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(Hansard)

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Official Report
(Hansard)

Assembly Sittings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 January 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On the rationale for the selection of amendments — I appreciate that the Speaker's Office reaches these determinations — first of all, are objective criteria applied to the selection? If so, is that something that can be made available for the guidance of parties? In particular, is any cognisance given to the impact of particular motions on particular Ministers? For example, my party was very disappointed that an amendment that was submitted on the issue of rural development funding, which largely arose as a result of a court case taken by one of our Ministers, was not selected, when obviously that issue directly affects our Minister and the Agriculture Minister.

Mr Speaker: I hear very much what the Member is saying, but he will know that this is a matter for and decisions for the Speaker. I am very happy to talk to the Member about the issue outside the Chamber. These matters are not normally raised here on the Floor of the Assembly.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that. Further to that point of order, is there any sort of guidance that the Speaker's Office can issue to parties on what factors are taken into consideration when amendments are being selected?

Mr Speaker: Yes, and the Business Office will continually advise parties on motions, on amendments and on the general business of the House. Certainly, through the Business Office, we can look to see whether there is guidance, especially when it comes to amendments to particular motions here in the House.

I have to say that our officials here are always very keen to try to guide Members to a point. I have to say that it is not my role or the Business Office's role to keep business out of the House. I am always keen to get business into the House. Certainly, as I say, it is not my role to try to keep business out of the House. I hear what Mr Weir said. Let us look at it and see whether we can give guidance to all parties.

I have to say that it is not that long ago that I said to our Business Office that it might be useful to have a number of sessions with parties on how to formulate amendments. I think that only one party came to those meetings; no other party came. So, we are always keen to help parties to frame amendments and motions and to make sure, as I say, that we get business into the House.

Road Races (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that the Road Races (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 became law on 17 January 2014.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Institutional

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. In compliance with section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the ninth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in institutional format, which was held in Dublin on Friday 10 January 2014. The Executive were represented at the meeting by the First Minister and me. The Irish Government were represented at the meeting by the Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore TD. The Tánaiste chaired the meeting.

Before the meeting, we had a very interesting engagement at the Google European headquarters in Dublin, which I would like to briefly mention. Google has worked with the In Flanders Fields Museum to digitise the records of Irish soldiers killed in World War I. Along with the Tánaiste, the First Minister and I officially launched the digitisation of those records. The partnership between Google and the In Flanders Fields Museum has resulted in an incredible source of information for families, students and researchers. Over 200,000 Irishmen fought in the war and 49,000 were killed. That shows the human impact of the war on the island of Ireland. I know that a number of MLAs were at the launch, and I encourage all MLAs to visit the Google site. I also encourage people to use it and to share their stories so that future generations can better understand the lives of their predecessors.

The NSMC institutional meeting took place in Iveagh House and was very positive and constructive. It provided a valuable opportunity for us to focus on some of the key challenges that we face. We discussed a range of issues, including the economic prospects and challenges for 2014 and the strategies being pursued in each jurisdiction, particularly in relation to the economy, youth employment and job creation.

The success of such events as “The Gathering” 2013 and Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture celebrations was acknowledged, and the importance of maintaining the positive momentum with regard to tourism figures in 2013 was recognised. In that regard, Ministers welcomed the fact that the Giro d’Italia cycling event in 2014 would have a cross-border element. Ministers also endorsed the importance of attracting other high-profile sporting events to the island of Ireland.

Ministers agreed that as we face into a new year, the economic outlook is more optimistic than it has been for some time. However, we recognised that a lot of work remains to be done.

We had a very good discussion on EU matters. Ministers emphasised the importance of using every opportunity to maximise the drawdown of EU funding in both jurisdictions. The Tánaiste advised the meeting that the Dublin Government were completing a post-EU-presidency review, which will include references to the positive North/South engagement during the presidency. He expressed his gratitude for the assistance given by the Executive during the presidency and agreed to keep us informed of future opportunities for joint working for mutual benefit.

The Council also reviewed progress on the Peace III and INTERREG IV programmes and looked forward to the completion of the consultation process on the new programmes.

Ministers noted that the engagement by officials with key stakeholders on the future direction of the north-west gateway initiative was continuing and agreed that a report would be brought to a future meeting of the Council.

The Council discussed a range of matters relating to the North/South bodies. Ministers noted the progress in respect of their corporate and business plans and the implementation of cumulative efficiency savings within the bodies. Ministers also discussed governance issues, including changes to the terms and conditions of staff in the North/South bodies aligned to those in the Irish public service, the review of the financial memoranda and forthcoming changes to the North/South pension scheme.

The Council also noted changes to the boards of the North/South bodies and that a process is under way to recruit a permanent chief executive to the Loughs Agency.

Ministers welcomed the appointment of Ruth Taillon as director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and congratulated her on her appointment. We also acknowledged the contribution of the previous director, Andy Pollak.

Ministers were informed that INTERREG IVa funding has been obtained for phase 3 of the Border People project. Training of information advisers and service personnel in the area of cross-border mobility is ongoing, and a needs analysis and sustainability plan is also being prepared.

Ministers had a useful discussion on the St Andrews Agreement review and noted that work is under way to implement the decision taken at the 8 November plenary meeting that Ministers should consider their priorities in their respective sectoral areas. It was agreed that Ministers will consider a report on the outcome of those ministerial discussions at the next institutional. We also considered a board appointment to the North/South Language Body. Ministers approved the appointment of Mr Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire to the board of the body.

Finally, Ministers agreed to meet again in institutional format later in 2014.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I welcome the statement from the deputy First Minister. My question relates to paragraph 15. I remind the deputy First Minister of a previous institutional joint communiqué of 3 October 2011, which stated:

> *“Ministers noted the progress made under the North West Gateway Initiative.”*

On 29 April 2013, another stated:

> *“Ministers welcomed progress under the North West Gateway Initiative ... The Council agreed to review progress on this engagement at a future meeting.”*

Then, it was stated today that the Council agreed that a report would be brought to a future meeting of the Council. Is there any end to the process?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely welcome the stakeholder engagement that has been taking place over the past

number of months about the future direction of the north-west gateway initiative. It is very important that we review the initiative to ensure that it remains relevant to the people of the north-west. The success of the City of Culture celebrations last year shows that Derry and the whole north-west region, when given the opportunity, can delivery spectacular outcomes. I hope that the legacy of the celebrations will give the region the belief that it can deliver and that that belief will help the region to attract investment.

Of course, many other good things are happening. Recently, I visited the new to-be science park on the site of Fort George, which is also linked to the Letterkenny project. It is also important to stress that work on the new radiotherapy unit, costing tens of millions of pounds, will begin this year. That is of hugely important benefit to the people of Donegal, Derry and Tyrone. Of course, we, through the auspices of the Department for Regional Development, are hopefully seeing the situation with the A5 being dealt with in a way that will see a satisfactory outcome. There is general agreement in Donegal and Derry that that is a very important project. It is a pity that the Member who has just spoken is the representative of a political party opposed to the project. That is a bit of a contradiction given that the party holds the ministerial position.

Mr Moutray: I, too, welcome the work done by Google and the In Flanders Fields Museum on the digitalisation of records of the Great War. Will the deputy First Minister inform the House of whether the Department will work with the Department of Education to ensure that the records of the Irish soldiers will be used in schools to broaden children and young people's knowledge of the sacrifice paid and, indeed, the futility of war?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, that would be a matter for the Department of Education and the Minister. However, I certainly recognise — I am sure that the First Minister will join me in doing so — that 2014 is a very important year. It is the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War, which brought so much tragedy and human misery all over the world. As I said in my statement, some 200,000 Irishmen from all parts of Ireland participated in that war, and almost 50,000 lost their lives. That is of enormous historical significance, and I think that it would be a huge mistake for any of us to try to ignore such an important anniversary.

12.15 pm

Other important anniversaries are coming up, such as the anniversary of the 1916 rising in 2016. If we approach all anniversaries in a mature way, we can improve the educational experience of our young people. I encourage the Education Minister to take up the suggestion that the Member makes.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Leas-ChéadAire as a ráiteas. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He said:

> *"We discussed a range of issues, including the economic prospects and challenges for 2014 and the strategies being pursued in each jurisdiction, particularly in relation to the economy, youth employment and job creation."*

Will he elaborate?

Mr M McGuinness: We had a very useful discussion with the Tánaiste on the issues facing our local economies. We both recognised during the meeting that there has been positive news on our economy lately, with indicators clearly suggesting that things are starting to stabilise. Our unemployment rate of 7·5% remains a concern, and, as an Executive, we are trying to foster job creation, not just in the context of foreign direct investment but in continuing support for our indigenous businesses, which are hugely important in bearing down on what are unacceptable unemployment figures. The fact that we are well below the European average, and taking into consideration the situation in the South, clearly shows that at least some of our strategies are working in the interests of the people whom we represent.

According to the Ulster Bank's latest purchasing managers' index (PMI) index, the rate of growth in our private sector in November was the second fastest in the survey's history, slower only than the record set in March 2004. The sharpest expansion in activity was in the service sector, with growth also quickening in the manufacturing and construction sectors. That extends the current sequence of growth to five consecutive months, which is good news. Of course, we are not out of the woods yet, but we are optimistic that an economic recovery is under way. It is now our responsibility to provide the environment in which to sustain and promote growth.

We have to keep it going. There is still more work to be done, but I think that, given what we have come through over the past five years, there are signs of things beginning to turn in our favour.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the statement and note that the meeting was attended by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and it appears to have been very constructive. I hope that the trials and tribulations that have since emerged do not get in the way of that.

The statement contains a commitment to maximise EU funding. The deputy First Minister will be aware that a recent Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme, motorways of the sea (MoS), was designed to create better linkage between neighbouring countries. Will he tell me whether the Foyle ferry service was discussed under the north-west gateway initiative, and if it was not, will he give the House a commitment that it will be discussed at a future meeting?

Mr M McGuinness: It was not discussed during the meeting. I know that it is an important project for people in the Donegal/Derry area. I will certainly undertake to have a further discussion with the Tánaiste at a future meeting. We all know and understand the difficulties with ferries and how their seasonal nature can impact on their ability to perform all year round, but I think that the Foyle ferry has provided an important service that has brought communities together in the area. It has provided a very useful resource for tourism, and I think that it is appropriate to have a further conversation about it.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the endorsement that the North/South Ministerial Council has given to the importance of attracting high-profile sporting events to the island of Ireland. Will the deputy First Minister comment on whether Ministers discussed how they will work together to support

the Irish Rugby Football Union bid to host the Rugby World Cup in Ireland in 2023?

Mr M McGuinness: I know that our Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, and the sports Minister in the South recognise that that could be of enormous benefit to the island of Ireland and to the promotion of rugby. It is presently at an exploration stage, but I think that all of us in the House, and, I am sure those in Leinster House, would feel that it would be a tremendous coup for Irish rugby if we could pull it off. So, that is being very diligently explored at this time.

Obviously, in the context of such a huge event that would propel us to worldwide prominence, economic factors are hugely important, so many of the discussions centre around its economic viability. However, in principle, it would absolutely wonderful if we could pull it off. We will see what the outcome of the discussions between the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the sports Minister in the South bring for us all.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. EU matters have been touched on where ferries and TEN-T are concerned. That will be a very substantial pot of money in future years. What discussions have taken place on transport issues and the possibility of cooperation to gain further investment from Europe for some of those issues, given the very good work that many Executive Ministers have done in Brussels over the past number of months?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, a huge priority for the Executive is to increase the drawdown from Europe across a whole range of issues, not least in the area that the Member mentioned. I think that we have had some considerable success in doing that. More work needs to be done, but I think that all our Departments are very clearly focused on the opportunities that exist for us in the coming period. So, I believe that that work will continue and that we will gain benefit and, indeed, increased drawdown from such engagements.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Regarding attracting important sporting events to the island of Ireland, how do Ministers view the importance of the Giro d'Italia?

Mr M McGuinness: It is very important. It is clearly one of the most prestigious cycling events in the world, and, given that we recognise that tourism is a very important contributor to our economies, it is really important that we focus on ensuring that those events are a success.

If you look at our experiences over the past while, whether it is the City of Culture celebrations and the way in which the north-west dealt really smoothly with what was an incredible year and with major events, or whether it is the enormous success that was the World Police and Fire Games, you see that they clearly show that there is nothing that we cannot tackle. The people who support this Administration are hugely talented and can take on any challenge. I think that the Giro d'Italia will similarly prove to be a huge success.

Given that we are expecting a massive influx of people who have an interest in cycling and that television networks throughout Europe will be covering the event, it is not to be missed. We certainly do not intend to miss the opportunity that it presents.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the statement. I particularly welcome paragraph 8, which clearly shows that the economy and youth unemployment were discussed. Will the deputy First Minister acknowledge that, although the figures for Northern Ireland are relatively stable, the figures for the north-west, including for my constituency and Inishowen in Donegal, remain quite high? Those who are economically inactive and especially our young people have found that, even with all the positivity from the City of Culture and the feel-good factor that it brought, there has been no legacy of employment opportunities for them. Will he outline how the north-west gateway initiative or any other project could stimulate that feel-good factor and job opportunities for our young people?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, coming from the same neck of the woods as the Member, I have total sympathy with everything he said.

The key to all this is that an improving economic situation will hopefully allow us, through time, to bear down on unacceptable figures, particularly in youth unemployment. This is a Europe-wide phenomenon, and the levels of youth unemployment in places such as Spain and Greece are upwards of 50%. That represents a challenge, and the key to all of it is to continue to move forward in a way that develops our economy so that it provides hugely important jobs for our young people.

The recent decision by Fujitsu to locate its very important European base in the city and provide employment for something like 200 people was very encouraging. The confidence that has been built as a result of the City of Culture celebrations means that the city can take advantage of all this in the future. All of us knew that the gains and benefits from that year were not going to happen immediately and would happen over time. Of course, an assessment is being made by the relevant Departments as to what increases in employment occurred during that year. Like the Member, I would be very interested to see those figures.

I agree that there is still a lot of work to be done, but the key is to continue to attract foreign direct investment, continue to support our local entrepreneurs and develop our economy in a way that gets our young people into work.

Mr Cree: The deputy First Minister referred to the governance issues in the North/South bodies and changes in conditions in order to align them with those in the Irish public service. Does that represent parity with the Northern Ireland Civil Service? Are the changes in the pension schemes going to mirror those going through this House?

Mr M McGuinness: I am very pleased to see that the Finance Departments are working together to bring about the reform of the North/South pension scheme. Both Finance Ministers have agreed that the pension reforms, as outlined by Hutton, should apply to the North/South pension scheme. It is important that the Finance Departments continue to work together closely to implement these reforms on the schedule agreed. Agreement has been reached, in principle, to apply the reforms to southern and northern members, thus preserving the concept of a North/South pension scheme. The North/South scheme was modelled on our

scheme, so it makes sense to do that. The timescale is to have increased employee contributions in place by April 2014. The key elements of the wider reforms are the move from final salary to career average and linking the normal scheme pension age with state pension age. Those elements should be implemented in line with the other main public service schemes by April 2015. So, huge progress has been made. The short answer to the question is that it is being modelled on what we have here.

Mr Allister: Seven years on, what is the product of the St Andrew's Agreement review and what is the level of agreement concerning it? Is the deputy First Minister fed up with that as well? If so, can we expect the mask to slip as it did last week when he made his pernicious attack on the Orange Order?

Mr M McGuinness: I am not sure what part of that question I should answer. We had a useful discussion on the St Andrew's Agreement review at the meeting. We are pleased to note that work is under way to implement the decision that was taken at the plenary meeting that we attended in November, namely that Ministers would consider the priorities in their respective sectoral areas and that a report on that consideration would be considered at the next meeting. So, without pre-empting those discussions, there are areas that we could explore that would deliver mutual benefits to both jurisdictions.

I look forward to considering the report and what Ministers see as their priorities once they have had those discussions.

The second aspect of the question does not relate to the institutional meeting that we attended.

12.30 pm

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

Mr Campbell: On the discussions about the St Andrews Agreement review, does the deputy First Minister accept that there will be a need to build on the changes that were agreed at St Andrews so that, if Ministers take decisions, as the Agriculture Minister did before Christmas, such decisions have to be overturned, whether at the Executive or in the courts of law?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that the Member is clear about the outcome of the St Andrews negotiations and the legislation that flowed from them. The issue that he raised did not come up at the institutional meeting of the North/South ministerial event that the First Minister and I attended. It is a subject of controversy. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development spoke about it last week, and I will leave the last word on the subject with her and her Department.

North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the twenty-first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in agriculture sector, which was held in Armagh on Wednesday 13 November 2013.

The Executive were represented by junior Minister Jonathan Bell MLA and me. The Dublin Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and Fergus O'Dowd TD, Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government. I chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed with junior Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of us both.

The Council discussed recent developments in international trade, and Ministers had an opportunity to advise on visits made by both Administrations. I welcomed Minister Coveney's agreement to explore the setting-up of a North/South international trade working group to share lessons learned during negotiations for entry into third country markets.

With regard to tackling tree disease, the Council agreed that the respective Agriculture Departments will work closely with a view to developing a protocol for the cross-border movement of affected larch logs while maintaining the necessary biosecurity. In response to the expansion of the area of woodland affected by the Phytophthora ramorum disease of larch, this arrangement will be beneficial in equipping the forestry industry to manage the difficulties of harvesting and processing timber from areas of affected larch woodland and will help to reduce the risk of further disease spread.

Ministers discussed and acknowledged the ongoing cross-border cooperation in an effort to control and eradicate tree diseases. DARD's spore monitoring equipment, for example, will be put in place by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) at a Chalara ash dieback outbreak site in County Leitrim, which will assist the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) and allow AFBI to test the use of the equipment on an outbreak site where there has been spread to adjoining hedgerows.

Ministers also discussed and acknowledged the following points: how the all-Ireland Chalara control strategy launched in July 2013 is being implemented; ongoing cooperation on laboratory diagnostics; ongoing discussions on the possible coordinated introduction of pre-notification legislation for certain tree species; continuing cooperation on the proposed new EU plant health legislative regime; continuing cooperation on action plans for the sustainable use of pesticides directive and the pesticides usage surveys; and recognising that the threat of plant disease and pests appears to be increasing. DARD's intention, as I said to the Assembly on 9 September 2013, is to increase the resources devoted to plant health and to allocate responsibility for all plant health matters to the chief executive of the Forest Service.

The Council noted recent developments on CAP, including the completion of the CAP reform political agreement between the EU Council of Ministers and the European

Parliament on 24 September 2013. Ministers noted that the legal texts arising from the political agreement should be adopted by the end of 2013 and agreed that the close contacts between DARD and DAFM officials on CAP issues should continue.

Ministers agreed the significance of the continued work on the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan, in particular that the African Horse Sickness Regulations 2013 will come into operation on 18 November. DAFM is progressing similar legislation in line with the all-island approach to deal with African horse sickness in the event of an outbreak of this epizootic disease.

Ministers also agreed the continued work by officials to scope the possibility of a joint contingency plan for rendering capacity on the island of Ireland; that officials are progressing work to establish respective disease surveillance priorities with a view to agreeing all-island surveillance priorities; and that officials from both jurisdictions continue their engagement, including with British Departments, to consider a range of equine registration issues.

The Council agreed that, if significant equine welfare and abandonment issues arise over the coming winter months, any required action will be on all-island basis. Ministers agreed that officials will continue to engage on the issue, monitor the level of equine welfare and abandonment cases as the winter progresses and keep the need for action under review.

Ministers welcomed the North/South rural development conference held in October, which will contribute, in the longer term, to strengthening the delivery of the LEADER programme. They also welcomed the announcement of support for a rural, faith-based community engagement programme. The programme, which fits within my Department's tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework, will support churches and other faith-based organisations to engage in anti-poverty and social inclusion initiatives in rural communities. As many faith-based organisations are organised on an all-island basis, this may present a range of opportunities for cross-border work.

The Council agreed that officials should organise a North/South conference in 2014 to develop cooperation ideas that could become early projects for the LEADER element of the new rural development programme. The Council acknowledged the breadth of actions being delivered to support cross-border rural development through the current INTERREG programme.

Ministers approved the appointment of Mr Mick Murphy to the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission from 13 November 2013 to 12 December 2015.

The meeting concluded by noting that the date of the next agriculture sectoral meeting will be in February 2014.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement. She spoke about pre-notification legislation for certain tree species. This legislation was introduced in the UK over a year ago. Why has it been held up in Northern Ireland? Is it due to the fact that the Republic of Ireland's Minister wants to delay its implementation?

The statement referred to the discovery in the wider environment — County Leitrim in the Republic of Ireland — of ash dieback. The Committee saw photographs of the practice of trying to reduce that. It can be described only as a scorched earth policy. What measures has the Minister taken, and what consultation has she had with the farming community and the bodies representing farming industries?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very happy to pick up on the questions raised. In the lead-up to the legislation, we have an all-island strategy in place to deal with the disease. I think that it is very important that we have that. It will be one of our strengths in trying to tackle the disease. The disease knows no barriers or borders, so it is important that we take forward the initiative on that basis. As I told the House before, one of the strengths of that strategy, given the changing circumstances and the fact that this is a relatively new disease, is that it is adaptable. That work continues.

As for legislation, we already have a wide range of powers in DARD to inspect, detain and destroy infected plant material. We will continue to use those powers. However, as the Member pointed out, in the past I have talked about the need to introduce pre-notification legislation and am keen to do that. It will strengthen the current arrangements. Going back to the initial point, however, I think it important that we do that on an all-island basis. I have not delayed the legislation. We are working it up as we speak and plan to coordinate its introduction right across the island. That will come forward in the very near future. Discussions are ongoing with the South to make sure that we tighten up to ensure that the legislation is appropriate. We do not want to bring it forward just for the sake of it; we want to make sure that it is appropriate and effective legislation.

Over the past year of dealing with the disease, we have engaged fairly regularly, particularly at official level, with all the stakeholders and even members of the public, because it is important that people who use forests are mindful of biosecurity measures. That can mean simple things such as washing the wheels of prams or bikes, or cleaning trainers before going onto other Forest Service land. We also implore the public to help us to tackle this and other tree diseases. However, we regularly engage with stakeholders, who are the key people involved, particularly in the forestry end of things. They include private landowners as well as those involved with public Forest Service land.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister. Part of my question has already been answered, but will the Minister give us more information on the all-Ireland approach to larch disease?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I have picked up on some of those things. It is important to assure Members that surveys and a significant body of work are ongoing. We are actively out, surveying land and making sure that we are looking for the symptoms. We are trying to get the message out to the public about the symptoms and are asking people to look for them.

The surveys cover all of the North. They take in recently planted sites of ash in public and private woodland, roadside plantings, established trees and hedgerows, and there is ongoing nursery surveillance. So, quite a

significant body of work is ongoing and, as I said, one of our strands is that we have in place an all-island strategy that is adaptable. We continue to engage, across the island, at official and ministerial level to make sure that our approach is comprehensive. In my opinion, the approach and the strategy that we have in place are comprehensive and look at all the issues of eradication, research into breeding for resistance and engaging with the public and stakeholders. As I said, one of the strategy's strengths is that it is adaptable.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will the Minister state whether she and her Department are considering the proposals that the Republic of Ireland Government have taken on CAP in respect of pillar 1 and pillar 2, and on supporting the development of the agrifood strategy, going forward, as they outlined last week?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. As the Member said, Simon Coveney last week published his proposals for the way forward. We are looking at those proposals, which include quite a number of positive announcements that I think industry will welcome. I have heard some commentary around the rural development end of things, and perhaps that deserved more attention. However, it is important to me, and CAP and common fisheries policy CFP reform is one of the key issues on which we have ongoing discussions at North/South Ministerial Council meetings. It is important that, where possible, we align the types of projects that we do across the island. I am keen to explore further what Minister Coveney has announced and to make sure that, moving forward, when I take my decisions, we can learn from and help each other across the island when we are doing similar types of projects. I am very keen to do that.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, in reply to a question for written answer from me, you confirmed that, in the past 12 months, you had three meetings with Ministers from the Republic on tackling tree disease. This statement relates to one of those. Given that ash dieback originated in Scotland, is the rush to an all-Ireland strategy ignoring the east-west dimension, and will you commit to work with the Woodland Trust on its ObservaTree initiative, which is a project aimed at creating the very best early warning system in Europe to detect tree disease?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that we engage with all stakeholders in tackling tree disease. It is vital that we pool all the thoughts and scientific information out there and make sure that we take the best approach to eradicating or at least dealing with some of the tree diseases that we are presented with. As I said, I have met stakeholders and will continue to do so, as and when required. That is key to us being able to tackle these diseases.

On the Woodland Trust project, as I said, I engage with the trust regularly and I am quite sure that it will want to come forward and talk to me again about that project. I think that your initial point was around — I am trying to think —

Mrs Dobson: East-west.

Mrs O'Neill: East-west, yes. Absolutely. As I said in the statement, we engage on an all-island basis, which, obviously, is key because if we do not tackle it, disease will just spread across the island. If we do not tackle it on an all-island basis, we will be at a disadvantage. However, as I also said, we are engaging with the responsible British Departments to make sure that we pool resources where we can and learn from each other, because we all have the same aim of being able to tackle this disease.

Mr Buchanan: Part of the statement to the House after the previous agricultural sector meeting in July 2013 dealt with the issue of horse registrations and passports. Today's statement mentions a range of equine registration issues. Can you inform the House if there has been any movement on this issue to date, or whether it is simply discussion after discussion with no real or meaningful action happening?

12.45 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure the Member that it is an ongoing discussion, because it is a discussion that we need to be having. Officials are very much engaged at that level. I believe that we need a database system right across the island. A number of lessons have been learned as a result of the horse meat scandal. Whilst the integrity of what we produce here has very much been protected, in moving forward it is important that any lessons that can be learned from that are learned. Some of the issues that were flagged up at that time were around passports. We have had too many people issuing passports. The sooner we are able to tackle that, the better. We need a database system right across the island, but we also have to be mindful of trade on an east-west basis. Discussion is ongoing to make sure that whatever we bring forward is workable for the industry, is not too bureaucratic and is a process that all Governments can be content and happy with.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, you referred to the importance of tackling rural deprivation. Can you give us a progress update on the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) project?

Mrs O'Neill: The MARA project commenced visits to identified vulnerable rural households back in May 2012. The project target is to visit 12,000 households prior to December 2014. To date, 9,228 visits have been undertaken. As part of the project, a follow-up visit is undertaken to householders who have had a referral for a service, grant or benefit. To date, 5,157 second visits have been completed. From the household visits undertaken, 24,911 referrals have been generated. As you will appreciate, the lead-in time for referrals is significant, but they already bearing fruit. For example, 595 households have benefited from warm homes and levy scheme grants; 2,755 households have been issued with advice and equipment following a home safety referral; and 161 people have received additional welfare benefits. Those 161 claims alone amount to over £443,000 per annum going into vulnerable rural households across the North. Add that to the 425 people who have registered with their local rural community transport partnership, with 34 having received a smart pass, and the 184 boiler replacement applications that have been approved.

The household visits are undertaken by over 100 trained enablers who are working on the project. Those enablers work for local community-based organisations, including the rural support networks. All 286 rural super output areas in the North are being targeted through the MARA project. I am delighted that work is ongoing in all the rural areas of the North, with two rural areas in Banbridge and Omagh recently completed. I am sure that the Member will welcome that. It is a fantastic project. You can see the

benefits just from the figures that I have outlined. That is £0·5 million of additional money going into vulnerable households, which would not have been the case if we did not have these people on the ground visiting people, taking them through the process and then making follow-up visits. It is a very worthwhile project, and I look forward to doing more of that in the future.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. She referred to the setting up of a North/South international trade working group. Can the Minister give us any reassurance that the international trade working group will tackle the discrimination against Northern Ireland dairy producers who are being stopped from putting their products into the southern markets by the National Dairy Council's campaign, which, as she has already admitted to me, is costing Northern Ireland businesses money? Can she confirm that the working group will tackle the Free State's protectionist stance?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that any of us has room to be protectionist. The Member will be aware that I raised this issue with Simon Coveney and sought some assurances that our industry would not be disadvantaged. It is unfortunate to say the least, because we are all targeting an export market; that is where the growth potential is. I am in an ongoing conversation with Minister Coveney around how we can tackle that issue. Essentially, it is an industry issue and these are industry decisions. However, we want to be able to engage with industry and say that, as we look to the future, if we want to grow our export market and grow our export sales, we cannot be fighting with each other and being protectionist over these issues.

I will continue to raise the issue, and I know that Minister Foster has raised the issue at a European level. We have to do that and chart our way forward. It is fair to say that I got some assurances from Minister Coveney that he is in discussions with the dairy industry in the Twenty-six Counties. Hopefully, we will have some sort of positive changes in the future.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Seán Lynch.

Mr Lynch: Sorry, I was not following the debate. I did not know that my name was down. Sorry about that.

Mr Wilson: The Minister has outlined the benefits that have been accrued so far from the initiatives to tackle rural poverty. However, rural poverty remains a huge issue despite the initiatives. To give us some idea of how successful it is, could she tell us how much has had to be invested in the MARA initiative, for example, to get the half a million pounds return on additional benefits to households?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have a breakdown of the figures and how much has been spent on the MARA project individually. The pot of money that we were talking about was a £16 million tackling poverty fund, and that was to take forward a number of initiatives, including the MARA project, youth employability schemes and rural transport schemes. I would describe a lot of that as leverage funding, and we were able to tie in other Departments to do positive work in rural communities, and that might not have happened if we had not had the investment from DARD. So, although £16 million might sound like a smaller amount of money in the scheme of things, all the initiatives with other Departments have certainly leveraged in significant additional investment.

I gave the example of almost half a million pounds going into rural communities because of someone calling to the house and talking you through what you are entitled to, and, to me, that is significant wins. However, I am very happy to provide to the Member the detailed breakdown of how much MARA cost. As I said, all the other schemes, such as borewells schemes, youth employability and access to benefits, are all positive initiatives. I will provide the detail to the Member.

Mr Allister: Today is 20 January. The meeting was on 13 November. Why has it taken the Minister over two months to report to the House? Is it because there was nothing of substance to report or is it that she holds the House in the same contempt as she holds her ministerial colleagues with whom she does not bother to consult about controversial issues? On one specific issue, has she done anything yet to sort out the mess over horse passports?

Mrs O'Neill: Perhaps the Member could change the record, because every time I make a statement to the House, he starts his contribution with a very similar comment. You may want to take it up with the Business Office, because I brought the statement in as timely a manner as possible. Obviously, we had the Christmas break in between, and you may have missed the fact that I have been defending rural communities in the courts over the past number of weeks as well. So, I will get on with doing the business but will always come to the House and report on the positive work that is being done in the North/South Ministerial Council.

It is important to remind the House what horse passports are for. They are primarily to protect the food chain and are mandatory for all equines across the EU. I said earlier that I believe that too many people are issuing passports, and that needs to be addressed. I am engaging with the industry on an east-west and North/South basis on how we can get one central database, and those lessons have been learned as a result of the recent horse meat crisis. The horse passport records are about a horse's identity and are not similar to what we have for cattle. So, we need to make sure that people know that there is a distinct difference. However, that said, we need a passport scheme that is enforced properly, and we need to take it on a North/South and east-west basis to protect the food chain. I regularly engage with the Food Standards Agency and all the other partners and will continue to do that in the time ahead.

British-Irish Council: Housing Work Stream

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): In compliance with the requirements of section 52C of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order 18 of the Northern Ireland Assembly, I wish to make a report on the third meeting of the British-Irish Council housing work stream, which was held in London on 30 October 2013. This report has been agreed by and is being made on behalf of Minister Carál Ní Chuilín, who accompanied me at the meeting.

The British-Irish Council (BIC) identified housing as a new work stream at its summit in Cardiff in February 2009, and my predecessors Margaret Ritchie and Alex Attwood subsequently hosted the first two ministerial housing work stream meetings in the Slieve Donard hotel in Newcastle, County Down in December 2009 and in St Mary's College in Belfast in February 2011. I have now hosted a third ministerial meeting, which was held in London and attended by seven of the eight jurisdictions.

The United Kingdom Government were represented by Kris Hopkins MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. The Government of the Irish Republic were represented by Jan O'Sullivan TD, Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The Scottish Government were represented by Margaret Burgess MSP, Minister for Housing and Welfare. The Welsh Assembly were represented by John Howells, director of housing and regeneration. The Jersey Government were represented by Deputy Andrew Green MBE, Minister of Housing. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Honourable Chris Robertshaw MHK, Minister of Social Care. Unfortunately, the representative of the State of Guernsey was unable to attend due to an urgent housing debate in their Parliament. I co-chaired the meeting alongside Minister Ní Chuilín, and together we represented the Northern Ireland Executive.

Each of the Administrations gave an update on developments and current policy initiatives, including youth employment issues, and a presentation on "Increasing Housing Supply and its Affordability" was given to the meeting by Professor Christine Whitehead from the London School of Economics. Professor Whitehead has previously undertaken work for the majority of BIC member Administrations and is, therefore, familiar with the challenges we face individually and collectively in addressing housing need.

Professor Whitehead noted that the financial crisis has hit the housing market in all eight jurisdictions in house prices, arrears and possession, and confidence. She further noted that all countries in Europe, except France, had experienced large reductions in transactions and output and that development finance has been particularly restricted. She pointed to a growing dependence on income-related benefits, even in working households, and stated that this increases the numbers of households whose income and housing opportunities are determined by government.

Professor Whitehead advised that, in most jurisdictions, worsening income distributions will increase demand for social and affordable housing. She also highlighted problems of a poor supply response, particularly in areas of high housing demand such as cities. In conclusion, she reiterated the key role for government in supporting the owner-occupied market and suggested that greater focus be given to intermediate tenures to meet housing demand.

Going forward, my officials will continue to share good practice with other Administrations to support the implementation of my housing strategy around the key themes of ensuring access to decent, affordable, sustainable homes across all tenures, meeting housing needs and supporting the most vulnerable, how the welfare reforms will affect housing, driving regeneration and sustaining communities through housing and getting the structures right.

A meeting of officials will be held in Belfast in February 2014 to progress the various issues in the housing work stream including the prioritisation of youth employment matters.

Mr Wilson: Common to all the Administrations, according to the statement, was the pressure that there is currently on the demand for social housing because of the recession, housing repossessions etc. I know that the Minister is disappointed about what is happening in Northern Ireland with the Housing Executive and housing associations giving back money at a time when there is such high demand. Did he glean any information from other Administrations as to whether they are experiencing the same problems with non-delivery by housing bodies and, if they have been, what actions they have taken to ensure that money that has been allocated for social housing is spent?

Mr McCausland: The focus of the discussion during the meeting was largely on other aspects of its remit, but that was touched on, and I took the opportunity to share with the various other representatives the things that we were doing in Northern Ireland to try to improve the situation. They are not dissimilar to things that are being done elsewhere. I outlined to them the fact that we were setting up a housing supply forum to look at the increased provision of housing and helping to support that market and also that we had, in the course of conversations with housing associations here, identified some of the issues that they have recognised as being hindrances to delivery.

That work is continuing, because it is clear, even from talking to our local housing associations, that there is a range of factors that they find to be obstacles to delivering more. I also think, to be frank, that we need to be more ambitious and that housing associations need to be more ambitious. I am encouraged by recent conversations, which have given me a sense that that is being recognised.

1.00 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement.

Professor Whitehead pointed to a growing dependence on income-related benefits, even among working households. She also advised that, in most jurisdictions, worsening income distributions will increase demand for social and affordable housing. Does the Minister think that his proposed housing strategy will adequately deal with the increasing demand for social and affordable housing? Will he also comment on the fact that, in Britain, so-called welfare reform has had adverse effects on the most vulnerable households? Does he think that that might also apply to the North?

Mr McCausland: The housing strategy is the first housing strategy that we have ever had in Northern Ireland, and it is obviously a document that will develop. It is intended that, rather than being a static document, it should get fleshed out more fully in some areas, and there will be developments that flow from it. As I indicated in answer to the previous question, the housing supply forum is important, but so are the conversations that we are having with housing associations to identify the various issues that are holding back the provision of more social and affordable housing.

It is true that we met our target, and we did so at less cost than was initially anticipated, but, if there is money that is not going to be spent, can we do more with the money that we have available to us? From talking to housing associations, I know that there are questions around planning issues and, in some cases, services. One association identified a case in which a housing scheme was held up for six months because it could not get the sewerage and the water supply sorted out. Those practical issues — land acquisition, the best use of publicly owned land and how we get that into the housing supply — are all being looked at at the moment, because it is a question that I want to see an answer to. We are talking to the associations and helping them identify what the problems are, and they are coming forward and saying, "These are the issues". I think, therefore, that we are doing all that we can in that regard. I hope that, on the basis of housing associations having done quite a bit of land acquisition last year, there will be a better outcome this year, although last year, of course, we met our target.

Yes, welfare reform is bound to have an impact on people in the same way as in Great Britain. The difference is that the package of variations, flexibilities and changes that I negotiated and arranged will, I think, produce a better outcome in Northern Ireland and avoid some of the worst difficulties that have been experienced in GB.

Mr Byrne: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement. Given that social housing demand is increasing generally because of falling incomes and austerity, what policy initiatives will be undertaken to improve the housing need situation in the social housing sector in the medium to long term?

Mr McCausland: In a sense, the answer to the third question is similar to the answer to the second question, which was similar to the answer to the first question, because all three are substantially the same question.

I have identified the initiatives that we are taking forward to deal with housing supply. Identifying the problems is the first thing, because, until you identify the problems, you cannot find a resolution to them. The good news, as I said, is that last year we met our target. We are on target to produce the 8,000 social and affordable homes that are required under the Programme for Government. We will meet that target, and I am pleased about that, but we want to do even better. Some of the issues in the housing sector are legacy issues that have arisen because of problems that were not addressed by some previous Ministers, perhaps from the Member's own party in some cases.

Mr Copeland: I, too, acknowledge the Minister's statement. I cannot help thinking, with apologies, that, in these days of economy, the Minister used so many words to say what was, to me anyway, so very little. Nevertheless, I note that, at the end of the statement, the Minister mentioned that his officials would continue to share good practices with other Administrations, which is welcome. I wonder, however, whether the Minister could enlighten us on what conversations were held around the edges of the meeting, particularly on the introduction of the single occupancy penalty, and whether he believes that any of the other Administrations were as apparently equally unprepared for that as we appeared to be, even in its watered-down version.

Mr McCausland: I am sorry that the Member is disappointed by the content of the meeting; I suggest that he maybe look at some of Professor Whitehead's work, which I found extremely informative. Some of her publications on housing are extremely informative indeed.

Where underoccupancy is concerned — or the bedroom tax, depending on how you describe it — it should be remembered that this was a meeting at which the bulk of the groups were not from within the United Kingdom in the normal sense. They were from areas such as Jersey and the Isle of Man and so on. Those are areas that have a very different situation from our own not only in government structures and approaches but in scale. The Irish Republic was represented as well, and the situation there is very different.

As for being unprepared, the Member is right on one point: the Housing Executive, over the years, did not prepare for this sort of thing. In fact, when the social housing development programme was first brought to me, a couple of years ago when I came to the Department, one of the first things that I asked was "In developing your social housing development programme, did you take account of welfare reform?". The answer was no. I found that shocking, and that was why, at that point, I sent the social housing development programme back to the Executive. We now have built in to it consideration of the provision of more suitable smaller units, rather than simply building more substantial family-sized units as the entire provision. We need that flexibility and variation to meet the demography in Northern Ireland.

The Member covered a number of points. If I have covered them, I am happy. He is nodding, so he is obviously content with the answer. I will leave it there.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí go dtí seo. As an aside, I note that the meeting took place on 30 October 2013. During the previous statement, a Member was very exercised that it had taken over two months for the Minister to come to the House. Given his absence, I see that that Member does not seem to be as exercised by the time that it has taken for this statement to come to the House. We well understand that bringing statements to the House can sometimes take a few months. We appreciate you coming here today.

I ask the Minister to reflect on Professor Whitehead's observation on the owner-occupier market. What impact does he feel that that may have as he develops his housing strategy?

Mr McCausland: I appreciate the Member's question. The delay in bringing the statement to the Assembly was due to other priorities in housing, including —

Mr McCartney: I have no issue with that.

Mr McCausland: I appreciate that. I was just going to say that one of the most important things was the building successful communities programme, which we brought forward towards the end of the year.

It would be very useful for us in Northern Ireland to take some cognisance of the information, assessment and analysis that Professor Whitehead brought forward. It would be useful not just for myself or for one of my officials, having heard it there, but possibly even for the Social Development Committee. She has a specialism in this and a good understanding of the entire market across the British Isles. It would be helpful to have some sort of summary of some of the conclusions in her publications on the matter, as well as of the information that she provided at the meeting. I take the opportunity to suggest that. The Deputy Chair of the Social Development Committee is here, and it may be something that Members would find useful, in the midst of their busy schedule.

Executive Committee Business

Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, to move the Consideration Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety).]

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

Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Reservoirs Bill: First Stage

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to introduce the Reservoirs Bill [NIA 31/11-15], which is a Bill to make provision about the regulation of the management, construction and alteration of certain reservoirs, in particular in relation to their safety to collect and store water; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Private Members' Business

Common Agricultural Policy: Rural Development Programme Funding

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed 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. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the motion will have five minutes in which to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called on to speak will have five minutes.

Mrs Dobson: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses dissatisfaction with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her failure to effectively consult with Executive colleagues on her plans to transfer funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2 within the common agricultural policy; notes with concern the ensuing events, which saw the issue brought before the High Court; accepts that, whilst farmers will benefit through increased direct payments, they and many rural communities and organisations may now lose out through significantly reduced rural development funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to commit to seeking sufficient funding for the future rural development programme to efficiently and effectively deliver a range of schemes, including those to support our burgeoning agrifood sector, increase farm safety measures, incentivise farm modernisation and capital investment, promote agrienvironment measures and support our rural economy and communities.

I welcome the opportunity to present the motion to the House. Although it focuses on the transfer of funding between pillars 1 and 2 of the CAP, it is a motion that strikes at the very heart of what is wrong in the approach of some parties in the House and how, consequently, they are failing to deliver effectively for the people of Northern Ireland. Indeed, I will go further and say that the circumstances around this case would be considered a total embarrassment in other countries around the world. Here we had, just days before the Christmas holidays, two Executive Departments in a legal wrangle. Of course, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development was entirely mistaken if she thought that this was an issue that did not need to go to the Executive, but I was also disappointed that the lines of communication evidently were not in place so that the Finance Minister felt that he instantly had to resort to legal action. Decisions should be taken around the Executive table and not across the High Court. I believe that this is a point upon —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I want to make my points.

I believe that this is a point upon which we can all agree. In my opinion, neither DARD or the wider public perception of our Executive will have come out well from this. It almost gives the appearance of "Carry On Government".

It will come as no surprise to Members that I have been disappointed with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's actions over the past four weeks. Never

mind failing to deal with the issue correctly at Executive level, she failed to keep members of the Agriculture Committee abreast of decisions and ensuing developments. Instead, she initially opted for a hastily submitted written ministerial statement, a statement that was published at 11.30 am on Friday 20 December 2013, 10 days after the last sitting of the Assembly and, indeed, the last sitting of the Agriculture Committee before recess. There can be no doubt whatsoever that she has lessons to learn. Equally, the Finance Minister has not bathed himself in glory.

1.15 pm

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I want to make my points.

I noted with interest that, in last week's statement, the point was reiterated, time and again, that the views of the Minister of Finance and Personnel were sought in advance of any proposed transfer but he stayed silent. It was, therefore, surprising that he was so eager to get the issue raised in the High Court. It must be asked, first, why he did not respond to DARD when the issue was initially raised with him. Secondly, but just as importantly, was his personal objection that due process was not followed, or was it to the rate of transfer proposed? Simply put, was it a Finance and Personnel act or a DUP act? Either way, it has left the two Ministers involved with a number of pressing decisions.

Does the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development propose scaling back the 2014-2020 rural development programme (RDP), or does the Finance Minister find himself in the unenviable situation of having to make significant funding available for a problem that very few people would have expected? We should not forget that the next RDP has already been given a budget of nearly €230 million, which is not an insignificant sum by any means. The problem is that we do not know, even roughly, what the next RDP will cost or the least that it will cost. The Agriculture Minister was asking for money without knowing how she would spend it. A similarly ludicrous situation happened in early 2011, when the previous Assembly decided on a Budget for 2011-15 just months before an election, having no idea what the next Programme for Government (PFG) would include. Surely it could not have been that difficult for DARD to work out even a headline anticipated budget for the next RDP and its schemes. I put that question directly to the Minister: how was the 7% arrived at? She must have realised that the decision would have been of great interest to Assembly Members because, much as my party and I recognise the positive contribution that the rural development programme has made to farmers and their families, there have been times when DARD's handling of it and some decisions surrounding the allocation of funding have left much to be desired, to say the very least.

The contentious nature of the RDP has only increased following its governance by the current Minister and her predecessor. Although I accept that, on the whole, many farmers and rural communities generally benefited from it, I can also say that many rural communities looked on aghast at the often exorbitant amounts of funding being spent by local councils and groups such as the GAA on pet projects that often had little or no clear connection to so-called rural development. The clearly deliberate and calculated attempts to lavish funding on items linked to republican ideology were also absolutely morally and procedurally repugnant. All the time, farmers and, indeed, other worthy projects are all too often left to the mercy of an over-bureaucratic and inflexible system.

In recent weeks, there has been much debate about what the decision to transfer 0% between pillars will mean on the ground. Before any analysis can be undertaken, clarity is urgently needed on the Executive's contribution to the next RDP. Although there would still have been a contribution of funds even if the Agriculture Minister had had her way with the 7% transfer, the actual contribution will now have to be radically augmented in light of recent events. I ask again that the Agriculture Minister and, even more pertinently, the Finance Minister give us an indication. I wonder whether the Finance Minister —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No. I want to make my points.

I wonder whether the Finance Minister really realised what he was letting himself in for. If he had to do it all again, would he try any other route?

Nevertheless, we are where we are. The Ulster Farmers' Union has outlined some sensible suggestions for the next RDP and agreed that some funds may need to be transferred. However, the big question is this: what now for the much-anticipated farm business improvement scheme? The Minister previously told us that the majority of the 7% transfer would have gone on that. We have been continuously told of the importance of this, if Northern Ireland is to capitalise on its agrifood sector. Indeed, the Going for Growth strategy called for a £250 million scheme.

Again, the collective response from the Executive Departments has, in my opinion, been weak, verging on the pathetic, meekly noting the benefits. Coming up to a year later, there has, aside from a loan scheme, been little financial commitment. Of course, other schemes stand to lose out until alternative funding can be sourced.

If you will allow me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will make one brief reference to a comment from the Member for Newry and Armagh Mr Irwin at the weekend; I do not see him in the Chamber today. He was irritated that I dared to raise widely held concerns about the future of farm safety measures and was, instead, keen to state that it was a matter for DETI. However, if DETI had put in place extra resources, we would not have to consider the next RDP for funding. Maybe he should speak to his party colleague on that one.

We recognise that the challenge should be to help organisations to avail themselves of funding. We have been fighting alongside others to roll back DARD's default position of having red tape in abundance. It must be recognised that, at a time of economic difficulty and hardship, rural businesses have been able to establish themselves because of help from that funding.

Before Christmas, I visited Sinton's at the Bridge in Scarva. It is a hugely successful restaurant, where investment created 18 jobs. I also attended the opening of Pear Tree Barn Nursery outside Lisburn, again creating jobs in the heart of our rural community. I would like to see more businesses like Sinton's and Pear Tree Barn, not fewer, where a relatively modest grant has delivered sustainable long-term benefits for the rural economy.

It should be the Executive's responsibility to ensure the sensible use of EU funds to benefit all farmers and the agrifood industry as a whole. I call on the Minister to re-engage with the industry, to identify the key priorities for the rural development programme, to deliver more rural success stories and to support our agrifood sector, farmers and all elements of the industry.

The Executive's failures are no blueprint for future economic success. It is now up to the two largest parties in the Executive to live up to their responsibilities. Let one positive outcome from this debate be that Ministers agree to work through the Executive and not the High Court. There must be no repeat of High Court government. That is not doing what is right for Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mrs Dobson: I commend the motion to the House.

Ms Lo: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out from "for her failure" to "plans" and insert:

> *"and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for their failure to effectively consult with each other or with their Executive colleagues over the recent attempt"*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am sorry that I was a little late coming in. I did not realise that proceedings were going so fast.

I support the main thrust of the UUP's motion, but it is unfair to lay blame solely on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for failing to effectively consult Executive colleagues. The Minister has informed us that she undertook an interdepartmental consultation process with Executive Ministers. When given the opportunity, the Finance Minister, we have been told, raised no concerns. It has been suggested in previous debates by a number of Members, me included, that the legal challenge could easily be viewed as a politically motivated action by the DUP in the run-up to the elections. Regardless of either party's motivations —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No, I am sorry. I have a lot to get through.

This should have been addressed in the Executive, not through an external legal battle. It is hugely worrying to me that two Executive Ministers could not resolve the issue within the confines of the Executive. In this, we have shown a complete lack of joined-up government. It is not the image of a stable Executive that we want the world to see. Instigating costly legal proceedings appears to us to be an entirely irresponsible action that has the potential to be seriously damaging for rural communities in Northern Ireland. It sets us back significantly, compared with the rest of the UK and the EU as a whole. We have had our fill of tit-for-tat politics over the past few months, and I would rather not reduce myself to that level.

Rather than speculating about whether the DUP is more interested in supporting big farmers than rural communities and small farms, I would like to focus on the implications of the 0% transfer to pillar 2. Let us look at the figures. The EU budget allocation for Northern Ireland from 2014 to 2020 for direct payments is €2·3 billion and, for rural development, it is €227·4 million, which is about 10% of the direct payments budget. Our new rural development allocation has been reduced by about 14% compared with the current 2013 level, as a result of cuts to the overall CAP budget. Northern Ireland now has the lowest EU allocation for rural development in Europe. We had a chance to transfer 15% of pillar 1 to pillar 2, and, even with the proposed transfer rate of 7%, which some had already argued was too low, we would have added €137·5 million to the regional development programme between 2014 and 2019. However, because of political wrangling, we are not transferring any money at all between the two elements of CAP. In contrast, Wales plans to transfer a rate of 15%; England, 12%; and Scotland, 9·5%. That totals around €2·3 billion of additional investment for rural development and environmental protection. For Northern Ireland to have a 0% transfer is a total shame and is out of step with other parts of the UK. The additional and much-needed funding would have supported investment in the agrifood industry, environmental protection and economic and social development in rural areas.

Mrs Dobson highlighted a number of schemes in the RDP, and I would like to spend the next few minutes exploring the potential negative effects of a lack of funding for the RDP's environmental measures. Within pillar 2, 30% of EU funding must be spent on environmental protection, addressing, in particular, two of the six EU priorities. Those are priority 4, which is restoring, preserving and enhancing ecosystems dependent on agriculture, food and forestry sectors, and priority 5, which is promoting resource efficiency and supporting the shift towards a low-carbon and climate-resilient economy in the agriculture, food and forestry sectors. The RDP aims to provide a variety of schemes to meet those priorities. However, the environmental sector is very concerned that, given the reduced budget to start with and the zero-rate transfer of money from pillar 1, we are at risk of not meeting our local, UK, European and international environmental obligations and are, therefore, at risk of huge infraction fines. For example, the water framework directive sets a target for us to restore 59% of all water bodies to good ecological status by 2015. Currently, only 28% of our rivers and lakes meet that standard. In relation to the habitats directive, the 2013 article 17 data indicates that 46 out of 49 of our natural habitats are deemed unfavourable. We now have more species in unfavourable conditions compared with 2007.

1.30 pm

As for greenhouse gas emissions targets, we have achieved a reduction of just over 17% on 1990 levels, and we are unlikely to achieve the target of a 35% reduction by 2015 set by the Executive's Programme for Government.

Some may argue that the greening element in pillar 1 will address environmental issues. The fact is that greening is most likely to be targeted at arable farming, which accounts for only 6% of agricultural land use here. Therefore, it will deliver very limited benefit to the environment. Furthermore, there is already an over-reliance on the voluntary agrienvironment schemes. There is a huge concern that the current proposals, under such a constrained budget, will not enable us to meet our environmental obligations.

The cross-cutting nature of pillar 2 funding could help Northern Ireland to address compliance with the various European directives as well as promoting tourism, reducing rural poverty and sustaining farm businesses. We have seen the recent episode of the DOE facing potentially huge

infraction fines over the mismanagement of Strangford lough. It would be very easy for another environmental non-governmental organisation (e-NGO) to raise concerns at European level and to bring an investigation of our poor performance in meeting EU requirements. I urge the Minister to work closely with her Executive colleagues to seek adequate funding to meet the deficit in funding for the rural development programme, which was created by the recent debacle between Ministers.

It is of course essential that our farmers receive financial assistance under CAP pillar 1 funding to sustain a viable farming industry in Northern Ireland, but we must also bear in mind that a sustainable environment is vital for all of us, now and in the future.

Mr Frew: I rise as a member of the DUP and not as the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, in case there is some confusion. It is decent courtesy in a debate like this for Members to give way. This is not a monologue; it should be a debate. It is a very important issue. It just shows that parties are not confident in their own positions when it comes to this sort of thing if they will not take interventions.

The motion seems to have been brought —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will.

Mr Wilson: Do you accept that one of the reasons why they are not comfortable is because it is totally contradictory? On one hand, they want to defend the income of the farmers, but on the other hand, they want the money to be taken off the farmers. On one hand, they say that the money is badly spent, but on the other hand, they want more money to spend. If you have such a contradictory position as that, of course you will not be happy to take interventions.

Mr Frew: I agree.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you very much. That is a minute that I will surely use. I thank the Member for highlighting that because it is a farce. As I said, the motion seems to have been brought about not because of concern for the agriculture and farming communities and the wider rural community but out of desperation. The UUP was sleeping at the sidelines when the DUP was fighting for the farmers. We had to take it to court because the Agriculture Minister would not bring her proposals and priorities to the Executive.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will certainly give way, although I point out that his colleague did not afford me the same opportunity.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He is so generous with his time. I refer the Member to the guidance book that was handed out by the Speaker at, I think, the start of this sitting. It refers to interventions. I think that the booklet indicates that, if a Member did not indicate that they were going to give way, a Member should not persist in trying to force that direction. The Member talks about being disingenuous and discourteous. Maybe he should take that direction from the Speaker.

In response to the DUP having taken the Sinn Féin Minister to court to get the decision righted, this is for my own recollection; I am trying to find it out. The previous Agriculture Minister, Michelle Gildernew, made a similar decision. Could the Minister, sorry, could the Member — maybe I am pre-empting something that might happen after tonight's programme — possibly tell me what steps the DUP's Finance Minister took at that stage, when Michelle Gildernew was Agriculture Minister? If I am correct, it is his current party leader — he is behind you —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I reiterate that it is entirely at the discretion of the Member as to whether they will accept an intervention. Members who are given the courtesy of making an intervention should make it short and sharp, because you are eating up on the Member's time.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for that speech. I am sure that he will afford me the same opportunity when he comes to speak.

We made this decision because farmers and the farming industry have been through terrible years of strife. This was the right decision. Last year, the Minister made a decision on the modulation money. Every single party in the Executive, as far as my memory serves me, supported that. We made a decision. We have a party position. Sinn Féin has a party position. I ask the Member now, what is the UUP's position on transferring from pillar 1 to pillar 2? I will take an intervention on that.

Mr Swann: Is the Member going to answer my question? Is he going to answer questions with questions? That seems to be the DUP way in this entire debate. That is another question. Answer my question first: when Michelle Gildernew —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Let us come back to the debate and address remarks through the Speaker.

Mr Frew: Because of the problems that farmers have been facing over the past year, we took a decision — *[Interruption.]* Well, because the farmers were not in the same position as they are in now. I will add to the point. The Member has not answered my question, and I will take an intervention again. What is the UUP's position on transferring from pillar 1 to pillar 2?

The Member does not seem to have a position. I am not going to waste any more of my time on this issue. Is the Member going to answer my question? A percentage. His leader was very good at talking about 90% or 80% of a Haass deal before he went to the Executive, got a verbal kicking and then came back and flipped over. Would the Member like to tell me what percentage the UUP would like to transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to address all remarks through the Speaker's Chair.

Mr Frew: I will afford him this very brief slip of time to answer that. What is the UUP's position on transferring from pillar 1 to pillar 2?

Mr Wilson: Silence is golden.

Mr Swann: Silence is golden? Is that another blessing of silence that has been given?

Mr Frew: I am sorry: the Member needs to address the point.

Mr Swann: I will address the point. Pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfers are reasonably valuable, and we have supported a transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2.

Mr Frew: A percentage.

Mr Swann: A percentage. The point has already been made by my party member Jo-Anne Dobson, that, if the budget had been put in place first —

Mr Frew: Percentage.

Mr Swann: The budget has not been established here: that is what we are saying. We are now out to consultation following the declaration on the transfer of money. Surely anyone with reasonable business sense makes the business case and the finance case first before they go bidding for money?

Mr Frew: The Member cannot answer me as to what percentage the UUP would wish to transfer. The DUP is very clear: we stated that 0% transfer should happen. Even Sinn Féin has a position. The UUP is only carping and complaining from the sidelines.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Frew: The UUP tells us that it is a carve-up between the two largest parties, and then the very next thing they say is that the two parties should decide.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: The UUP is all over the place on this subject.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will follow that exchange, although I do not want to get involved in the middle of a row between the DUP and the UUP. Clearly, the election has commenced. I think that there is a 17-week countdown already.

I will get back to the motion and not the verbal exchanges that have been going on. There are parts of the motion that we can identify with: for example, we are concerned that this matter has been brought before the courts. Certainly, we do not support any criticism of the Agriculture Minister for anything that she did in respect of this matter.

It is absolutely vital that people understand that the rural development programme is crucial for the sustainability and vitality of rural areas. It is important for things such as job creation, economic development and farming families. Indeed, it is important to point out that the rural development programme that we are in now has created 382 jobs, which is very important for deprived rural areas. The budget of the current rural development programme is around £500 million. It is very important to point out that 80% of that goes back to farmers through the various schemes such as less-favoured areas (LFAs), farm diversification, the manure efficiency technology scheme (METS) and other projects. Twenty per cent, which is £100 million, went to the broader aspects of rural development and schemes such as the MARA project, which the Minister referred to earlier and which has delivered £433,000 into the pockets of those in deprived rural areas, support for rural transport for isolated rural areas, the rural borewells scheme and various other anti-poverty measures for rural areas.

Last week, reference was made here to the GAA — I think that Mr Allister raised it — and various schemes that are funded under the rural development programme were referred to earlier today. That gets to the point of unionists' gripe and, perhaps, the motivation for this ending up in court in the first place. I think that it is important to point out that the criticism of the funding of GAA projects is unwarranted. Anyone who comes from a rural area knows that. In the area that I am from, the GAA — apart from the games, pastimes and recreational opportunities that it provides — provides a focal point for all aspects of that local rural community. If we look at some of the events that happened in my GAA club in Loughmacrory over the Christmas period, we see that, for example, the club was used as a focal point for the local women's group, for charity events for local disability groups and cancer charities, for a game of football in aid of epilepsy and for a cycling event in aid of the Alzheimer's Society. It is a base for after-funeral dinners. It is where the youth club —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes, of course.

Mr Allister: In his defence of the squander of rural farming money on the GAA, does the Member seriously believe that the needs of the GAA — including one of the richest clubs on this island, Tyrone GAA — are such that they overshadow the needs of hard-working farmers who struggle day and daily to make ends meet and for whom the single farm payment is not a luxury but a lifeline? Does he really think that squandering that funding on the GAA and other soft, ludicrous options is a proper spend of that sort of money?

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

Mr McAleer: Clearly, the Member was not listening to some of the things I said. If you are referring to those things as soft and unimportant in rural areas, perhaps you should come to deprived rural areas and see what it is like to live there. In many rural areas, there is nothing else apart from the GAA and the basic services that it provides to local communities.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes, OK.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that there is still money in the rural development budget? Does he also accept that, if farming is to be competitive, farmers have to have the money that is allocated to them to invest in, for example, milking parlours or to do the job we expect them to do, which is to supply food for the agrifood industry?

Mr McAleer: OK. That is a very good and important point, and indeed our party and Agriculture Minister have done their best to support the farming community. It is important to note that DUP and UUP MEPs voted for the cut to the EU budget. Indeed, the DUP at Westminster supported the Tories in negotiating a 22% cut to the rural development programme. That is probably the joke. We are looking at the current rural development programme and talking about a 22% cut that was negotiated by the Tories with the support of the DUP. We are talking about the TUV, the DUP and the Ulster Unionists who talk about —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: I am not giving way to any more unionists today. They talk all the time about parity, parity, parity, yet, when it comes to the modulation rate, parity does not apply. In England, there is a 12% modulation rate; in Scotland, it is 9·5%; and in Wales, it is 15%. The question we need to ask unionists is why our rural communities should suffer and why parity is so important in all other cases but can just be dropped like a hot potato when it suits.

In conclusion, we share many of the sentiments of the motion: that the matter ended up in court —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr McAleer: — at the behest of the DUP; that rural community groups and organisations may lose out as a result of the reduced rural development programme —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is now up.

Mr McAleer: — but we certainly do not support the charge that the Minister has done anything wrong.

1.45 pm

Mr Byrne: The timing of the debate is important, given the CAP situation in Northern Ireland. However, the debate should not be needed. We have had an unfortunate development: a turf war between Ministers played out in the courts. That is a big failure in the political dynamics between Ministers in the Executive, and it led to a High Court battle between the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel in the closing days of December.

There is grave concern in the farming community, and in the rural community generally. Will rural development be badly affected, and will the agrifood development strategy be damaged? The Minister needs to answer those questions, along with her colleagues.

The two Ministers should have been in intense discussions since October about the CAP moneys and how rural development was to be funded from 2014 to 2020. Who should have been leading the discussions in the Executive? The Agriculture and Rural Development Minister should have been in direct consultation with the Finance and Personnel Minister to make sure that the CAP money was smoothly presented to the Assembly and to the wider farming and rural communities.

A DARD statement on 20 December outlined a 7% transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2. That was a reasonable transfer, given the circumstances in Northern Ireland. However, no rational explanation was given, and there was no mention of Executive co-matched funding to supplement the rural development programme. If we were going to keep down the transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2, it was crucial for the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister to have had an agreement with the Finance and Personnel Minister to co-match funding.

For the CAP direct payment system, farmers generally wanted to lessen the percentage transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2. Quite naturally, they wanted farmers to benefit primarily from the EU CAP moneys. Co-matched funding was therefore necessary to make sure that we have a viable and workable rural development programme. However, rural development must be adequately funded to make rural communities better serviced and to enable rural sustainability to be promoted and advanced.

The SDLP will support the motion. We will also support the amendment, because it widens the motion to include other Ministers who should have been involved in the discussions.

The CAP moneys are very important to Northern Ireland farming and the rural community. Currently, €2·3 billion is allocated for direct payments over the next six years. My colleague Mr McAleer said that rural development moneys in the UK have been drastically cut by 14%. That is because Mr Cameron wanted to come back from Brussels able to state that he had secured a cut in the EU Budget. Unfortunately, the rural development programme has been the programme most adversely cut in the UK envelope. Rural development programme moneys in pillar 2 have been reduced to £227 million over the six-year period.

Direct farm payments are crucial to active farmers who are engaged in practical farming, be it dairy and beef, sheep, fruit and vegetables, arable, cereals, or whatever. What is going to happen to those who farm in hill areas? There is a raging debate, even in the farming community, about whether Northern Ireland should be treated as a single zone or a two-zone statelet. The sooner that those issues are cleared up, the better.

I appeal to the Minister to make sure that real and meaningful discussions take place to ensure that the farming community and the rural community in general can live in harmony with the outcome, whatever that may be.

The debate is necessary, given what happened between 20 December and 31 December. The amendment focuses on ministerial roles and responsibilities in a so-called collective Government, in particular the role and function of the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister and latterly the role and responsibility of the Finance and Personnel Minister. What a fiasco. We have two Ministers from the one Government in the High Court.

I ask the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why DARD caved in so quickly when it was challenged in the High Court. That is a fundamental issue that has to be faced in the Assembly and in the Executive. What a sorry mess has unfolded, given the High Court legal battle on the pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfers.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he acknowledge that any negotiation takes two parties and that, if you are left in a position where a party will not bring forward its priorities and plans to you, there is no form of resolution other than a court case to ensure that your beliefs and the support that the farmers need are established?

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Will the Member give way?

Mr Byrne: Yes.

Mrs O'Neill: Is the Member aware that, last week I outlined in a statement the fact that the Minister of Finance and Personnel took no opportunity to raise any issues with me? I had written to him on two occasions, and on neither occasion had he any issue at all. I directly asked him a question about the transfer. So, the DUP is electioneering. I think that that is very evident to everybody; they can

speak for themselves, but I ask the Member whether he agrees with that assessment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Byrne: I will try to deal with both interventions. First, on what Mr Frew said —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is now up.

Mr Byrne: I would have been delighted to respond to both interventions; however, I abide by your ruling, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. We support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Buchanan: On 20 December 2013, when the Agriculture Minister announced her intention to make a transfer of 7% from pillar 1 to pillar 2 for the years 2014 to 2019, it came as a surprise to many in the farming community and to many in the House. That 7% amounted to a total of £114 million that was to be removed without consultation with or approval of the Executive. To add insult to injury, the Minister then stated that, prior to reaching her decision, she had consulted widely on the matter.

It is unfortunate that this Minister, who has been in office now for quite some time, failed to realise that she has a duty and a responsibility under the ministerial code to bring all such proposals before the Executive for approval. In failing to do that, did the Minister really think that she could paddle her own canoe and get away without being held to account for her actions at ministerial level, never mind the implications for the future of the agriculture industry? That is why many from the farming community have approached my office voicing their support for the High Court challenge and subsequent ruling, which have ensured that the money is kept where it belongs, which is at the cutting edge of the agriculture industry.

However, I have to say that, on reading the ridiculous comments of Mrs Dobson, who moved the motion, when she labelled the case brought before the High Court as nothing short of a "pantomime", I think that they really show how out of touch she is with the views of the farming community and those who are delivering for the sector as a whole. Also, making the suggestion that this ruling will have detrimental consequences for the funding of farm safety measures, when, in reality, that is a matter for DETI through the Health and Safety Executive rather than for DARD, shows a clear lack of understanding on her part.

When I look at the wording of the motion where, on the one hand, Mrs Dobson:

> *"expresses dissatisfaction with the Minister ... for her failure to ... consult with Executive colleagues"*

yet, on the other, criticises the challenge brought to the High Court and the ruling that followed, I see that it clearly begs the question about the direction that she is pursuing.

I challenge Ms Lo assertion's that this is a political squabble prior to elections. Perhaps she should refer to the St Andrews Agreement, which ensures that a Minister can no longer go on a solo run, and inform herself of the ministerial code. The Minister and Mrs Dobson are exercised about the level of rural development funding, but the reality is that a pot of €227 million is allocated to rural development funding from Europe. It is now the Minister's responsibility to bring forward proposals for future funding to the Executive for approval. That is a practice that she would have been better to engage in, rather than going down a Lone Ranger path of her own making, which was inevitably doomed to failure.

As for Mrs Dobson, I know that she is now playing the Pontius Pilate card by washing her hands and those of her party of the issue, leaving it to other parties in the Executive. I make it clear to the House that the DUP will not shy away from its responsibility in continuing to deliver for the farming community.

Turning for a few moments to rural development funding, let me pose this question: why is it that there is now so much mistrust of the distribution of funding among many who are involved in the rural development programme, despite the real benefit that it has been to the farming community? Is it not the case that millions of pounds have been given to GAA and other projects managed by district councils, which raises questions as to how they have benefited the environment or the rural community as a whole? I know of one case in my constituency of the GAA receiving in excess of £800,000 despite the fact that it was not signed off by the chair of that steering committee as they deemed that it had not met the criteria for the funding. Lo and behold, the Minister signed it off despite that and passed it on to the GAA in that area.

Therefore, I now challenge the Minister to engage with the Executive to bring forward properly funded and meaningful projects that will be vehicles to deliver much-needed support and economic growth to the agricultural industry and rural communities. Let us have no more solo runs —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Buchanan: — but let us bring forward those meaningful proposals to the Executive.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Ian Milne.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Employment and Learning

University of Ulster, Coleraine

1. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the reasons for the intended closure of the senior common room at the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster. *(AQO 5306/11-15)*

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The University of Ulster is undertaking a £15·15 million development of the physical estate at its Coleraine campus. This includes the rationalisation of the central buildings, where the senior common room was housed, the demolition of the south buildings and the construction of a new state-of-the-art teaching and learning block to replace the academic provision previously housed in the south buildings. The university will continue to provide common room facilities for university staff. Societies will be able to book the common room space for evening or weekend events.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he advise us whether any of the funding received from DEL benefited this project?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. The redevelopment of the Coleraine campus is subject to capital support from my Department. As I said, the overall cost is £15·15 million, of which the Department is contributing £13·6 million in total. In particular, the current phase of the rationalisation is in receipt of a grant of £5·1 million from my Department.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister inform us what interaction the Department had with the university or the protesters during this period?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for her question. Essentially, this was a matter for the university to address and resolve. It is important that Members appreciate that universities are autonomous bodies. Although they receive considerable support from government in Northern Ireland, that support runs to the policy direction for the universities and a considerable amount of resourcing support. It is not the job of government to micromanage how universities conduct their affairs. That said, I was pleased that a resolution to the situation was found through dialogue. Hopefully, that solution will be sustainable as the months proceed.

Mr P Ramsey: Like a number of Members, I was concerned at media reports, particularly when utilities to rooms that were being used exclusively by students were knocked off. I ask again: will the Minister ensure that, by holding meetings with the students and management involved, departmental officials are on top of incidents of this nature in future?

Dr Farry: I certainly assure the Member that my officials and I kept ourselves informed of developments as the situation unfolded. No doubt, as in any situation, lessons can be learned on how similar situations can be handled in future. I am pleased that the situation was resolved very quickly in its final days, as it seemed to escalate with the comments that were being made. I again stress that there have been discussions between the university and those involved in the dispute, and the University visitor is examining the situation. I hope that a sustainable solution has been found that will stick over the coming months.

Teacher Training

2. **Mr Attwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the review of initial teacher training. *(AQO 5307/11-15)*

Dr Farry: Members are aware that I instigated a review into the teacher training infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The review panel has begun work and is engaged in considering the most recent developments in the field of initial teacher education provision internationally. The panel has also invited submissions on the review from initial teacher education providers and other interested stakeholders. The closing date for submissions was 18 December. My officials are collating the responses for the panel and will be preparing a summary report for publication on the Department's website in the coming weeks.

The review panel will use the information from the overview of international best practice and the issues raised in the submissions as the background to a series of meetings that it will hold with each of the initial teacher education providers, towards the end of February. The panel will then draw all the information together, along with the information gathered in stage 1 of the review, and produce a report setting out the options for the future shape of initial teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland. Once this assignment has been completed, it will form the basis for further dialogue with the various institutions, with the intention of finding an agreed way forward.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. I go back to the submissions issue. Can you confirm that the review panel will receive full, unedited copies of the submissions that your Department received and not something that has been redacted by your Department? Can you also confirm that the review panel, in its initial work and meetings with the higher education (HE) institutions in the North, will not spend only half a day with each of the providers? That cannot be the case, can it, Minister? Surely that must be false and inaccurate.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his questions and interest. I am happy to give him the assurance that this will be a proper and thorough process and that the panel will have full access to all of the over 100 submissions that came in from a range of organisations and individuals. To do anything other than that would be self-defeating. It is for the panel itself to work out its programme of work. This is not being directed by me or my officials. Departmental officials are there only to facilitate the work of the panel, which will make its own determination on how detailed its interaction with the various providers needs to be.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister knows that the Committee has raised many concerns, especially about the smaller colleges. We raised the fact that even the panel that has

been set up may not look favourably at smaller institutions. What future is laid out for the likes of St Mary's and Stranmillis colleges?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. What the outcome of the review will be remains an open question, but I am determined that we adopt an evidence-based approach. That is why we have adopted the two-stage approach of, first, examining the financial situation facing, in particular, the two teacher training colleges and, secondly, looking at international best practice and trying to determine the different available options in any potential reconfiguration of the system.

I appreciate the concerns that the Committee and others have expressed, but it is equally important to acknowledge that the system as it stands will simply not be sustainable for Northern Ireland. There are huge pressures on our budgets. In particular, we need to ensure that we get maximum efficiency from our investment in skills. There are considerable inefficiencies in the current approach to teacher education. However, this is not simply about savings. It has to be viewed as an opportunity to make sure that Northern Ireland is in line with international best practice in the institutional format of teacher education provision. It is important that we seize and acknowledge the opportunities that may arise from doing things somewhat differently in the future.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister take notice of the changing financial position of the colleges? In looking at the future of teaching teachers, is he keeping in touch with the further teaching that they need when in schools?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. The content of teaching is an issue for my colleague the Minister of Education. Financing issues are relevant to my Department because it funds the different institutions. It is important to bear in mind that, as things stand, the colleges will not be financially sustainable over the next decade. If we do nothing, there will be a problem. In the short run, we also have to acknowledge that there are a number of financial interventions that are geared towards maintenance of the viability of, in particular, the small teacher training colleges.

One bizarre outcome is that, in Northern Ireland, it costs more to train a teacher than an engineer. Yet, in the current economic situation, we have a surplus of teachers and insufficient engineers, which is a problem. That suggests that our priorities are not quite right in how we invest our scarce resources to upskill for the future needs of our economy.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give an assurance that, during the currency of the review, he will take no steps to prejudice the outcome or the operation of the colleges by virtue of reducing their funding to shape matters in a certain direction?

Dr Farry: I am happy to give the Member an assurance that we are preserving the status quo while the review is being conducted. I stress that it is to be a short review, and the timescale is that a report should be with me by early summer this year. I will look to have discussions with the teacher training colleges in autumn this year. We are not doing anything to prejudice the outcome of the review. Indeed, the numbers have already been set for this year's entry, and they have been agreed by the Minister of Education for next year. Therefore, there is a degree of stability in the short run for the colleges while we take more fundamental look at the future institutional shape in Northern Ireland.

Steps 2 Success

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department will protect against fraud and the misuse of public funds through the Steps 2 Success programme. *(AQO 5308/11-15)*

4. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the Steps 2 Success programme. *(AQO 5309/11-15)*

8. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he has had any contact from the NI Audit Office regarding the processing of tenders for the Steps 2 Success programme. *(AQO 5313/11-15)*

15. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why the recent pre-qualification questionnaire on Steps 2 Success did not ask interested parties to demonstrate that they had a supply chain in place to deliver the contract. *(AQO 5320/11-15)*

Dr Farry: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 3, 4, 8 and 15 together, and I request an additional minute for the answer.

Procurement for the Steps 2 Success employment programme, which is designed to move people from unemployment and economic inactivity into suitable sustained employment, is current. The procurement exercise is being carried out under the guidance of the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel. Its role is to ensure that the procurement meets all legislative and policy requirements.

The procurement is being carried out in two stages. Stage 1 has been completed. It was designed to select six organisations in each of three contract areas to submit tenders at stage 2. At stage 1, bidding organisations provided examples related to previous experience of their capacity and capability to deliver the programme in response to specific questions. Eighteen different organisations submitted bids during stage 1. Following evaluation by senior officials from the Department, six organisations were selected in each contract area. Nine different organisations were selected, because some organisations were brought forward for more than one contract area. In stage 2, organisations will be asked to demonstrate how they will provide a flexible, individually tailored programme to assist eligible participants to move into sustainable employment. It is anticipated that procurement of stage 2 will launch in February, with the programme starting in June.

There will be a number of measures in place to protect against fraud and the misuse of public funds, including inspections by the Department's financial and quality monitoring staff. Bidding organisations were not asked to demonstrate that they had a supply chain in place at stage 1 because that stage was designed to allow them to demonstrate their capability and capacity to deliver the programme, based on examples of previous experience. At stage 2, organisations will be requested to supply details of their proposed delivery infrastructure, including the supply chain that they propose to put in place. They will also need to demonstrate how they will deliver a high-quality

service to all participants on the programme. The minimum standard of service offered to each participant is set out by the Department in a service guarantee.

The Department will put in place a robust contract management system to oversee the delivery of Steps 2 Success. That will include assessment of compliance with all terms and conditions, including those connected with claims and payments. In addition, contractors will be required to provide assurance on the controls that they have in place, which will be validated by the Department. I have had no contact from the Northern Ireland Audit Office about the processing of tenders for Steps 2 Success.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí sin. Can the Minister assure us that his Department will ensure that the programme delivers value for money?

Dr Farry: I am happy to give the Member that assurance. There are a number of fundamental rationales for the new programme. First, Steps 2 Success is a reasonably successful programme in its own right, but there is significant scope for improvement in results, particularly in moving people into sustainable employment. That has to be the ultimate consideration that we keep in mind. The programme is designed to help people who are currently long-term unemployed to progress into sustainable employment. That will be of benefit to individuals and our economy. The recontracting will also ensure that we have value for money. This will be a competitive process, and that is also important for the public purse.

2.15 pm

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Can the groups or companies that were unsuccessful in the first round of the tendering process now be brought in to deliver the programme, perhaps on behalf of the successful bidder? Is he happy enough about the ethics of this process going forward?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Taking his second point first, I am not quite sure what he means by the ethics of the process. I stress that I have full confidence in the system that we are adopting in relation to this procurement. At every stage, we are rigorously following best practice and the law. The Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate has been assisting and guiding my Department at every stage along the path.

I also stress that we are now moving to stage 2. One of the issues that will be assessed is the nature of the supply chain that the people who have been passed for stage 2 will be engaging with. Within that, there will be opportunities for a range of organisations, including those that are based in Northern Ireland. However, that may not be exclusively the case, given that we are operating under European procurement rules. In essence, there will be a wealth of opportunities locally under this programme. One of the criteria on which people will be judged is the quality of their local supply chain and their ability to bring in organisations to assist with the delivery of the programme.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his previous answers. I hear what he is saying, but can he assure the House 100% that there will be no misuse of public funds and that there will certainly be no fraudulent activity?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I am not sure that any Minister can stand before the Assembly, whether it is in relation to Steps 2 Success or, indeed, any other programme, under procurement or otherwise, and give the Member the assurance that he is asking for, because we are dealing with human nature. However, I can assure him that we are taking the issue of combating fraud and the issue of quality extremely seriously. That applies both to the issue of the nature of organisations that will, in the future, deliver contracts on our behalf and to the nature of their interaction with individuals.

It is important to stress that it is a departure from our previous practice with Steps to Work, and from the practice in Great Britain with the work programme, in that we are putting in place service guarantees and a code of conduct. We are not going down the route of the "out of sight, out of mind" approach in Great Britain where, once a person is referred to the contractors, they can do as they wish with that individual. We will be closely monitoring the situation in Northern Ireland because there are important issues of public accountability in place, and also to ensure that companies are not simply addressing the easier cases and that in Northern Ireland, if anything, they are addressing everyone's particular circumstances in an individually tailored way.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I am interested to find out how the Minister is going to stop successful candidate companies that are based overseas from slicing off a large proportion of the revenue in pure profit and then asking unsuccessful bidders to deliver the Steps 2 Success scheme from start to finish at a much reduced rate.

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He is constantly expressing these unfounded fears about this situation. Obviously, there will be situations where any organisation that is delivering a contract will seek to derive a management fee and a profit from that exercise, but one of the challenges in procurement is to ensure that we are assessing and policing that situation. In that respect, Steps 2 Success is no different from any other type of contractual situation that we will face. It is important to bear in mind that it is about delivering results for the Northern Ireland economy. We want to have a step change in our ability to take people who are in long-term unemployment and to assist them into sustainable employment, which, I am sure, is an objective that the Member would welcome alongside everyone else. In doing that, it is not unreasonable that we put in place a structure that will manage and support that.

It is also clear that all of the contractors will be expected to have a supply chain in place to assist them in that regard. I think we are taking this forward in a very responsible manner and that, in time, the programme will be viewed as a real success in supporting both individuals and the economy of Northern Ireland.

Youth Unemployment

5. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his discussions with his European colleagues to find a solution to the problem of youth unemployment. *(AQO 5310/11-15)*

Dr Farry: Tackling youth unemployment has a particular focus in Europe and is of utmost priority for my Department. I met recently, in Brussels, Commissioner Andor, the Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. We discussed youth unemployment, particularly the youth guarantee. My view is that my Department is meeting the youth guarantee through its programmes and policies.

The youth employment scheme is designed to link social and economic policy through a targeted approach to upskilling young people in preparation for work. It is not possible to make a direct comparison with all elements of the youth contract in Great Britain. However, the enhanced employer subsidy element in Northern Ireland is a considerable enhancement, offering 12 months of subsidised employed, in comparison with the 6-months wage incentive in Great Britain. In addition to supporting young people in securing employment, funding for apprenticeship training is also available.

European engagement is a priority for me and my officials to ensure awareness of developments that impact on this region. I am committed to maximising European funding and increasing drawdown of funds to support employment in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland European social fund programme 2007-2013 aims to assist unemployed and economically inactive people, including young people, by helping them to enter, remain and make progress in sustained employment. One of the key targets is to assist 4,500 16- to 19-year-olds over the duration of the programme.

In the new European social fund programme, running from 2014-2020, there will be increased emphasis on improving the employability of young people, particularly those who are not in employment, education or training. I also hold regular meetings with my colleagues in the South to explore how we can work collaboratively to tackle related issues such as youth unemployment.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and wish him well in his efforts on that very difficult problem. Will the Minister detail what discussions he has had in relation to getting a properly funded youth guarantee scheme introduced here?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. We already have, in practice, a range of measures that, in effect, deliver the youth guarantee in Northern Ireland. If anything, I think the Commission would recognise that our approach to the youth guarantee is more robust and comprehensive than that of our colleagues in Great Britain. It is a matter for the UK Government to report back to the European Commission on the UK's overall implementation of the youth guarantee, and our response will be part of that submission. However, they do not intend to submit an implementation plan as such, as other states have been requested to do, but to submit what they term a summary account. I regret that the UK Government have not been more robust and comprehensive in how they are responding to the European Commission.

In essence, the different schemes that we have — whether through the current Training for Success, our programmes supporting those in the NEET category, our assistance for people in apprenticeships, our support through education maintenance allowance (EMA), or the future discussions that we are going to have around the United Youth programme in Northern Ireland — all address aspects of the youth guarantee. It is also worth stressing that we are embarking on a new system of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland, which will offer fresh opportunities for young people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: Youth unemployment is quite a serious issue. When the Committee was at the European employment conference, we were told that 90% of jobs will require an IT qualification. What work is your Department doing within the EU's Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs to ensure that our young people are properly educated?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that we engage with European programmes, whether that is in relation to digital jobs or the European alliance for apprenticeships. Those programmes provide us with the opportunity to exchange best practice and to learn what is happening in other jurisdictions. As well as that, we can often tap into funding opportunities.

The Member is correct to stress the importance of investing in good-quality IT skills. However, in saying that, it is important that, in IT skills, we draw a distinction between people's use of applications and people's knowledge of programming. The former is very much considered to be the third leg of the stool in essential skills, and we will offer support for people in maths, English and information and communication technology (ICT) skills. We are also investing heavily in trying to encourage more and more people to have knowledge of programming skills. That is something that is probably beyond the scope of just my Department. It is something that we need to encourage more and more in our schools. I know that the business community is very keen to encourage an uptake in programming skills, particularly among young people in their more formative years.

Mr Campbell: The Minister referred to the youth employment scheme. A number of us got behind the scheme on a constituency basis to support and promote it. Will he report on how successful it has been, not just in the number of people coming through the scheme but in getting to the hard-to-reach working-class estates where there is endemic unemployment?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. The youth employment scheme has been very successful in its own right. If we compare our performance in Northern Ireland relative to similar schemes in Great Britain, we see that, across a number of indicators, we are performing better. I think that is a reflection of the advantages of devolution. We have not simply copied something that is being delivered in Great Britain and rolled it out in Northern Ireland; rather, we have listened to the voices of young people and the business community and tailored our own solution. Hence, we have, so far, achieved better outcomes.

The Member is right to stress the importance of outreach. The youth employment scheme is open to all. Our employment advisers will, where appropriate, steer those who are unemployed to consider the youth employment scheme. It is important to acknowledge that there are other schemes out there working with those who are more disengaged or facing barriers. That is why the pathways to success strategy for dealing with those in the NEET category is so important. We will have the opportunity, as we look to the United Youth programme over the coming

months, to refresh that strategy and to ensure that we move it to a new level of engaging people, in particular those who are most disengaged from the economy.

Colleges: Funding Cuts

6. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the impact that cuts to the age-weighted pupil unit at secondary schools are having on further and higher education colleges. *(AQO 5311/11-15)*

Dr Farry: The age-weighted pupil unit is the responsibility of the Department of Education. It is the main element of the common funding scheme, which distributes funding to schools as part of the delegated budgets under local management of school funding arrangements. My officials have contacted the Department of Education, which confirmed that there have been no changes to the age-weighted pupil unit at secondary education or any other phase of education in the past few years; neither have any changes to the age-weighted pupil unit been proposed as part of the current reform of the common funding scheme.

There is no evidence to suggest that the schools' age-weighted pupil unit has an impact on further education colleges. However, since 2008, schools have also been in receipt of entitlement framework funding as a contribution to the additional costs associated with planning and delivering an expanded curricular offer through cost-effective collaboration, which includes further education colleges.

With the entitlement framework becoming statutory, it is anticipated that the delivery of all aspects of the curriculum will be funded through schools' delegated budget allocations. Consequently, the Department of Education plans to phase out the ring-fenced entitlement framework funding support by the 2015-16 financial year. It is entirely possible that that change will reduce the number of post-primary-school children following professional and technical provision at further education colleges. That would be unfortunate, given the benefits to pupils engaging in a wider range of provision, especially professional and technical courses, at a further education college.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but there is no time for a supplementary question because that ends the period for listed questions. We move now to 15 minutes of topical questions.

2.30 pm

Skills: Economic Growth

1. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he plans to engage with businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), to identify skills gaps and where existing vacancies could be filled, given the more positive soundings from economists and others about potential economic growth in 2014. *(AQT 561/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for the question, and it is an important issue as we look ahead. Already, there is very good engagement with the business community, and I will highlight in particular a number of collaborative working groups that are in existence for some of the priority skills sectors. We have had an extremely successful ICT working group over the past number of years. It has involved a number of Departments, as well as universities, colleges and the business community. The model has been replicated for engineering and advanced manufacturing, as well as for the food and drink manufacturing sector, and can be rolled out to other sectors. In the more recent past, the model has also been used for the tourism and hospitality sector.

The Department has a range of means by which it engages with business. The main interface is through its Skills Solutions Service by providing information on skills opportunities to business. We also engage through Careers Service and the employment service. Bearing it in mind that I have stressed that there are three layers of interaction, work is ongoing in the Department to create a single interface for employers to make engagement much more efficient and streamlined. As part of that as well, we are working with Invest Northern Ireland to ensure that both our efforts on engaging with employers are effectively coordinated.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Business leaders, particularly in Ballymena, often raise with us the link between school leavers and local businesses such as those in the manufacturing sector. How does the Minister's announced review of careers advice fit into his business engagement strategy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. He mentions Ballymena, which is a good case example of skills engagement. Skill Exchange has piloted Ballymena for its first presence in Northern Ireland.

My Department and the Department of Education are finalising the terms of reference for the review of careers. If that review is to be successful, it really has to be there to address the interests of young people and the economy, and that means ensuring that the business community has its voice well heard during the process. It has been very clear in its articulation of the need for robust careers advice in Northern Ireland that ensures that young people are exposed to accurate labour market information about where future job opportunities are likely to be.

Magee Campus: Expansion

2. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he agrees that an expanded Magee campus is essential to developing the north-west economy, given that we have talked quite a bit about youth unemployment and some of the economic difficulties that we face, with no better or worse example of that than my constituency. *(AQT 562/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I have put it on record on numerous occasions that I would like to see the Magee campus expand, and I acknowledge the arguments that have been made on the importance of the university to the local economy. We have made some significant increases in the maximum student number (MaSN) for the campus over the past number of years. Those increases were from a situation in which, when I took up office in 2011, we had no provision to allow that to happen. If other opportunities arise, we will see about making further allocations to the university sector, and the University of Ulster has a commitment to direct any additional allocations to the Magee campus.

It is worth putting it on record, however, that any additional undergraduate places need to be baselined, and, as we look to future Budget discussions, bearing it in mind that we are likely to see further squeezes in public spending, we need to ensure that, if we are to make any further allocations of places, they can be sustained into the future. The last thing that I want to see is a situation in which we expand the university sector in Northern Ireland at the same time as we have to make further reductions in allocations to the sector and, as a consequence, we hollow out the quality of education in Northern Ireland. There is no point in putting in additional places if they will be of an inferior nature. So, it is important that we have a balanced approach as we move ahead and fully understand the financial implications of the direction of travel that the Member suggests.

Mr Eastwood: I think that most people would understand the implications of investing in higher education. Those implications are usually very positive. Given that the Executive have committed to supporting the One Plan, which foresees that there will be 9,400 students at Magee by 2020, will the Minister and his Department work alongside his Executive colleagues, local stakeholders and the University of Ulster to see that target realised?

Dr Farry: I am happy to see what we can do for the delivery of the One Plan. We are coming close to meeting the initial target of having 1,000 additional places by 2015. Whether we actually get there remains to be seen. Ultimately, there are pathways through which that target for additional places can be met that involve the university itself making some internal reallocations of places, as well as opportunities in part-time study and attracting more international students. Those are on top of any future decisions that the Executive may take on that.

I want to turn this back to the Member and stress that it also takes every other political party in the Assembly to step up and make those commitments. In 2011, when we took up office at the start of this mandate, his party started at a position of supporting the freezing of tuition fees but resourcing that through universities dipping into what were perceived to be their reserves at that time. That would not have been a sustainable solution. If we are to do this, the Member and others will have to identify what we will do less of to allow us to shift resources into the university sector to allow for the potential expansion of Magee.

Stranmillis/QUB: Proposed Merger

3. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to update the House on the widely talked about proposed merger of Stranmillis University College and Queen's University. *(AQT 563/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. In 2011, when I took up office, the merger was very much on the agenda. Indeed, my predecessor had issued a consultation document on it. However, it became clear that there was opposition in the Assembly to the merger proceeding as it was set out in the consultation document. The particular governance arrangements at Stranmillis required a decision to be taken through the Assembly's structures to enable that to happen. The merger is now essentially on hold as we do the wider review of the teacher training infrastructure. I do not want to predict particular outcomes that may arise from that, although that is something on which the panel will reflect as part of a wider set of potential arrangements that could arise.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the light of any future announcement, does he recognise and will he take into consideration the very considerable work that Stranmillis has done to raise additional finance through various methods since the proposed merger was last talked about?

Dr Farry: I am certainly happy to pay tribute to our teacher training colleges on a range of fronts. They are able to raise additional resources, and I acknowledge their ongoing work on that. They also perform extremely well in national student surveys. However, I do not think that that detracts from what is still the underlying situation that faces our teacher education system in Northern Ireland. It is important that we use resources wisely and ensure that we follow international best practice in arrangements. It is still Stranmillis's policy that the merger should proceed. When we talk about the merger and reflect on what was discussed, it is important to note that it was not about Stranmillis losing quality and being subsumed into the much bigger entity of Queen's University; it was very much a potential marriage of equal partners, where a new ethos would be created on the back of any potential merger and something would emerge that was much greater than the sum of its parts.

We await the panel's recommendations with great interest. Whatever happens, there will be an exciting future for teacher education in Northern Ireland. We are striving to ensure that we have a world-class system, and I do not think that we should aspire to anything less than that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Pat Sheehan is not in his place.

Agency Workers Directive

5. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many complaints, if any, have been registered with the Labour Relations Agency as a result of the agency workers directive. *(AQT 565/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I do not have the precise figures to hand, but I am more than happy to write to the Member on that. She is right to say that, where complaints are raised, there are mechanisms in place to address them, and investigations will follow if abuses have been identified. It is important that we recognise that the agency workers directive is in place to give a degree of enhanced protection to agency workers, who provide a service to us all through their contribution to the economy.

Mrs McKevitt: What is the Department doing to protect agency workers against wrongful treatment? Will he make that a priority for his Department?

Dr Farry: I assure the Member that we are reviewing the implementation of the agency workers directive in Northern Ireland. It was introduced in June 2011, following a vote in the Assembly, and went live in December 2011. It has now been in place for over two years, so we have a reasonable degree of evidence from which we can draw some conclusions. If we need to make changes on the back of that review, I will come back to the Assembly in that regard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Robin Newton is not in his place.

Software Testers' Academy

7. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the success of the Software Testers' Academy, from which students are graduating today. *(AQT 567/11-15)*

Dr Farry: That is a very good question from the Member. Minister Foster and I have just attended the graduation of the third cohort from the Software Testers' Academy. This is one of a number of academy-based interventions that we are making to support the IT industry in particular. We also have academies for cloud computing and data analytics. The model has also been applied in the aerospace sector, with a computer numerical control (CNC) academy in operation. The academies take graduates from different disciplines and, over a very short time, give them the skills to be professionals in what is a crucially important sector in Northern Ireland. We are very pleased with the level of interest shown by individuals and companies and with the quality of the people coming through, who are real assets to their companies.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister advise the House on the future plans for that scheme or any similar schemes?

Dr Farry: I imagine that we will be looking for the academy's fourth cohort in the very near future and seeing whether we can extend that by involving other training colleges. We will wish to consider the academy model for other specialisms. As I mentioned, we have deployed it for cloud computing and data analytics. Indeed, if there are other areas where it is applicable, we will readily move in that direction. This is something where we, as government, are being very flexible and dynamic in responding to the needs of industry. At times, we put longer-term interventions in place, be they apprenticeships or what we do through the colleges, universities and the education system, but we also need to respond over a very short time. The academy model allows us to get that balance in our interventions and can address some very particular skills opportunities that arise in the local economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Time is up. We must move on.

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Deputy Speaker: We will start with listed questions.

Rugby World Cup 2023

1. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what recent meetings she has had with the Irish Government and others to coordinate support for the Irish Rugby Football Union's bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023. *(AQO 5321/11-15)*

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I met Shane Logan, the chief Executive of Ulster Rugby, and Philip Browne, the chief executive of Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU), together with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, on 15 October 2013. I have scheduled to meet Irish Government Ministers Leo Varadkar and Michael Ring, along with Minister Ní Chuilín, on 22 January to discuss the hosting of the Rugby World Cup in 2023.

2.45 pm

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome the strong cross-border cooperation to deliver an important project for the island. What other plans, if any, does she have to support further sporting events on a cross-border, North/South basis?

Mrs Foster: First, Mr Deputy Speaker, it would be wrong if we passed this moment without congratulating the Ulster rugby team on its tremendous victory at the weekend. Many people thought that it was very much an uphill struggle, but we got there. I pay tribute to all the team and, indeed, many of the supporters who travelled to Leicester to see a tremendous victory. It means, of course, that we will have a home quarter-final in Belfast, which we are looking forward to very much.

The coming together of our Ministers and the relevant Ministers in the Republic of Ireland arises from a realisation that neither of us could host the World Cup on our own. In this instance, we should work together for mutual benefit in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and I think that we have a good working relationship. As I said, we will have another meeting on Wednesday to develop the plans further. The call will not be launched imminently but in May 2016. We want to be ready and to make sure that all the work is in place because we believe that, given our shared history and heritage in rugby football, we could not only put on an excellent event across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland for everyone here but bring numerous tourists to Northern Ireland. I see great benefits for us, which is why we will work together on the event.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers. Maybe she would want to send a delegation of MLAs to the next Rugby World Cup. I am sure that some of us here would be willing to go.

When the Minister appeared before the Committee, she made positive and supportive comments about the GAA's role in helping to secure the bid. On an unrelated matter, has the Minister's Department or the Department of Sport in the South considered offering any personnel support to the IRFU to help to secure the bid?

Mrs Foster: We are working closely with the IRFU and, for our part, with the Ulster branch. Given that the next Rugby World Cup is in England, I have no difficulty in sending the Member to Twickenham to do some recces for us. Part of the meeting on Wednesday will look at the practical measures that we will have to take to make sure that we are ready. I will take the Member's comments on board about providing support. I imagine that the IRFU will want the best people in place to make sure that we are well set to welcome the tournament to the island in 2023. We will give them all the support that they ask for, within budgetary reason, obviously. We believe that it would be a great event for us.

Retail Industry: DETI Support

2. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what support her Department offers to local retailers. *(AQO 5322/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: My Department and Invest Northern Ireland have worked closely with the full range of businesses

across Northern Ireland, including those in the retail sector, and have met a number of local retailer groups. A wide range of initiatives are available that offer support and guidance to local retailers. Invest NI's business support team and nibusinessinfo.co.uk, for example, provide a valuable source, from business information and signposting to specialist advice for retailers. Retail businesses can also avail themselves of Invest NI's wide range of workshops and seminars. Invest NI has also supported local councils to develop programmes that are open and accessible to retail businesses.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. How does her Department help and support retailers to maximise the opportunity provided by the Internet as a place for promoting and selling goods and services?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. Indeed, the onset of online shopping is one of the challenges that is always pointed out. I have often said that our retailers need to embrace that, and they need to do so in a positive way. When local retailers can demonstrate a market opportunity online, Invest Northern Ireland can provide advice and guidance and may be able to give financial support, subject to its standard intervention principles.

We have also worked with the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) to assist in preparing a guide for its membership on developing an online retail presence. I understand that the guide will be ready for release in the first quarter of this year. We work very closely with retailers. We provide them with access to workshops, and we will help them to get online if there is a market opportunity. That is a recognition that we need to move with the times and give as much support as we can.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí i dtaobh an ábhair. I thank the Minister for her responses on this matter. Will she provide us with some information about what support was given through her Department for Small Business Saturday?

Mrs Foster: I do not have that information to hand, but I was involved in some of the promotional work for Small Business Saturday. As I said, small businesses can come forward and avail themselves of online help and support. They can also access our design clinics under the Boosting Business programme. You will recall that Boosting Business was brought in to speak to the wider business base, not just to Invest NI clients. That is all open to the wider business base and certainly to the small businesses involved in Small Business Saturday.

Mr Craig: Given that a lot of local businesses already trade online — the example that I am thinking of is McCalls of Lisburn, which now does the vast majority of its trading online — what are the Department and Invest NI doing to promote that sales technique for the other retailers struggling on some of our high streets?

Mrs Foster: Our business advisers can call with anyone, including the retail sector, who expresses an interest in speaking to the people in that team. As I said, online guides are being developed in cooperation with NIIRTA. We have the opportunity to help businesses if there is a market opportunity for them online. We also have workshops for them to attend if they so wish. Therefore, we have embraced the challenge, as some would see it, of online shopping. I happen to think that the clicks-and-bricks approach in trying to draw people into the physical shop through the internet is a good way forward. We cannot avoid the fact that the internet is there. We have to deal with it, and we are addressing it through some of the programmes that we have.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers, particularly on online trading. I just hope that we keep the Northern Ireland brand in it.

On another facet of trading, what is her assessment of 3D colour imitation shopfronts? They really do up the centres of our villages and look excellent, but we need to make sure that they are not there permanently.

Mrs Foster: The Member may recall that this first became an issue in and around the time of the G8. At that time, money was made available from, I think, the Department of the Environment and possibly the Department for Social Development to some towns, particularly in Fermanagh, that had empty shops so that they could be made attractive despite having empty shops. It is a welcome sign. Many companies that then decided to go on to the high street — this has happened in Enniskillen — have kept the painting on their shutters so that, when the shutters are down, the shopfront looks quite attractive, but there is a shop behind that during the day. I understand why some people described these as false and what have you, but I happen to think that they are a good way of sprucing up a town, making it look well and, hopefully, attracting investment so that the false shopfronts can be taken away.

Renewable Heat Incentive

3. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the level of uptake of the renewable heat incentive. *(AQO 5323/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland renewable heat incentive (RHI) was launched on 1 November 2012 for the non-domestic sector. As a result, 11·5 megawatts of new renewable heat capacity has been installed. Performance over the first 12 months of the scheme compares favourably with Great Britain. While accounting for less than 3% of the UK heat demand, the number of Northern Ireland applications equates to 6·8% of GB applications and 3·2% of accredited heat capacity. That demonstrates that the Northern Ireland scheme is punching above its weight.

In addition, the performance of the renewable heat premium payment scheme, which provides support for the domestic market, has been very positive. Over 11 megawatts of new renewable heat capacity has been supported through that scheme. I believe that the deployment of over 22 megawatts of new renewable heat capacity in the past 18 months is a good start towards achieving the Executive's target of 10% renewable heat by 2020.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for that information. When does she anticipate the domestic roll-out of the RHI? Will there be a renewed emphasis on the renewable heat incentive through marketing to promote the domestic scheme and increase promotion of the commercial RHI?

Mrs Foster: We hope that the domestic RHI will be rolled out at the same time as in Great Britain so that those can dovetail together. We held a consultation that resulted in the receipt of around 50 responses. We have been looking at those to see whether we can answer the questions that

have been raised. That will happen in the near future, and we hope that it will be as successful as the payment schemes in the domestic sector.

Mr I McCrea: Will the Minister outline whether businesses can avail themselves of the Carbon Trust loan scheme, as well as getting support through the RHI?

Mrs Foster: Yes. That subject caused a lot of concern to people who had availed themselves of the Carbon Trust loan, and we have been able to get clarity on it. An installation that has been done with a Carbon Trust loan is eligible to be considered for accreditation under the Northern Ireland renewable heat incentive scheme. Where an applicant has availed themselves of what is called de minimis aid, such as the Carbon Trust loan, prior to making an RHI application for accreditation, the RHI aid will be provided on the basis of the European Commission's de minimis regulations. We were able to get an answer to that question. I know that members of the Committee in particular were concerned about that because a lot of people had taken advantage of the Carbon Trust loan scheme. We are pleased to be able to provide that clarification.

Mr McKinney: Does the Minister have any plans to further improve the uptake of the renewable heat incentive?

Mrs Foster: We are keen to promote the renewable heat incentive alongside energy efficiency, because we believe that energy efficiency has to be in place as well. In fact, energy efficiency measures can often be the most cost effective way of bringing down people's energy bills. We will engage in a positive campaign. The Member may be aware of our Energy Wise campaign, which we rolled out to promote energy efficiency. We hope that people will take up the message and get involved because not only is it good sense but it reduces bills.

Fisheries: Job Relocation

4. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact on trade and commerce in the area of the relocation of Department of Agriculture and Rural Development fisheries jobs to the Downshire site in Downpatrick. *(AQO 5324/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: Overall, moving jobs from one location to another is neutral, as the economic gains at the destination location are offset by losses at the origin. Job dispersal can rebalance economic activity within Northern Ireland. The relocation of fisheries jobs will move some spending power to Downpatrick, for example, passing spend to local retailers and restaurants in the lunchtime economy. In the longer term, there may be some further transfer of spending power if staff relocate to live in the area. However, due to the relative ease of travel to Downpatrick, that may not be as significant as would be the case in other instances.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response. Does she have any plans to relocate jobs or services in her Department to the South Down area or, indeed, any rural constituencies across the North?

Mrs Foster: I understand that I am meeting the Member and, indeed, a delegation from Downpatrick early next month on this very issue. Whilst, at the moment, I have no plans to relocate any jobs centrally in my Department, I remind the Member that there are Invest NI offices spread across Northern Ireland. The Trading Standards Service has offices in Armagh, Ballymena, Enniskillen and Londonderry as well, so there are areas in the Department where, although the headquarters are in Belfast, jobs are spread out across Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers. Does she recognise a greater role for new councils in economic development, whereby opportunities could be developed for closer working with Invest NI?

Mrs Foster: I certainly hope that the new councils will work closer not only with Invest NI but with my tourism authorities. That is very much the hope, because we will work closely with local councils on the new tourism destinations that we are setting up across Northern Ireland. As it happens, Invest Northern Ireland already has offices across Northern Ireland and has a close working relationship with local councils. I believe that that will be strengthened by RPA and hopefully provide a focus for partnership in local economic development initiatives. We will certainly want to take up that challenge, and I am sure that the new councillors will want to as well.

Industrial Development: Omagh

5. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action Invest NI is taking to identify additional land in Omagh for industrial development. *(AQO 5325/11-15)*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before the Minister answers the question, I remind Members that supplementary questions must relate to Omagh.

Mrs Foster: Through Invest Northern Ireland's engagement with the council in Omagh and the Department of the Environment's Planning Service, a number of potential options were identified. The organisation undertook a series of desktop studies, with two locations identified as potentially suitable for development. Invest Northern Ireland has attempted to acquire land at two locations in Omagh; however, it has been unsuccessful in securing those. Invest NI is committed to continuing to work closely with all relevant stakeholders to secure new industrial land for Omagh.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. She will know that there is very little land available in Omagh that would give companies opportunities to expand. Will the Minister ensure that Invest NI and other stakeholders, such as Omagh District Council etc, redouble their efforts to locate industrial development land in the Omagh area?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I feel his frustration, because I feel it as well. We have attempted to acquire sites in the Omagh area in particular. At the moment, we have 119 acres of land in west Tyrone, but the majority of it — I think that it is a good, healthy sign — has been occupied by businesses, leaving just 21 acres, some of which is not suitable for occupation. So, we need to find more land.

I want to assure the Member that we will continue to work with the council locally and the private sector. Indeed, if companies come to us to expand or want to come to Omagh, we point them in the direction of private sector

holdings, of which there are some in the Omagh area. He can be assured that we not turning away investment from Omagh but are redirecting it to the private sector. We accept that we need to have more industrial land in the area.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answers and for being very supportive of the engineering sector in Omagh. How closely does her Department work with the Department of the Environment to earmark land for industrial development in, for example, Omagh, where the area plan is years out of date?

Mrs Foster: I accept that the area plan is out of date; it was possibly out of date when I was in the Department of the Environment, so progress needs to be made in that respect. We need to work with all the sectors — the council, the Department of the Environment and the private sector — to help companies that want to expand or come to Omagh and Strabane.

On a positive note, when I looked at the figures for the land that is available, I said that a new park has been built in the Strabane area in the recent past and that there surely must be availability in Strabane. However, Strabane has little availability, and I think that that is a very good sign for economic development in your area of west Tyrone.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Again, before I call Mr Pat Sheehan, I remind Members that supplementary questions to the next question must relate to west Belfast.

Investment: West Belfast

6. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her efforts to attract investment into West Belfast. *(AQO 5326/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: Invest NI continues to support business growth and investment in West Belfast. Between 1 April 2011 and 30 September 2013, it made 350 offers of support to companies in West Belfast, with £6·2 million of support contributing to the total investment in the constituency of over £42·5 million. That has led to the promotion of 770 new jobs in the area. During the same period, a total of 292 business starts have also been supported in West Belfast.

Last February, I also announced that Caterpillar was creating 200 high-quality shared services jobs in West Belfast. In seeking to attract further foreign investment, Invest NI is continuing to work with local stakeholders, including the West Belfast and Greater Shankill Partnership Boards, to review the features and benefits of West Belfast to maximise opportunities for future economic growth.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she advise the House on how important the link with local councils is in identifying locations for potential investors? The Minister touched on this point in response to an earlier question, but will she tell the Assembly how she intends to strengthen those links?

Mrs Foster: We have talked about putting Invest Northern Ireland employees into council offices. In fact, we have not just talked about it, we have done it. In Coleraine, we put an Invest NI employee into the council offices so that they could work ever more closely with the council. That was a pilot project that worked very well, and I hope that we will be able to develop that concept when RPA takes more shape after the shadow council elections in May.

Obviously, we are all in the same game of bringing investment to Northern Ireland, and each local council will have its own views on what is best in its area and the right way to present the area. I hope that they will be able to bring that expertise to Invest Northern Ireland, particularly to those in Invest Northern Ireland who sell Northern Ireland abroad, for example our teams in America and the Middle East, so that they know what each area has to offer. I hope that the new councils will be able to do that very effectively.

Mr Attwood: At the risk of putting words in the Minister's mouth, my question has a yes or no answer. Given that there is land zoned for industrial use at the former Visteon site on Finaghy Road North, and given that that site has access to the M1 northbound, is her Department prepared to advise the Planning Service in relation to a planning application to fully or substantially use the site for housing, yes or no, that part of that land should continue to be retained for industrial use, given the commitment that you have said you have to that part of Northern Ireland for jobs growth?

Mrs Foster: The Member knows that there is never a yes or no answer, and he should know that better than most. *[Laughter.]* The situation with land that is zoned for economic development is this, and Invest NI is very clear on the issue, and this is what we will be saying to the Minister of the Environment, the planning department or whoever comes to us for advice: we are generally opposed to the loss of land that is being used, or was last used, for industry to non-industrial users. That is our policy.

We just had a question in relation to west Tyrone and the scarcity of land for economic development and the need to find suitable sites for economic development. Therefore, we are always very slow to give up land that has been zoned for economic development. Therefore, there has to be a very strong and overwhelming case for us to move away from that. That is the position. It is not a yes or no answer, but I hope that it was a helpful answer.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Will she give an assessment of the potential contribution of the E3 campus at Belfast Metropolitan College?

Mrs Foster: I am a great supporter of the E3 campus. It is a tremendous asset to West Belfast. I have visited it on a number of occasions, and I have seen the way in which it has made a difference, not just to people who travel to it for education but to the wider community that sits in and around E3. I think that E3 will continue to provide a very good base to which employers can look for skills, and I know that my colleague Stephen Farry believes that as well. Also, potential foreign direct investment (FDI) companies coming in always look at what skills are available to them and at what the higher and further education colleges are like in that particular area. To have E3 on your doorstep is a very important asset indeed.

Mr Campbell: Northern Ireland has a number of very successful private sector companies. Can the Minister update the House on one of them? That is, the sale of Andor Technology in West Belfast.

Mrs Foster: As the Member is probably aware, an offer for the purchase of Andor Technology plc share capital by Oxford Instruments plc, which is a FTSE 250 company, has been agreed with Andor's board. Andor has been a tremendous asset and catalyst to the particular area where it sits in West Belfast. The offer remains open to all shareholders, so we cannot be definitive on this issue. However, whatever happens with the ownership of Andor, I hope that we will continue to have the positive relationship between Invest Northern Ireland and Andor that we have developed over a number of years. Indeed, I recall opening Andor's office in Shanghai on my first visit to China. That is the sort of business that we are talking about: very forward-looking and outward-looking. We are very fortunate to have Andor as one of our companies here in Belfast.

Jobs Fund

7. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many jobs have been created under the jobs fund to date. *(AQO 5327/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: As of 31 December 2013, a total of 4,177 jobs had been created through the jobs fund since its launch in April 2011. That means that the jobs fund has now exceeded its target to create 4,000 jobs by March 2014.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for her answer, which is a Northern Ireland-wide one. It is very good to see that the jobs fund has surpassed its target, but I wonder whether the Minister can give us some examples of where the jobs fund has been of specific benefit to companies.

Mrs Foster: The one thing that I have always said about the jobs fund is that it can be supporting two jobs in a little firm somewhere in Northern Ireland or it can be supporting — in the biggest example, Stream — 1,000 jobs. We have had some tremendous examples of how the jobs fund has made a big difference to Northern Ireland. In Stream Global Services, 1,000 jobs are supported by the jobs fund; in BT, it supports 116 jobs; in Terumo BCT, 416 jobs; and in Linden Foods — of course, very important because it is in Dungannon — 179 jobs are supported through the jobs fund. However, smaller companies have benefited as well. At Cloughbane Farm Foods, 10 jobs have been promoted; and in TES (NI), 70 have been promoted. It is quite a big step up for companies like TES to move to that sort of scale. So, for me, the jobs fund has been a tremendous success, and I am delighted to see that it has already passed its target for March 2014 in January 2014.

Mrs Overend: The latest figures that I had access to are those for jobs created in 2012-13. I note that Mid Ulster has the second highest number of jobs created under the jobs fund in that period — 261 — which is indeed evidence of the entrepreneurial spirit in Mid Ulster. Does the Minister estimate that this trend will continue in the most recent figures?

Mrs Foster: Certainly, the jobs fund has made a significant difference. I am just looking at the figures for all the constituencies across Northern Ireland. The figures are in hundreds, no matter which constituency you look at. In respect of the Member's constituency, Mid Ulster, the number of jobs promoted — as opposed to jobs created — in Mid Ulster alone will total 776. That is a tremendous boost for one constituency. It is one of the constituencies that gains most jobs, so congratulations to Mid Ulster. However, there are many constituencies, right across Northern Ireland, that are of a similar vein.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends questions for oral answer. We will now move to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Tourism: Serviced Accommodation

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has any information as to why there is such a disparity in tourism spread here and what could be done about it, given that recent figures indicate that, proportionally, nights spent in serviced accommodation by tourists were 22% in Strangford and 26% in the Mournes compared with 89% in Belfast. *(AQT 571/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: I do not have the detailed figures in front of me. The Member will understand that, because these are topical questions. I therefore do not have any chance to prepare for them, but one would always expect figures for serviced accommodation, particularly in capital cities, to be higher than in more rural areas. Self-catering accommodation in rural areas seems to be more popular, and that is why we get those figures.

I do not know whether he has the self-catering figures, but it would be interesting to compare and contrast the self-catering figures in somewhere such as Belfast with somewhere such as Strangford, County Fermanagh or the Mournes. Perhaps we can look at the self-catering figures together, as opposed to those for serviced accommodation.

Mr McNarry: There are suggestions to lease Northern Ireland Water land for wind farms in the Mournes. Does the Minister think that that would be of benefit in attracting tourists?

Mrs Foster: I am glad to say that it is not up to me as to whether such a planning application proceeds. I am sure that the Minister of the Environment will have his own view. When an application for wind farms or any renewable energy is made, we have to take into account all the impacts and benefits. I am sure that the Minister and his planning officials will do that when considering whether to allow wind farms.

Consumer Council

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in the future arrangements for the Consumer Council in Northern Ireland, whether she sees it having an enhanced or strengthened role. *(AQT 572/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, the consultation on the issue will soon be finished. Meetings have taken place across Northern Ireland. I am looking forward to seeing the report on those meetings and all the consultation responses. I am not sure how many responses we have through at present. I will look at those, as I said when I started the consultation, with an open mind. Some people do not accept that, and that is fair enough, but I know that I am looking at the issue with an open mind. I look forward to seeing the consultation responses.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response, but will you, like the SDLP, acknowledge the immense

contribution that the Consumer Council is making across Northern Ireland in helping consumers in the most difficult of circumstances?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mrs Foster: I will recognise that. Indeed, in my capacity as an MLA for Fermanagh and South Tyrone, I used the Consumer Council to help constituents. In that case, the matter concerned Northern Ireland Water, and I asked the Consumer Council what it could do to help. I do, of course, recognise the need for an independent advocate, but I think that the Member would agree with me that it is right that we review such organisations from time to time. We reviewed Invest Northern Ireland, are in the process of reviewing the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and are now looking at the Consumer Council.

It would be wrong not to review the functions, efficiency and effectiveness of all our arm's-length organisations. If we allow them to continue without a review, where is the accountability? That is what this is about: looking to see whether they are providing a service at the top of their game. If not, why not, and what can we do to help change that?

Jobs Fund: North Down

3. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the 23 jobs that were created through the jobs fund in North Down last year represent a satisfactory figure. *(AQT 573/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: The jobs fund promoted 74 jobs in the North Down area in 2012-13, and 60 to date in the financial year that we are in. Over the term of the jobs fund, 164 jobs were promoted in North Down from April 2011.

Mr Cree: I was asking for the number of jobs created, not promoted. Following the same theme, the sum of assistance paid for jobs created was only £82,000 last year. Is the Minister prepared to ask her officials to take some action to improve the figures for North Down?

Mrs Foster: We make offers to companies, as the Member knows, and that is why I talk about the numbers promoted. That means the numbers that are available to those particular firms that we can help. If they decide not to grow their companies at a faster rate or to slow down recruitment, I think that he would accept that there is nothing that I can do to force them to increase recruitment, other than to keep alongside them to see whether there is anything else in their companies that we can help them with.

He will recall that I was with Mango Direct, which is to promote 55 jobs, but I am not sure how many it has actually created. However, I will find out for the Member, because that was an excellent company. I know that it may have had accommodation difficulties, in so far as it was completely full when I visited. I do not know whether that is an issue. However, it is the sort of issue that may prevent a company being faster with its jobs fund spend. I will get the Member the up-to-date figures for job creation in North Down, but that does not take away from the fact that globally, in Northern Ireland terms, we have surpassed what was, when one thinks about it, the quite stretching Programme for Government target. We have done that in January 2014, but the target was set for March 2014. So, I think that we should congratulate Invest Northern Ireland on the work that it is doing on that.

Wrightbus

4. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to respond to last week's announcement of the award of a significant contract to Wrightbus, a very important employer in my constituency of North Antrim. *(AQT 574/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: I very much welcome this further announcement by Wrightbus, which came hot on the heels of 600 jobs for Transport for London. We are delighted to see that there is an order for 301 buses, which is the lion's share of a 425 bus order for FirstGroup. FirstGroup is coming to Wrightbus because of the innovative way in which Wrightbus does business. Again, it has been able to provide a solution to FirstGroup for cutting down fuel consumption on the bus model that it is selling to FirstGroup. I think that that is a tremendous endorsement of the Wrightbus workforce's skills and abilities. We will continue to support Wrightbus and, indeed, any other company that shows such an innovative edge.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am sure that she will also be aware that there has been some illogical criticism, particularly from one local representative in North Antrim, about Invest NI and how it has been conducting itself in North Antrim. Is the Minister able to advise the House of the support that Invest NI will continue to give to Wrightbus as it moves into the future?

Mrs Foster: We have developed a partnership with Wrightbus. I again pay tribute to the client executive, who is the person on the ground who works with a company, which, in this instance, is Wrightbus, and who helps a company to develop its plans.

We in the House remember that Wrightbus was, a short couple of years ago, in the situation for the first time in its history of having to lay some people off. That was a traumatic event in Wrightbus's life. However, it stepped forward, and its representatives came to us and said, "Well, we want to look at something new. We want to invest in research and development. We want to look at lean manufacturing". Should any Member have the chance to visit the Wrightbus site, they will see that lean manufacturing in place. So, it took the opportunity, presented by a quiet time, to reinvest in the company, and we have helped it to do that. I think that that is a positive example for other companies right across Northern Ireland. Indeed, this announcement provides a shop window through which to look into Ballymena, North Antrim and Northern Ireland to see what can be achieved in research and development and innovation.

Mivan: Job Losses

5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the action that her Department plans to take in relation to Mivan following the announcement of job losses in the past few days. *(AQT 575/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for mentioning Mivan, because, of course, that news on Friday was very disappointing. I understand that most of the job losses that were announced on Friday relate to work outside Northern Ireland, meaning contracts that were being delivered outside Northern Ireland. I have spoken to the administrator and to Mivan's financial director. They are

still working very hard to find a solution for the wider Mivan company, and we will, of course, support them in any way that we can. I have made that very clear, whether that support comes from Invest Northern Ireland or from the Department centrally.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister mentioned contracts and procurement. Minister, on the back of the experience of Mivan and the ability of small businesses to bid for large public sector contracts, will your Department take any specific measures to assist companies to be best placed to win some of the contracts?

Mrs Foster: Through InterTradeIreland, we do a lot of work on procurement practices in Northern Ireland for companies from the Republic of Ireland, and on practices in the Republic of Ireland for companies from Northern Ireland, so that they can tender across the border. One of the successes of InterTradeIreland's work is that it has that go-to-tender programme and holds workshops across the island of Ireland to allow companies to develop that. If I am not wrong, InterTradeIreland has also developed an app on public procurement. Those are very tangible and practical ways of helping companies to become aware of procurement opportunities. I am sure that the Finance Minister, too, will be watching this very carefully, particularly in relation to subcontractors and the experience here, because we recall the very difficult time with Pattons and the difficulties it had last year.

Small Businesses

7. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has any proposals to alleviate some of the crippling pressures faced by small businesses, given that the Minister will be aware that Angela McGowan a reputable economist with Danske Bank has undertaken some recent surveys that suggest that the worst is behind us, which is good news, but running alongside that is the impression that some 3,500 small businesses here are experiencing significant financial stress. *(AQT 577/11-15)*

Mrs Foster: I had an opportunity to glance very briefly at Angela McGowan's report this morning. I welcome the headline that consumer confidence is growing, which the Member pointed out. We should all welcome that. Indeed, from my response to the second substantive question for oral answer today, on retail, you will know that we very much want to engender consumer confidence.

On the second part of the Member's question, it has always been an issue that there was a lag in relation to small companies that were treading water to try to keep afloat during the worst of the recession. I make a plea, through him, for any small companies that are facing those difficulties not to leave it to the last moment to come to Members or to seek help. One of the features that we have seen over the past period of time is that people try to manage on their own and then seek help when it is too late to be able to do something to save their businesses.

Talking of financial capability, I visited Advice Northern Ireland last Monday and saw the debt advice line. The people there made me aware that they now have a business advice line for sole traders and small companies. Companies could and should avail themselves of that if they find themselves in difficulties. The worst thing to do is to put one's head under the duvet and think that nothing will happen.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you very much for that very extensive answer, Minister. Moving away from small businesses slightly, there is also a sense coming through in the report that the rise in confidence is linked to those in employment whereas, not entirely surprisingly, the unemployed do not have much to be confident about. Is there any possibility that you will liaise with the Minister for Employment and Learning and perhaps set up some sort of workshop, task force, group or whatever that might find a way of cutting our unemployment figures?

Mrs Foster: I am not sure that it is an answer to the Member's question, but, later this week, the Minister for Employment and Learning and I will launch the economic inactivity strategy to deal particularly with those in generational unemployment to try to move them away from that. As the Member for Foyle will tell him, one of the features of that is the fact that we are looking for pilot projects across Northern Ireland to try to address economic inactivity. Economic inactivity has been with us for 30 years, and we really need to grapple with it. I am pleased that that final strategy will be announced later this week.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Common Agricultural Policy: Rural Development Programme Funding

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

> *That this Assembly expresses dissatisfaction with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her failure to effectively consult with Executive colleagues on her plans to transfer funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2 within the common agricultural policy; notes with concern the ensuing events, which saw the issue brought before the High Court; accepts that, whilst farmers will benefit through increased direct payments, they and many rural communities and organisations may now lose out through significantly reduced rural development funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to commit to seeking sufficient funding for the future rural development programme to efficiently and effectively deliver a range of schemes, including those to support our burgeoning agrifood sector, increase farm safety measures, incentivise farm modernisation and capital investment, promote agrienvironment measures and support our rural economy and communities. — [Mrs Dobson.]*

Which amendment was:

Leave out from "for her failure" to "plans" and insert:

> *"and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for their failure to effectively consult with each other or with their Executive colleagues over the recent attempt" — [Ms Lo.]*

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The important message that should go out from the Assembly today is that DARD stands for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and that Michelle O'Neill, as Minister, has a duty and a responsibility for both aspects of the title. However, no matter what spin others try to put on it, that does not mean that any transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2 is at the expense of our farming community. I live and work in a rural community and understand the recent difficulties and challenges that many farm families have faced and continue to face, but they will also be disadvantaged by the DUP's intervention, which has led to 0% transfer. In fact, less than half the farmers who receive a single farm payment will receive the extra £260 a year whereas, if the money went to the rural development programme, the majority of that money would have been given back to farmers through much-needed grant schemes.

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

From listening to the debate today, it appears that some do not recognise the value of the programme to the farming community. There have been capital schemes for items such as new sheds and fencing, which farmers lobbied hard for, and grant schemes that support the farm family options and the farm safety measures as well as diversification projects. In addition, the rural development programme supports our growing agrifood sector and the wider rural economy through the inevitable job creation from that, not to mention the less-favoured area payment, which has traditionally been paid from the programme and is vital to our hill farmers. Farmers not only work in the countryside but live in it. They also benefit from the many community and environmental projects that are funded by the programme. Many farmers are members of sporting organisations and want access to better services such as broadband. They have a vested interest and, indeed, are crucial to maintaining and protecting our environment.

I am disappointed that the attempt to transfer has been portrayed as an agriculture versus rural development issue. As the Minister said in her statement to the House last week, it is a matter of getting the balance right and ensuring that the right support is there for our farmers as well as supporting the needs of the rural community and the environment. It is, therefore, a matter of concern rather than dissatisfaction that the Minister, in taking a decision that was informed by consultation with stakeholders, was central to the work of her Department and left a higher percentage in pillar 1 than any other part of the member state, was met with opposition that saw the matter go to the High Court. Like many others, I question the motivations that led the DUP and the Finance Minister to take the issue to court. I can only assume, as others have, that it was a politically motivated action driven by the upcoming elections. Likewise, their recent contribution in 'Farmers Weekly', which attempts to portray the Minister as the —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Milne: Yes.

Mr Frew: Who?

Mr Wilson: I think that you asked first.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much; that is very gracious. Does the Member agree that, in this country, there are elections nearly every year and that, if a party has a position and wants to advance its plans and policies politically, how it could be politically motivated in a bad sense? We wanted to fight to retain the money in direct payments to give farmers the benefit of direct payments without the bureaucracy. That is a good thing. Does the Member not agree?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Milne: As the Member said, there are elections every year, and I do not see why this has to be questioned now when it had not been questioned in the past.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Will the Member give way?

Mr Milne: Yes.

Mrs O'Neill: Does the Member agree that, if the party opposite had genuine serious concerns about a transfer of moneys, surely the place to raise that would have been in the Executive as opposed to going straight to the courts and ignoring correspondence from me that asked for views? If there was genuine interest in the issue, that would have been the place to raise it.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Milne: Go ahead.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much; that is very gracious. Does the Member agree that it is up to Departments and Ministers to bring proposals to the Executive so that they can be assessed and a decision taken by the Executive?

Mr Milne: As far as I am aware, the Minister consulted colleagues.

Mr Frew: After the event.

Mr Milne: All I can hope for at this stage is that the consequence of these actions is not that more decisions in the Assembly are made by judges than locally elected Ministers.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he accept that the Minister was so covert about all this that not only would she not share it with the Executive but, at the early stage of development, at which there is normally discussion between parties, she would not even share it with advisers? Suspicions were raised that, because money was misused in the past and some money was not spent in the past, we were going to have another shambles like we had before.

Mr Milne: I thank the Member for his intervention, but, as far as I am aware, at least a couple of letters were circulated.

As I said, I do not want decisions such as this being made by judges rather than locally elected Ministers. More importantly at this point, I hope that the DUP and the Finance Minister will now support the Minister when she makes her bid to the Executive to make up the shortfall that has been created.

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

Mr Milne: It is imperative that the rural development programme can deliver on its commitments and is not undermined by party politics.

Mr Irwin: As a farmer, I declare an interest. I fully welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate as I have been infuriated by the misinformation that has abounded since my party colleagues issued court proceedings that resulted in the successful halting of plans to transfer vital farm-related funding from pillar 1 to pillar 2.

Let us be fully clear on the issue: this was not shadow boxing, as has been foolishly and childishly claimed by some in the Ulster Unionist Party. It was a real and meaningful attempt to prevent an Executive Minister going on a solo run without entering into a full discussion with her Executive colleagues on an issue of huge importance. The Finance Minister, Simon Hamilton, was absolutely correct in taking that action, and the subsequent court ruling vindicated the stance taken by our party and the Finance Minister. It must be fully understood that the failure to consult the Executive resulted in the court action being taken. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development was effectively reined in. The motion is correct in its sentiment that the matter should not have had to reach this stage, but that is for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to explain.

The DUP has been crystal clear that it is opposed to any transfer of funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2. Indeed, our party MEP, the hard-working Diane Dodds, has responded to the pillar 2 consultation and stated her opposition to any such transfer between the two pillars. The allegation has been made that the DUP was quick to issue court proceedings without any attempt to resolve the issues in the Assembly. That is another falsehood, given that we tried to engage with DARD on this important matter in a bid to get a resolution before commencing court action. That was not possible, but the important element is that the decision has been halted, which means that a proper discussion can take place on the issues surrounding direct help to farmers and rural development.

The ensuing court action ensured that £137·5 million of funding remained with farming families across the Province. Farming and the agrifood sector are a very important industry for Northern Ireland, and I have been continually requesting a fairer deal for farmers to bridge the gap between the farm gate and the supermarket shelf. The retained money, along with the rest of the funding for pillar 1, will allow farmers to develop their business and help them to respond to changing market conditions and maximise their potential product outputs.

We must be under no illusion: there is still ample funding in pillar 2 to deliver an effective rural development programme. Even with the £137 million remaining in pillar 1, pillar 2 will provide suitable funding opportunities for future projects in the rural community. It must also be said that families who avail themselves of pillar 1 funding will spend the money on their businesses. Ultimately, that finance will filter into the wider rural community directly and indirectly, supporting a wide range of people in employment without vast sums being tied up in costly administration.

As a past member of a local action group (LAG), I have seen at first hand the importance of rural development and, of course, the monumental burden of red tape and bureaucracy in the delivery of rural development funding. That, in my opinion, remains the largest stumbling block to the effective delivery of a rural development funding scheme that will bring long-term benefits to the rural community. Indeed, many schemes that would benefit local farmers have remained closed, despite being oversubscribed. Those are real challenges facing the Minister in delivering effective aid to farmers and the wider rural community.

The important issue for me remains that the Minister must enter full discussions on this issue and, indeed, on the big issue of the reform of the common agricultural policy. Those issues have wide-reaching effects on the agrifood sector and the wider rural community. They involve many hundreds of millions of pounds, which must be targeted effectively where such funds will make the greatest and most lasting difference. The debate is still to be had on those issues. I inquire of the Minister if she intends to be a willing facilitator in such a debate.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I start by saying that I am taking no interventions, so do not waste your time asking me. I am taking no interventions because my time is precious, and I will certainly not waste my time here today. The debate has clearly shown that the farming community has been used as a political football by the DUP. The fact that Members can spend six minutes asking one question really sums it up.

Much has been said about the Minister's decision and the figure of 7%. That is a crucial factor that has been passed over and made light of. The Executive could have

added to the money in pillar 2 and given it out to farmers for schemes that they have lobbied for and need, such as fences and sheds etc. Now, with all the money in pillar 1, less than 50% of farmers will get an estimated €260 — less than the cost of a wax jacket.

On 20 December, the Minister took her decision that 7% of the funds should transfer from pillar 1 — direct payments — to pillar 2 — rural development. That figure is the lowest per hectare of all member states. In England, it is 12%; in Wales, 15%; and, in Scotland, 9·5%. In total, their allocation for EU 2014-2020 direct payments was £2·3 billion, and £227 million for rural development. For some unexplained reason, the DUP — on the face of it, because it could not get its own way on CAP reform — ran to the courts, which ruled that this must go to the Executive. The Minister did that and asked for urgent procedure before the 31 December deadline, but the DUP again blocked that, and 0% was transmitted to Brussels for the Six Counties.

The DUP has clearly shown that it is looking after one section of the farming community at the expense of the small hill farmer. I make it clear today that Sinn Féin will continue to support the small hill farmer and all farmers. We do not make any difference between them and will not be party to a two-tier system. They are also on record as saying that they do not want anything going to any other organisations. We already have the lowest funding for the RDP in Europe because of DUP-supported cuts. Let us make it clear today that the DUP did not support cuts to the budget only once or twice, but three times — once in Europe, once in Westminster and now here, with the court action. It has cut the money to the farmers three times. Remember that: I said three times.

Mr Wilson: The money is staying with the farmers.

Mr McMullan: You were part of it too. You sat in Westminster.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McMullan: It cannot be dismissed. The decision of the courts could now have repercussions for all Departments. Your MEP was quoted in the papers at the weekend saying that the Minister had now stopped Ministers doing solo runs. I hope that applies to your party, because a lot of them have done solo runs this last while.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask that all remarks be made through the Chair, please.

3.45 pm

Mr McMullan: When the Minister took the decision in 2012 not to apply a voluntary year of modulation, that was not challenged. Indeed, the previous Agriculture Minister's decision on the transfer of funds from direct payments to rural development was not challenged. Other such transferred funds were used to benefit the farmers and farmers' families only.

We now have 0% transfer, which means that we have to find the funding to keep not only the schemes in the rural development programme, such as farm modernisation, capital investment, agrienvironment, countryside management and farm safety, but the agrifood industry and rural communities themselves. Within the agrifood industry, there are plans to create 15,000 new jobs. In its rush to set up a two-tier system, the DUP is quite prepared to put that at risk in favour of the big farmer. Let the DUP now explain why it went to the courts, why it wants a two-tier system, where the money is coming from and everything else. The small farmer would like to know. Also, we support the recent call for one region only.

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate. I listened carefully and with interest to the debate so far. Despite the fact that I made a statement in the House last week and answered numerous questions from Members, it appears to me that perhaps some Members are not listening. So, I welcome the opportunity to clarify some of the points. Common threads have been raised through the debate. Some are genuine concerns, and I will take those on board and try to address them; some are, in my opinion, electioneering. That being said, I will respond to the debate with fact and accuracy.

It is important that, once again, I set out the sequence of events that led to a zero rate of transfer being applied. Members know that, on 20 December, I made a written ministerial statement to the Assembly and advised of my decision to transfer 7% of the direct payments allocation to the rural development allocation. I intended that the transfer rate of 7% for the years 2014 to 2019 would provide approximately an additional €137·5 million to the overall rural development programme budget.

Mr Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: OK.

Mr Wilson: This €137.5 million has been thrown around the Chamber today. Will the Minister make it clear where that €137 million is coming from and say that it would not have been spent on waxed jackets, as her colleague suggested, otherwise Barbour will have a field day on sales in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: You will see that as I go through the debate. I want to pick up on all the points raised. However, it is clear to me that this was farmers' money for farmers. Let us be very clear: 80% of all moneys in the rural development programme goes to farmers. In the past, all modulated money has gone to farming schemes. That was the intention. The Member has picked up on a point — the Chair of the Committee picked up on it earlier — around lack of detail. The detail was there: read it. Indicative costings were given out in the consultation. The points were all there and very evident for people to see and base their decisions on. The material was there. If people chose to ignore it, that is their problem.

I think it was the proposer of the motion who asked earlier "Why 7%? Where did I get that figure from? How did I arrive at it?". Again, I picked up on that point last week, but I am happy to pick up on it today and make it clear for you. Last week, when I addressed the House, I said that I took a decision based on a fair and balanced assessment and a wide-ranging consultation that sought numerous views. On the basis of analysis of all the responses I received, I took a decision on a 7% transfer. That was to give us a fair and balanced approach to rural communities and to support rural communities in the round: the farming sector, the environmental sector and rural communities. That is something that, I believe, it is my responsibility to do. In moving forward, we have to have a scheme in place that looks after all the interests of those who live in rural communities. That is not to say that those issues

are competing: they are all relevant and all need to be supported in moving forward.

Following my decision on 20 December, I was advised that legal action had been instigated by the Finance Minister on the basis that the issue should have been referred to the Executive. The issue went to court, and the court held that it met the criterion of being significant or controversial and outside the Programme for Government. The judgement was that the issue was significant and controversial. Following the court judgement, which I accepted, I immediately proposed a transfer rate of 7% in an Executive paper that was brought to the Executive. I very clearly set out and explained the pressing timescale that we faced. DEFRA needed a decision by 31 December, and that then had to be communicated to Europe. So, I had to take the decision. I asked for a speedy decision from the Executive, but the reality, without sugar-coating it, is that the DUP blocked it, so the decision did not go forward.

I am listening to the debate, and I believe that some Members on the Benches opposite have amnesia. I certainly do not. I know why DEFRA took the decision: it was because the DUP blocked the decision. I do not know why the DUP seeks a mandate if it wants to sit back and allow DEFRA to take decisions that are influential for local people here in farming communities. That is a political reality. The decision by DEFRA to take a challenge led us to the position where we were sitting at a zero rate of transfer. So, we have to look at where we are at now and look comparatively at what England, Scotland and Wales have done: 15%, 12% and 9·5%, which are all significant investments in rural communities. I am very disappointed that we were not able to do that.

Some of the debate focused on solo runs by me in taking the decision. Let us be very clear: this is not something new. Pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfers have happened before. There has never been any political issue with it before. The average transfer rate when Michelle Gildernew was Minister was 6%, and I do not recall any political issue being raised at that time. Maybe there were no elections that year. That is the reality.

I made the point at the start — I want to make it clear — that all modulated funds are directed only towards projects that benefit farmers and farm families. I will list them. I listed them last week, but I will do so again, because I think that it is so important that we —

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. The Minister can say that the modulated money goes to these schemes, but the fact remains that the money still in the pot for rural development then goes on other things that are not efficient and effective for the farming community. It really grates members of the farming community when they drive by a scheme or a project that should have been funded through another form and not the rural development funding and not their money.

Mrs O'Neill: Again, that is a narrow view from you about rural communities. Farmers are rural dwellers. They live in rural communities, and those rural communities need to be sustainable and thriving into the future.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mrs O'Neill: I will in a second. Do farmers not deserve to have other services in their communities also? I do not think that you should keep playing off rural communities against farmers. That is not the situation. This is about how we use the European moneys that we have most effectively and how we get money into farmers' pockets. The projects that I wanted to take forward are capital grant schemes, and that is why I wanted to transfer money. It is for things such as fencing and sheds. Those are the things that farmers want, so stop playing one off against the other. It is about a fair and balanced approach in moving forward. I will give way to the Member for West Tyrone.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. Minister, last week and this week, quite a number of spurious comments and suggestions have been made about how the rural development moneys have been spent. Will the Minister agree that any funds to be spent in rural communities have been decided on by the LAGs and joint council committees (JCCs), of which representatives of all the parties in the House are members?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree with that. I do not take decisions on how the money is best spent. These are the local groups. These are locally elected representatives taking decisions for their communities. That to me is absolutely key to the success of this project and moving forward.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Minister for giving way. At least she is engaging in the debate, which is more than the proposer of the motion did. Money is spent on amenity sites in rural areas, which farmers pay for, but householders pay through their rates for amenity sites in urban areas. Is that a fair way of spending the money or, indeed, many of the other local authority projects that were funded under this? Farmers paid for it, whereas, if they lived in an urban area, it would have been paid for through the rates.

Mrs O'Neill: I could go right through lists and lists of projects that have been funded, and they have been funded with the support of your party colleagues in council, my party colleagues and, indeed, all Members of the House. The projects that have come forward have come as a result of the local areas taking a decision on what they feel is most needed in the rural community. You will have to question your party members about why they support something. There is a project in place, and it is about getting money into rural communities at a time of economic decline and the negative situation that we are in. It is investment and spending in rural communities that brings tourism potential and job creation. These are all things that we cannot just dismiss and decide to cherry-pick because we do not like one of them. We need to be real about this. This is about a fair and balanced approach to rural communities in moving forward.

I make the point again that all modulated funds have gone to farm projects. I will list some of the projects: Focus Farms, with 1,000 visits attended by over 15,000 farmers; the bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) awareness stuff; farm safety; and the farm modernisation programme, which is a fantastic thing on the ground and farmers want to see more of it. In the farm modernisation programme, over £12·5 million is supporting 4,600 farm businesses. When the additional 60% contribution from farmers is added, that results in a total investment of over £30 million in the local economy. That is not something to be sniffed at; that is something that we need to build on and encourage and work with farmers in doing. It is exactly what I wanted to do —

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way. Can she outline what will happen from here? Given the scenario that we are in, the farming and rural community want to hear what will happen now. When will there be meaningful discussions between the Minister and her colleagues about securing matched funding to make sure that rural development becomes real and meaningful again?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to outline that, and I will pick up on the point about next steps. For me, the onus is very much on the Executive now. They will have to step up. I hope that the Finance Minister, who obviously took the court challenge and objects to the money being transferred to a programme to which the Executive could have added value, potentially doubling the fund that we had, will support me when I make the case to the Executive on moving forward and how we will fund worthwhile projects in rural communities.

I will go back to my point. On 13 January, I stated in the Assembly that I was disappointed that, as a result of the intervention by the Finance Minister, we are the only part of this member state where no transfer is happening. That risks depriving farmers, rural communities and environmental protection of much-needed investment.

I will turn to the motion and begin with the claim that I failed to consult effectively with Executive colleagues. I have made the point repeatedly, but I will make it again in case people are not listening. Maybe they are sitting refusing to listen. I will keep making the point. I did correspond with my Executive colleagues. On two occasions, the Finance Minister, who saw fit to take a legal challenge, did not bother to respond. He had no issue. That calls into question his motivation for taking the challenge. What was his motivation, when he was happy to come to two Executive meetings when the correspondence went around and there were no issues? Not one problem was raised. Yet and all, when I made a decision, he decided that there was a case to go to court. His motivation has to be questioned. That is for him to answer.

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I will not give way because I have given way plenty. I think that I have been pretty fair. I want to get through some of the points.

As I said, I believe that I consulted effectively with Executive colleagues on my plans to transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2. The statement in the motion is groundless. As I said very clearly, it is, quite simply, purely a matter of fact that I consulted all Executive Ministers and that the Finance Minister had no issue. In fact, the Environment Minister was the only Minister who actually responded to say that he obviously supported environmental schemes being funded and wanted to make sure that that would be the case in future. Again, I point out the fact that the Finance Minister had no issue at that time. Again, not to sugarcoat the issue, that seriously undermines his rationale for doing this. It seriously calls into question his motivation for doing it.

The motion also calls for the Assembly to note with concern the events that saw the issue being brought before the High Court. I absolutely agree that it should not have gone to the High Court. There was a place to deal with it: the Executive. As I have said, the Finance Minister chose not to do that. Again, that points out one thing to me: it was a political issue. The Finance Minister could have brought it to the Executive but chose not to.

The motion further calls for me to seek sufficient funding from the rural development programme. The Member asked about that with regard to moving forward and looking to the future. I have already made it clear in this statement to the House that I will go to the Executive and make a case for additional funding. We have put in place the Agri-Food Strategy Board. It has now come up with a plan, which, to break that down into its simplest forms, is grants for farmers and that type of thing. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I will make a case to the Executive. I will now have to make a bigger case because of the decision by the Finance Minister. The Executive will have to step up to the mark and support that if they are serious about supporting an industry that is thriving and doing well. I hope that Members opposite are up for that and that all parties in the Chamber will support me in my bid to the Executive for additional funding.

Where are we now in the absence of the transfer of funds? As I said, the Executive will have to step up and help us to address the issues. We have a clear vision. The Agri-Food Strategy Board plan is in place, but we need the money to back it up. That is what I will look for from the Executive in the time ahead.

In closing, let me say that I am grateful for this opportunity. I am happy to have the debate, and I will have it as many times as is necessary until we get to the stage at which I feel as though people are actually listening. I share the concern of the proposer of the motion that the issue went in front of the High Court. That is not the way to do business. The decision also has implications for the wider Executive, and we will have to deal with that.

4.00 pm

Why the Finance Minister invoked court proceedings, having earlier declined to comment on the pillar 1 to pillar 2 transfer issue, is a matter for him to explain. I have rehearsed my reasoning for why I believe he did it, but he can answer for himself. Incidentally, he has not had one conversation with me about this. There has been no knock on my door from DFP wanting to talk about the issue. Again, that raises a question about the motivation behind all this.

I want to assure Members and any member of the farming or rural community who is listening to today's debate that there is no bigger supporter of farming and rural communities than me. I am trying to be a champion for farmers and rural communities. I assure the Assembly that I am committed to seeking the additional funding that will allow me to do the types of projects on the ground that farming communities are asking for. I am absolutely committed to delivering a balanced rural development programme —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Minister draw her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs O'Neill: — that meets the needs of the entire farming community and the environment and rural sectors. We cannot leave any stone unturned as we move forward. We have to support everybody in the round.

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Minister for her response. She spoke very robustly, with authority and

determination, and it feels as though she was on the right side of the argument. However, the Alliance Party tabled its amendment because it felt that it was necessary that the Minister of Finance and Personnel's role in the 0% transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2 be recognised.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: I am only started, Sammy. Hold on. *[Laughter.]* You are mad to get in. Wait a minute.

Mr Wilson: You have started on the wrong foot already. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCarthy: Right, that is you gone. You are not getting in again. *[Laughter.]* I am extremely disappointed in the Finance and Personnel Minister for not replying in the first place to a simple invitation from the Minister at an early stage. It seems very strange that he could not reply. Had he done so, it would have prevented all the shenanigans that we had over the Christmas period.

My colleague Anna Lo highlighted how Wales plans to transfer a rate of 15%, England a rate of 12% and Scotland a rate of 9·5%, totalling around €2·3 billion in additional investment for rural development and, indeed, environmental protection.

Mr Wilson: Will you give way at this point?

Mr McCarthy: Very briefly, Sammy.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member, who obviously has a more extensive knowledge of farmers than Ms Lo does representing South Belfast, which, as we know, has a huge farming community. Given that his constituency has a large farming community, will he tell the Assembly whether he is happy that 7% of the money that farmers would have for development of their own farms should be taken from them to do the kinds of things — namely, work that councils should have been doing — that the Minister justified here today?

Mr McCarthy: I do not go along with that at all. I think that this is about the Department working with everybody for the benefit of everybody, including farmers and the environment sector. We know that a lot of other things have also benefited. As you say, coming from a rural constituency, I have seen the benefits of the funding that we are talking about.

For Northern Ireland to have a 0% rate of transfer is embarrassing and will potentially have enormously detrimental consequences. The additional and much-needed funding would have supported investment in the agrifood industry, environmental protection and economic and social development in our rural areas. The transfer of funds in the past has paid for agrienvironment schemes. Evidence shows that those schemes are the best way in which to reverse the declines in habitat and biodiversity and losses in the wider countryside. Given that agrienvironment schemes also provide a valuable economic boost to rural communities, I would like to know from the Minister whether DARD has or will conduct an impact assessment on the 0% transfer to determine the threat to those wildlife-friendly farmers who rely on agrienvironment payments to maintain a viable farm business.

The environment sector has expressed concern that less-favoured area payments have traditionally been paid from rural development policy budgets. That payment is set to become, as I understand it, for areas of natural constraint, and it can be paid from RDP or pillar 1. Given that the transfer of RDP has been set at 0%, the RSPB has recommended that the areas of natural constraint be paid from the pillar 1 budget, as it costs the taxpayer about £20 million a year. If that was paid from the RDP budget, it would use most of Northern Ireland's allocation and would achieve very little for our environment. We need to know how those reduced funds are going to be strictly targeted so that we can have an assurance that they are spent efficiently.

The interaction between Mr Swann and Mr Frew this afternoon may not have been their finest hour as legislators. I am surprised, because I served on the Agriculture Committee for a while with Mr Swann and Mr Frew, and they got on famously; there were no arguments whatsoever. Maybe it is because I left your Committee that the standard has gone down.

Mr Byrne: Come back. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: "Come back", says the Deputy Chair.

The question is this: did the previous Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development bring the decision to transfer funds from pillar 1 to pillar 2 to the Executive for approval? Or, is it, as the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development rose to suggest and as I am beginning to believe, simply a case of the DUP electioneering? They would not do that — no.

I am not sure that farmers —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: No.

I am not sure that saying that farmers are in a different position now is an adequate response.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member indicated that he is not giving way.

Mr McCarthy: Mr Byrne, the Deputy Chair of the Agriculture Committee, reiterated the failure of certain Ministers and stated his disappointment that legal proceedings had to be taken. My party shares that disappointment.

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

Mr McCarthy: The Alliance Party and I hope that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development will work closely with her Executive colleagues to meet the funding deficit for the rural development programme. I hope that lessons have been learned from the pantomime over Christmas. The Assembly should be —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McCarthy: — highly embarrassed by what has happened. Let us hope that everyone in our rural and farming communities can benefit from all European funding.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Wilson: You are 7% over your time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Swann: I think that the level of debate and exchange that there has been in the Chamber shows that we have been truly justified in bringing the motion forward because it has allowed all parties to air their views on what is coming forward. In his closing comments, Kieran said that this may not have been our finest hour. I think that what has led to this debate was not the Executive's finest hour. We see legal proceedings being taken by one Minister against the other. We have heard the counterclaim from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development that she had tabled documents and written letters. Minister, can I ask you, as a matter of form, to put all those documents on display in the Library for all Members? We will then be able to see for ourselves what papers were laid, as mentioned throughout the debate, and we can make our own minds up. We made our opening comments in the debate, because we were not aware of or privileged to the conversation that she had as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development with the Minister of Finance and Personnel. If that is rightly so, stand your ground and stand on your merits and show Members and the rural community what actions were actually taken.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be brief. Does the Member welcome the courts' decision?

Mr Swann: A decision having to be taken by the courts is the biggest problem and the reason why we brought the motion forward. When we take the decisions on a devolved matter out of the Chamber and out of the Executive and put them into the courts, I do not welcome a court having to take any decision on the jurisdiction of the proceedings of the House. That is the problem that I have, Mr Frew.

As I said when we had the exchange —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I want to make this point and to elaborate on this matter. I will let you in in a minute or two. I want to continue when I am on this track. I raised this matter in an intervention to you. In the previous rural development programme, the actual decision of transfer was made by David Cairns, a direct rule Minister. It was then amended and reversed by the Sinn Féin Minister Michelle Gildernew. No action was taken then, and no concern was shown. She took that decision, independent of the Executive. There was no challenge. That was on 11 June 2007, when we came back.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that things should come back to the Executive only if they are controversial? Clearly, what happened from 2007 showed that taking money from farmers and spending it in a way not directly related to the farming industry was, in some cases, quite controversial because it was not even agreed by the local committees. However, the Minister signed off on it. Funding became controversial, so the issue had to go to the court. Does the Member not welcome the fact that Ministers cannot now make controversial decisions without there being a safety mechanism in place?

Mr Swann: I thank —

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: I just want to develop this. I thank the former Minister for that comment. If the decision was going to be controversial, did the Finance Minister or the DUP inform the Agriculture Minister that the transfer rate that she was going to set was going to be controversial? If they did, please put those documents into the public domain.

We have talked about solo runs. I have heard it said a number of times that this is a great victory: the DUP has finally shown that there will be no solo runs. On Together: Building a United Community, OFMDFM did not consult with the Minister for Employment and Learning. There was no consultation with DEL whatsoever, even though the programme is about challenging youth unemployment. There was no consultation with Executive Ministers on that. Again, the solo run argument is not valid in this case. It will stand to be proven if the St Andrews Agreement has completed the end of solo runs. As far as I am aware, the agreement was quite a while ago and we have seen a number of solo runs from Ministers.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister — sorry; the Member — for giving way. We are getting mixed up with so many interventions. I go back to my original question to him: do you support and welcome the decision taken by the DUP to go to court and get a result for the farming community? The direct payment is the best direct form of financial assistance to a farming community. Do you deny that? Also, will you give us a percentage as to what the UUP would transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2?

Mr Swann: You keep going back. I am here to wind on the debate and come back on some of the points that other Members raised. We have made it clear; Jo-Anne developed her position at the start of the debate. It was simply the fact that, if we had seen in the consultation by the Agriculture Minister, putting out the figures for what projects were going to be assigned, we could have seen the percentage transfer —

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: Certainly.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said during my contribution to the debate — and I am sure that the Member was listening — I was very able to point out that indicative costings were set out as part of the consultation. I made the point a few minutes ago that, if people in the Chamber decided not to read them, that is their problem. They were clearly set out for people to make an informed decision. Average costings and bandings were set out for each type of project that I wanted to take forward.

The Member who intervened said that this was a win for the farming community. It was not a win; it was a let-down for rural communities. The decision is now not reflective of the entire needs of rural communities. We need to look at the environmental sector, the farming sector and rural dwellers as a whole, and not just look after a small section of rural communities.

Mr Swann: Minister, I will come back —

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I do not want to get into the issue of the Minister's decision. The courts have already decided who was right and wrong on that issue. The Member said that the Together: Building a United Community strategy was not brought to the Executive. It was brought to the Executive, and it was endorsed by the Executive.

Mr Swann: I thank the First Minister for his comments. I was taking the Minister for Employment and Learning's approach on that; he said that he was not consulted on the detail of it. I say that as Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning.

I go back to what the Agriculture Minister said about the bandings and all the rest. The point made by my party colleague when developing this argument was that, when the previous percentage change was made in the 2007 rural development budget, your predecessor had the dignity and respect to come to the Agriculture Committee to explain that. That is another problem that we have. This is not about point scoring, although that is what is being portrayed between the two unionist parties. We want to point out here that we have concerns and problems with the entire process that is going on.

Issues have been raised about comments made regarding farm safety maybe losing out on these schemes. It has been pointed out that DETI is responsible for farm safety. I have tabled a question to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment asking how much of her budget is set aside for farm safety schemes and developments, or whether it simply going to be about protocols and strategies between DETI and DARD. If DETI is taking on the responsibility of farm safety and the delivery of farm safety schemes, I want to ensure that there is a budget to do that. A display was put on here last week that proved the importance of farm safety, and if that is going to be lost out on because of a tit for tat between the parties, it will be to the detriment of our rural development.

4.15 pm

Ian Milne explained that less than 48% of farmers will gain £260 if the transfer is not made. Ian, I do not have the commitment for those figures, but I will take your recommendation. The £260 per farming family will not cover the major schemes. That expression was developed by Mr McCarthy.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the Finance Minister's contribution would have been very helpful today? We have certainly heard a lot from the very animated ousted one; perhaps that is another voice from the past. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Swann: I asked the Agriculture Minister whether she would lay all the papers in the Assembly to see who is right or who is wrong and what correspondence there was. Maybe if we pass the same request to the Finance Minister, through his party representatives, some clarity could be achieved.

William Irwin said that he was behind the sentiment of the motion. I thank him for his comments and support, because, as Kieran pointed out, our Agriculture Committee is usually a lot more supportive and speaks with one voice. The political point scoring that has brought the situation about — Kieran also developed that argument — has —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: No, I am running out of time, Paul. I have given way to you a number of times.

Minister, I will ask one thing of you. You said that this is it until 2017, but in your written statement of 20 December 2013 you said that you can reapply in August 2014 but that you will have to go through DEFRA, with the agreement of all the other member states. Is that completely out of scope or is it your political stance?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Swann: I commend the motion to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 60; Noes 37.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Milne, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 34; Noes 63.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Swann.

NOES

Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan,

Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McMullan and Mr Milne.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly negatived.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

4.45 pm

Smithwick Tribunal

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes 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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Givan: I beg to move

> *That this Assembly expresses concern at the findings of the Smithwick tribunal report; calls on the Irish Government to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; and further calls upon the Minister of Justice and the Chief Constable of the PSNI to have urgent discussions with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that they take all practical steps to prevent any repeat of such atrocities.*

I will give some context to the report and then move on to some broader political points that it is necessary to make. First and foremost, our thoughts are with the Breen and Buchanan families, who lost Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan in an ambush by the Provisional IRA.

The tribunal was established in May 2005, and work commenced in March 2006. It was set up by the Irish Government to investigate collusion between an Garda Síochána and the Provisional IRA in the murder of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan on 20 March 1989.

Chief Superintendent Harry Breen was an officer who was highly decorated for his service to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, a service that he joined in 1957, and highly respected by his colleagues. Superintendent Bob Buchanan joined the service in 1956 and served as a chief inspector in my constituency in Lisburn. He was a highly respected member of the community, a devout Christian and a lay preacher in his church.

The Smithwick tribunal took eight years to complete its work. It gathered extensive information, sitting for 132 days of public hearings and taking evidence from 198 witnesses, 22 of whom appeared on more than one occasion. As I indicated earlier, the tribunal was about the ambush of the two men by the Provisional IRA on 20 March 1989 after they attended a meeting in Dundalk garda station.

Let me outline briefly the circumstances of the day. Arrangements were made for the meeting at Dundalk police station, and those were discussed and well known in the station on the morning of the planned visit. The officers arrived no earlier than 2.20 pm, and that was widely witnessed. At 2.30 pm, the Provisional IRA placed an active service unit on the Edenappa Road near Jonesborough in south Armagh. As Judge Smithwick says, that was a direct result of confirmation having been

received that the officers had arrived at Dundalk police station.

Harry Breen was targeted because of his appearance in the media with weapons that had been seized from the Provisional IRA through the actions taken against it in the Loughgall ambush, where the Provisional IRA suffered a major setback to the terrorist activity that it had sought to wreak on the police station there. It was Harry Breen who was photographed with the weapons that were seized, and the report states that that photograph was etched in every republican's mind, making him a target of the Provisional IRA. Bob Buchanan had also been identified as being on an IRA hit list, and I will return to that issue shortly.

Justice Peter Smithwick has found, after an exhaustive process, that collusion took place between members of an Garda Síochána and the Provisional IRA in the murder of those two officers. His report says:

> *"the fact that the preparations commenced so late in the morning tends, in my view, to make it more likely that the information came from Dundalk Garda Station. ... both police services have received information from reliable sources indicating that there was collusion. ... I am satisfied that the IRA required positive identification that Harry Breen, in particular, had arrived at Dundalk Garda Station."*

The report also states:

> *"Given that I am satisfied that the evidence points to the fact that there was someone within the Garda Station assisting the IRA, it also seems to me to be likely that the Provisional IRA would seek to exploit that resource by having that individual or individuals confirm the arrival of the two officers."*

Of course, at the time, there were garda officers who were widely suspected of being rogue officers and of having colluded with the Provisional IRA. The report touches on them. They were Sergeant Leo Colton and Sergeant Hickey, who assisted the Provisional IRA by signing false passports. That suggested to Judge Smithwick that the Provisional IRA:

> *"reposed considerable trust in Mr Colton".*

The report also indicates that Sergeant Owen Corrigan had:

> *"inappropriate dealings with the Provisional IRA".*

He refused to provide details of his personal bank account to the inquiry.

There had been previous inquiries, namely the O'Dea and Camon investigations, and the report said that those were inadequate. Indeed, Justice Smithwick said:

> *"This was an example of the prioritisation of political expediency in the short term, without due regard to the rights of victims and the importance of placing justice at the centre of any policing system."*

He also said:

> *"The culture of failing adequately to address suggestions of wrongdoing, either for reasons of political expediency or by virtue of misguided loyalty, has been a feature of life in this State."*

His report found a general culture that existed and that still exists in the gardaí where loyalty to the force is more highly regarded than honesty.

The report has clear challenges for the gardaí leadership about how it failed to handle concerns about rogue officers and the culture of the organisation that Judge Smithwick says prevails to this day. That culture was manifested at the tribunal by the unprecedented attack on evidence that the PSNI provided through Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) Drew Harris. That was rebutted as "nonsense on stilts" by the Garda Commissioner's legal representatives. He also said that ACC Harris had paraded his rank before the tribunal.

The judge also took on the Garda Commissioner and accused his lawyers of setting out to undermine former Chief Superintendent Tom Curran, whose evidence was that he had told garda HQ that Bob Buchanan was on an IRA hit list. However, intelligence from an informant to then Assistant Commissioner, Eugene Crowley, shows no record of it being acted upon. Instead, Garda Commissioner Callinan has said that he cannot accept the conclusions from Judge Smithwick about loyalty to the organisation above loyalty to truth. He is in denial, and he diminishes the apology that the Irish Government provided to the families of Buchanan and Breen.

Let us touch on the IRA's involvement in the inquiry, which, as Members will be aware, benefited from immunity under section 5 of the Tribunals of Inquiry (Evidence) (Amendment) Act 1979. Immunity was also provided for by the Attorney General, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the Lord Advocate in the United Kingdom's jurisdiction. Gerry Adams said in the Irish Parliament:

> *"I used whatever influence I had to ensure there was an unprecedented attendance in terms of former IRA volunteers speaking to the tribunal and the justice on more than one occasion."*

However, the evidence is clear that the IRA was not helpful. John McBurney, the solicitor at the inquiry, talked about the need for further investigations to identify gardaí officers who colluded with the IRA. He said that he suspected that the man was still alive because the IRA went to considerable lengths to sabotage the Smithwick tribunal and to prevent it getting to the truth. So, the evidence that Provisional IRA members gave was provided through what was called a "final note", which gave an account of the events that occurred on 20 March 1989.

It said that they had:

> *"received no assistance from an agent of the state."*

Subsequently, the tribunal requested a meeting with one of those members and the judge felt that it was very important that that should happen, that he should hear the evidence first hand and that it should be under cross-examination. However, they refused to come forward to the tribunal.

That is a salutary lesson to Members in the House who hear from Sinn Féin that it wants a truth process and that, if we set that up, we will get the truth. Yet, here it had a tribunal under the gaze of the Irish Free State and it refused to give it the information necessary to get to the truth. Indeed, worse still, it sought to sabotage the efforts of the tribunal. Of course, Gerry Adams went on to blame

the incident on the officers because they had a laissez-faire approach to their own security; that was dealt with previously.

For many people, the Smithwick tribunal will be regarded as only the tip of the iceberg, because this was not just an isolated incident. Collusion is strongly suspected in the murder of Lord Justice Gibson and Lady Gibson in 1987 and the murder of the Hanna family in 1988, the target of which was meant to be a senior judge. Many other murders took place along the border in which collusion is suspected.

The fact that the political establishment in Dublin is shocked by these revelations is something that I find shocking. Any process to deal with the past must also look at the actions of the Irish Government, which was then led by Jack Lynch, in assisting the creation of the Provisional IRA. Captain James Kelly, who was an Irish intelligence officer, acted on the orders of the Irish Government to acquire and import guns into the Republic of Ireland for PIRA. Captain Kelly and senior members of the Irish Government met senior figures in the IRA as early as October 1969. So, when we look at the past, let the Smithwick tribunal be the catalyst for the Irish Government to come clean on their failures and the failures of their agencies.

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

Mr Givan: Let us also remember, however, that ultimate responsibility for the terrorist campaign that inflicted carnage on our community was that of those members of the Provisional IRA.

Mr A Maginness: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Irish Government" and insert:

> *"and authorities to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; acknowledges the response of an Garda Síochána to learn lessons and do whatever is necessary arising from the report; further acknowledges the exceptionally good cooperation between Justice Departments, PSNI and an Garda Síochána respectively and the commitment to together fight terrorism, organised crime and wrongdoing from whatever source; welcomes the decisive response of an Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore, to the report and endorses the recommendations of the report, including those around a structured framework for cross-border policing."*

The outcome of the Smithwick inquiry was one of the most shocking and saddest reports that I have had to deal with as an SDLP politician. Indeed, it was a shameful day, I believe, for policing in Ireland and in particular for an Garda Síochána.

As the previous contributor said, the tribunal referred to the murder of two senior RUC officers, Harry Breen and Bob Buchanan, who were killed by the Provisional IRA on Monday 20 March 1989. It was shocking and sad because Judge Smithwick concluded, after much deliberation, that there was collusion in those murders by a member or members of an Garda Síochána. It was a shameful and despicable action carried out by a member or members of an Garda Síochána.

The reaction to this report was quite properly dealt with by senior members of the Irish Government, in particular the Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore, and the Irish Justice Minister, Alan Shatter. I just want to read into the record what Alan Shatter TD, the Minister for Justice and Equality, said on 3 December 2013:

> *"Judge Smithwick was unable to find direct evidence of collusion in the killings. However, he concludes, on the balance of probabilities, that collusion did occur involving an unidentified member or members of An Garda Síochána ... For reasons outlined in the report published today, it has taken the Tribunal over 8 years to issue its report. I am well aware that this length of time must have placed great strain on the families of the two officers. But I hope that today's report will help them in their quest for the truth of what happened on that evil day and that it represents an important piece in the complex and inevitably disturbing jigsaw of trying to address the past.*
>
> *After many years' deliberations, it is right that the Tribunal report should now be considered in detail. I will be doing so with a view to presenting it to my colleagues in Government in the coming weeks. I expect too that the report will be fully debated in the Oireachtas.*
>
> *But even before that process is completed I believe that it is important to say immediately, on my own behalf and that of the Government, that I apologise without reservation for any failings identified in the report on the part of the State or any of its agencies."*

5.00 pm

The Tánaiste said:

> *"Today we must acknowledge and confront the central grave finding of the Smithwick Tribunal Report that there was collusion with the IRA from within An Garda Síochána in the murders of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Robert Buchanan ...*
>
> *I am appalled and saddened by this finding; it is a matter of grave public concern. On behalf of the Government and the people of Ireland, I apologise without reservation to the Breen and Buchanan families for any failings identified in the report on the part of the State or any of its agencies."*

Those were robust responses to the Smithwick report, and I believe that they reflect a mature and responsible acceptance by the Irish Government in relation to this grave issue.

On behalf of the SDLP, my colleague Dolores Kelly said:

> *"The SDLP accept the findings of the Smithwick Tribunal and in doing so would like to acknowledge the bravery and persistence of the Breen and Buchanan families. The Smithwick Tribunal took an independent and fearless approach and this should be a measure of how to deal with the past. Judge Smithwick, through a trying process and painstaking work has gotten to the bottom of this tragedy."*

Again, I believe that that was a mature response. This gives some justice and closure to the Breen and Buchanan families and their former colleagues in the RUC.

I remind the House that, although the inquiry commenced in 2005, it arose out of the 2001 Weston Park agreement. At that conference, it was agreed between the British and Irish Governments and among the parties that there should be a number of inquiries into events of a contentious and controversial nature involving collusion on the part of the security forces and paramilitaries, including the Provisional IRA. However, one inquiry remains to be undertaken that is part of a commitment by the British Government: the murder of Pat Finucane. It is important for us to remind the British Government that it is an outstanding commitment.

Our amendment is a positive contribution. It makes the motion positive by emphasising the recommendations of the report of the Smithwick tribunal. I will turn to recommendations 1 to 6 and take them in two parts. The first three deal with frameworks and procedures to be put in place to allow for the structured and regular exchange of intelligence between an Garda Síochána and the PSNI. Judge Smithwick makes an important contribution to improving intelligence between the two police services, North and South. He refers to a model — the integrated border intelligence team — made up of agencies from the United States and Canada. Intelligence operatives from the stakeholder agencies collocate, each having exclusive access to his or her own national intelligence database but sharing intelligence with the other stakeholders daily, subject to information and sharing protocols.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I am sorry; I have a lot to get through.

The second recommendation is that the need for structured frameworks for cross-border policing and enhanced personal relationships go hand in hand. He recommends an exchange of personnel between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána, and he refers to the Patten report from which that arises. I believe that, if we are to do something positive in memory of two brave men who served the people of this island, North and South, in a very courageous fashion, it should be something practical to enhance cross-border policing. This recommendation, as well as the first, is to be commended.

The next recommendation is on protocols:

> *"if necessary underpinned by legislative changes, providing the legal and procedural structures for the seamless investigation by joint police teams of crimes with a cross-border element."*

That, surely, would be a major contribution to policing, North and South, and it would help to deal with the terrorism being inflicted upon people in Ireland, North and South. I hope that we can learn from that.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I cannot. I have two other points to make.

The final point is that an Garda Síochána should not tolerate "unethical or irregular behaviour" and that there should be "proper vetting for prospective members". It is also recommended that breaches of discipline continue to be investigated and enforced after a member has, in fact, left an Garda Síochána and that:

> *"penalties for breaches of discipline in this regard could, if necessary, be enforced against the former member's pension."*

That, again, is positive. Finally, if there is to be a future investigation or inquiry along similar lines —

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

Mr A Maginness: — the report says:

> *"consideration ought to be given to establishing same on the basis that it has the power to hear evidence, compel the attendance of witnesses and make orders for ... discovery ... in both jurisdictions."*

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, it has to be said that this is about the death of RUC Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and RUC Superintendent Robert Buchanan and their families. If the Smithwick tribunal has done anything, it may, going by some media reports, have brought some closure or acceptable truth to the families. If so, perhaps that is at the core of whatever our discussion and disagreements might be here.

As outlined, the inquiry came from the Weston Park agreement. It is important to say that the two Governments were involved in the discussions, and Judge Cory was asked to see what the case was for public inquiries. Among the six cases that came out of that was the Smithwick inquiry. Alban Maginness read this into the record, but it is worth repeating that Smithwick concluded that he was unable to find direct evidence of collusion in the killings but that, on the balance of probabilities, collusion involving an unidentified member or members of an Garda Síochána and the Irish Republican Army did occur.

What the Smithwick report describes is not on the same scale or in the same form as that which happened within the British state forces directed against the Catholic and nationalist community, mainly in the North of Ireland but also in the South of Ireland. That was systemic, institutionalised and coordinated collusion. It is important to say that it led to the death of hundreds of citizens, including those killed in the Dublin and Monaghan bombings and by the notorious Glenanne gang, which was involved in over 100 killings in the murder triangle. People who watched the recent programme on the MRF will be in little doubt about the type of collusion that went on, of which some people on that programme were proud. To this day —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr G Kelly: No. To this day, the British will not hand over the information to the families involved. The Irish Government upheld their commitment — that is what the Smithwick tribunal was about — and the British Government did not.

As Alban Maginness mentioned, Pat Finucane's family has been waiting a very long time for truth and justice. Indeed, there is a volume of documented evidence of collusion and state involvement in that case. So, my objection to the motion is that it is exclusive. There were five inquiries; originally, there were to be six. Pat Finucane's inquiry has not taken place. Worse than that is the fact that some — I say "some" — Members from the party opposite have not only compounded people's suffering by defending

collusion in the Finucane case but have, at times, made scurrilous innuendos and accusations against the victim of that collusion.

I also fail to understand — I note that Paul Givan actually mentioned this when he talked about how wide he believed collusion was in the South — why, if the DUP and, indeed, the UUP support the Smithwick tribunal, they do not support the inquiry into Pat Finucane's murder. If they support Smithwick, why were they against the idea of investigating themes and patterns in the Haass negotiations? Why did they argue so vehemently against those things, when Paul Givan argues that we should look at the Twenty-six Counties? I suppose the question is this: what are they afraid of? They moved towards this motion very quickly. That is fair enough, but they need to realise that, if they are looking for the truth, let it be on the basis of equality, parity of esteem and mutual respect. Let us get away from the hierarchy of victims. Let us realise that, as an example, Pat Finucane's family deserve your support as well as everybody else's.

Mr Hussey: I begin by declaring an interest as a former member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, a force with which I am very proud to be associated.

The motion deals with the Smithwick report. The tribunal found that unidentified members of an Garda Síochána colluded with the Provisional IRA in the murder of RUC officers Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan. Micheál Martin TD referred to the findings as "truly shocking and sickening". He went on to say:

> *"It represents a terrible betrayal of the thousands of members of An Garda Síochána who down through the years made many sacrifices to protect the citizens of this island, North and South, and who worked extremely hard against the actions of the Provisional IRA and other terrorist groups. It betrays that sacrifice in a profound and disgusting way."*

I fully support Mr Martin's comments. I pay tribute to the members of an Garda Síochána who proudly wore the uniform and protected the citizens and the state against terrorist attack. Mr Martin also said:

> *"Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan were carrying out their professional duties to protect the citizens of this State"*

— obviously, he was referring to the Irish Republic —

> *"in co-operation with An Garda Síochána and they were gunned down savagely in the course of doing their duty."*

Clearly, the leader of Fianna Fáil accepts that those police officers were murdered in cold blood. He accepts that there was collusion between the guards and the Provisional IRA. Anyone who knows the history of Northern Ireland and the political history of Fianna Fáil knows that some of that party's previous leaders did everything in their power to ensure that the protection of the Irish state was given to the Provos as they headed into the Republic's jurisdiction.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that there is now a clear responsibility on the present Government of the Irish Republic and their policing and security institutions to publicly acknowledge and apologise for the historical failure of successive Irish Governments to properly deal with the murderous and illegal activities of the IRA and the republican movement and that that is an imperative as we all seek to move forward on issues dealing with the past?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree entirely with your comments. You will note that the previous contributor referred to various activities but made no reference to the murderous attacks and ethnic cleansing along the border and the murder of various people — in Castlederg, for example, where 29 people lost their life. They deal specifically with one person, and they continue to do that.

5.15 pm

I welcome Mr Martin's progressive attitude. He can clearly see the wrongs that were committed by the Provos and the members of an Garda Síochána who colluded in the murders of two police officers. It is worth quoting a further piece of Mr Martin's contribution to the Dáil:

> *"We should be very clear that this was premeditated murder carried out by so-called republicans and people supported by the Sinn Féin leaders and others, who continue to refuse to accept the reality that this was a premeditated murder. Deputy Adams should apologise to the families on behalf of that so-called republican movement, as this kind of language and Sinn-Féin-speak, to which we are now becoming accustomed, represents their ongoing Widgery approach to whitewashing their past atrocities."*

There is a clear indication of how the Government and the Opposition in the Irish Republic see Sinn Féin and the IRA.

The Tánaiste paid tribute to the two RUC officers and their families and referred to Smithwick as:

> *"an open, honest and comprehensive report".*

He continued:

> *"Out of respect for the families, we should recall the human dimension of this atrocity."*

We must always remember the loss that the families endured. We all know that over 3,500 souls were lost during the Troubles. The Tánaiste added:

> *"where allegations of collusion by agents of the State were concerned, we have long agreed that the State bears a particular and solemn responsibility. I have stated previously that I do not believe we can address the past constructively unless we are each prepared to ask questions of ourselves and of our own role."*

I ask some of the Members opposite to think long and hard about their past and about any role they played in the murder or injury of many of the citizens of this Province and island. The Irish Government appear open to discussion on Smithwick, and today's proposal from DUP Members is aimed at bringing the matter to a satisfactory conclusion.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hussey: I will.

Mr Allister: Before the Member concludes, does he agree — he referred to the reaction of the Southern Government — that one issue that they have been particularly non-committal about is the finding in Smithwick that part of the problem, in terms of a cover-up, was the pursuit of political expediency, which gave rise to these matters not coming to light? Would he care to comment on that? Does he agree that that is probably a huge telltale sign of a much wider ambit of collusion than Smithwick has already revealed?

Mr Hussey: I accept the Member's comments. He is quite correct: the Irish Government have a lot of questions to answer. Again, that was referred to by my colleague Danny Kennedy. The Irish Government have a lot of questions to answer. They seemed to have an open-gate policy when people were fleeing from this jurisdiction into theirs. They have a lot of questions to answer, as, of course, does the Provisional IRA, which seems to think that every other piece of paper on any offence that occurred in Northern Ireland should be made available. Let the IRA bring its records forward. Let us see what weapons it did and did not actually decommission.

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

Mr Hussey: I support the proposal put forward here today.

Mr Dickson: Before addressing the motion, I pay my and my party's tribute to Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan. They were dedicated police officers murdered whilst trying to protect and defend people from crime and terrorism. It is important to remember that behind each of the tragic events that we are discussing today are hurting relatives. So, I wish to remember the Breen and Buchanan families, who have suffered grievously and continue to deal with the loss of their loved ones. Clearly, this has been a difficult and painful period for both families, as the truth surrounding what happened starts to emerge. Our thoughts remain very much with them at this time.

Judge Peter Smithwick's report highlighted collusion between as yet unidentified gardaí and the Provisional IRA in this case. Contrary to the outrageous and offensive views of a few, the vast majority of us are horrified by the report's conclusions. In light of its findings, the Alliance Party welcomes the speedy response of the Irish Government in offering an absolute and unqualified apology. We also welcome the meeting that took place soon after between the Justice Ministers on 6 December and 17 December, with the latter also being attended by the Chief Constable and the Garda Commissioner.

The motion is right to highlight the need for cross-border cooperation to address the report's findings. It is also right to call for all necessary action to pursue justice. If there is any evidence that points to a smoking gun, all lines of inquiry should and must be followed. My party is therefore supportive of the motion, but we would like to see the SDLP amendment made, as it better reflects where things currently stand.

As I said, meetings have already taken place between the Justice Ministers, the Chief Constable and the Garda Commissioner. We should look ahead to further meetings and the implementation of the report's recommendations. I welcome the amendment's recognition of the close relationship between both police services. That is something that the PSNI and the gardaí and both Ministers have stressed since the report's publication. Indeed, I recall the Chief Constable declaring that he enjoys stronger cooperation with an Garda Síochána, for example, than he did on occasions with neighbouring forces in England when he worked there.

We know the high level of cooperation that exists, particularly regarding the terrorist threat and the activities of organised crime gangs. In the run-up to Christmas, for example, officers from the PSNI and gardaí worked together to foil a dissident bomb plot. It is likely that that saved many lives. That is just one example of the police services working together to defend democracy and to uphold our institutions against the threat of violence, terror and murder.

Judge Smithwick made recommendations regarding how that cooperation could be strengthened, particularly in relation to intelligence sharing and personnel exchanges. There are procedures and structures to facilitate those already. Nevertheless, we support a review of those procedures and structures to see where improvements can be made.

I have one final point to make. Some have said that we should draw a line under these events and that, if we seek to establish the truth, we will never be able to move forward. However, what this issue has highlighted again is that, whilst the exploration of the past may be painful and uncomfortable, one thing is clear: it cannot be avoided, if we are to address with integrity the needs of those bereaved and injured and learn lessons from our past, both of which are key to building a stable and shared future for us all.

Mr Campbell: I begin by paying tribute to the families of Messrs Breen and Buchanan, as others have done. Here were two officers of outstanding bravery, operating in exceptionally difficult terrain, who paid the ultimate sacrifice, brutally gunned down by cowardly murderers. They were but two among a number of others, as my colleague Mr Givan alluded to. A number of judges and other senior police officers were also at risk because of the degree of collusion that existed back then between the Provisional IRA and some elements in the police force in the Irish Republic.

I want to dwell on the Smithwick inquiry and how it helps but also presents a difficulty in how we deal with the past. It helps because, in some small way, there was a degree of finality brought to this one issue. However, part of the problem is that the context in which the Smithwick inquiry came about was, as has been outlined, a result of the Weston Park discussions. Let us set aside the politics of who asked for what and who got what out of the Weston Park discussions: the understanding, post Weston Park, was that a number of investigations would be carried out. At different degrees and at different rates those investigations have been undertaken.

In the context of the Smithwick inquiry into the Breen and Buchanan murders, we have in writing, in the report of the Smithwick tribunal, the fact that members of the Provisional IRA would not cooperate, even though their political representatives had entered into the Weston Park discussions and even though they understood that there

would be investigations of IRA atrocities and other killings, including those in which the assertion was that there was collusion of the forces of the state in Northern Ireland. Even in that context, Provisional IRA members declined to offer their full support to Weston Park.

I am aware of another instance — there may be others — in which an inquiry was set up at the demand of republicans: the Saville inquiry. We all know the context in which that was set up: the previous Prime Minister Tony Blair wanted to bring closure and was prepared to spend any amount of time and money to do so. Most people had a reasonable idea of what the ground rules for the outcome of that inquiry would be. Even in that context, the current deputy First Minister went into the tribunal hearing and declined to cooperate. So, we have two instances, one of which was Smithwick, where Provisional IRA members declined to cooperate, and the second was when the deputy First Minister went into the box in Saville and declined to cooperate. However, we are told that there will be openness and transparency from Sinn Féin in trying to bring closure to the issues of the past. We can see now why we ran into problems in the Haass discussions. We need to see openness and transparency from those who were involved in murder, terror and arson. We need to hear from them about what they did, their guilt and their plea for mercy after having done what they did. They seem to demand of others that which they will not apply to themselves. That is what we need to see, but we did not see it in Smithwick or Saville. We need to see it to make progress.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I will speak against the motion. Tá mise ag labhairt in éadan an rúin seo inniu. The motion expresses concerns at the finding of the Smithwick tribunal, and it calls on the Irish Government to pursue those responsible, among other things. Baineann an rún seo le buarthaí faoi na torthaí atá ag teacht amach as Tuairisc an Bhinse Smithwick. Glaonn sé ar Rialtas na hÉireann dul sa tóir ar na daoine a bhí freagrach. I find it hard to take those concerns seriously. They are disingenuous and selective.

We have years of experience of collusion in the North throughout 30 years of conflict. We know that there was collusion by the British state forces. There has been a complete and abject failure to acknowledge that that happened. We know that the British were directly involved in institutionalised collusion. We have seen documentary programmes about the MRF, which has been referred to. We have seen Anne Cadwallader's book recently, which gives factual information about 120 murders in the murder triangle in mid-Ulster. There has been other research, lots of which is well documented and followed through. Father Faul, Father Murray and Patricia Lundy have done excellent work in getting to the core of the issues. The facts are there. It can be traced back to individuals.

Smithwick acknowledged that there was not hard evidence, but he decided that, on the balance of probability, there was collusion. The IRA denied that it took place. Shéan an IRA go raibh claonpháirteachas ann. However, the decision was arrived at, so that is where it came out.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Ms McCorley: I will not.

So, we now have the debate today. We have unionists with their grave concerns about collusion. Yet, when we have evidence of systemic collusion in the North that led to scores of nationalist deaths, we do not really seem to hear much —

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Ms McCorley: I will not.

We do not seem to hear much complaint from —

Mr Hussey: She is refusing me as well.

Ms McCorley: It is my entitlement to decide to give way or not.

It makes you wonder. The death of Pat Finucane was mentioned by my colleague Gerry Kelly. In a few weeks' time, we will come to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Pat. If unionism is against collusion, I challenge it to call on the British to own up to the role of its agents in the murder of Pat Finucane. If they are really opposed to collusion, they will do that.

5.30 pm

Mr Anderson: I support the motion. It raises a number of core issues that need to be tackled and addressed if we are to keep moving forward as a society. We hear a lot about the past, and it was a central theme of the recent Haass talks, but if we are to have any hope of dealing with our past, it requires everyone, and I mean everyone, to be honest, open and transparent. There is no point in the spotlight being shone on certain areas of the past if it is not shone with equal brightness on others.

To date, the spotlight has been used very selectively. There are those who are very keen for it to focus on the role of Her Majesty's Government and on the role of Her Majesty's security forces — the RUC, the UDR, the Royal Irish Regiment (RIR) and the army — and, as long as the spotlight shines on those areas, they are happy. They can sit smugly and point their finger at others. They can demand justice, they can demand endless public inquiries and they can demand apologies, all as long as the spotlight does not shine on them. Well, the time is long past for the focus to fall on other groups and other areas of our past. Members opposite need to have that spotlight shone on them.

The Government of the Irish Republic need to have their part in our troubled past properly explored and exposed. The Republic of Ireland has long been a key player in the Troubles. We on this side of the House have long argued that the Irish Government need to own up to what their predecessors did, and we have debated the matter in the Chamber on previous occasions. They need to acknowledge the extent to which they nurtured the fledgling Provisional IRA; the extent to which they turned a blind eye to cross-border terrorist activity; the extent to which they harboured known IRA terrorists; and the extent to which they failed to extradite those terrorists to Northern Ireland.

The recent findings of the Smithwick inquiry have put all those issues firmly back on the agenda. The spotlight has now been shone on the role of the Irish Government and on the role of the gardaí in what was one of the most high-profile murders ever carried out by the Provisional IRA. On 20 March 1989, two senior RUC officers, Chief

Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Bob Buchanan, were brutally murdered just over the border as they returned home from a meeting at Dundalk garda station. Mr Breen came from Banbridge in my Upper Bann constituency. We must never forget those two men and their families, who continue to live daily with their loss.

The leader of the party opposite has already added insult to injury by way of the utterly disgraceful comments that he made and should hang his head in shame. Most of us will remember the murders very clearly. At the time, there was shock in an already hardened community, because here we had two senior RUC men — upstanding, decent, Christian men — done to death in the most brutal of circumstances. Questions were immediately asked about how the IRA would have known about their movements. To say that the unionist people were suspicious of the role of some in the Irish authorities would be putting it mildly. Indeed, many of us long believed that there was collusion between some garda officers and Republican terrorists, and now Judge Smithwick, after his detailed and exhaustive inquiry, has confirmed those fears and suspicions.

I appreciate that the Irish Government were quick to offer an apology, but it does not go far enough. We need to see action by the Irish state to ensure that they bring to justice all those who have been and still are engaged in terrorism. We also need to see what lessons can be learned about the role of the gardaí.

As the 'Sunday Independent' stated:

> *"The collusion by at least one garda with a terrorist organisation dedicated to overthrowing the State, in the murder of two fellow police officers, is the ultimate betrayal of everything that a police force stands for."*

When the Smithwick tribunal findings were published last month, former garda chief inspector Kathleen O'Toole said that the gardaí would have "bad apples" like any other organisation. However, there is strong concern that it is more than one or two rogue officers or one or two bad apples.

As Judge Smithwick himself said:

> *"The culture of failing adequately to address suggestions of wrongdoing, either for reasons of political expediency or by virtue of misguided loyalty, has been a feature of life in this State."*

Our Justice Minister must act, and so, too, must the Chief Constable. It is vital that we have urgent discussions with our counterparts.

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

Mr Anderson: Public confidence demands it.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I listened carefully to the contributions. I suppose that we have to acknowledge that there was some predictability about the positions that people would take on the motion and the debate that it has provoked. It is equally obvious that various unionist spokespersons have displayed a curious dichotomy when the issue concerns an Garda Síochána and the political authorities in the Twenty-six Counties. That is in contrast to the generally unenthusiastic response from unionists to collusion in the North that involved members of — I do not say all — the RUC, the UDR, the British Army, MI5 and a motley bunch of unionist paramilitaries in cases that are well known to that side of the House as well as to this. Those cases include McGurk's Bar, the Miami Showband, the Dublin/Monaghan bombings and the Pat Finucane case, about which the British Prime Minister said that there were "shocking levels of collusion". They also include the killing of Roseanne Mallon and many other examples of a controlled, organised and directed policy of collusion.

However, rather than cherry-pick the minutiae of the Smithwick report, I intend to focus on what I regard as a very significant and perhaps, at this stage, unintended consequence. That is that there may have been a change of attitude in both main unionist parties to collusion. We must remember that this has all happened in the mouth of the Haass process; however, it was not reflected in that process, so perhaps it was unintended. However, Justice Smithwick adopted the definitions of collusion that John Stevens and, subsequently, Judge Cory developed. In addition, and as he reflected in his report, which, you need no reminding, was responded to very positively immediately on its publication of 4 December, Justice Smithwick added another criterion: the balance of probability. I would like unionists not to respond to that or to have a knee-jerk reaction but to think about it.

In their response to the Smithwick tribunal, the unionists have accepted what I regard as a new threshold of proof for the deaths and injuries of many people in Ireland, North and South, through collusion. I think that, at some stage, we will have to deal with this issue, and I hope that the process of doing that could begin with the debate on this motion. I put it to the unionists opposite that their acceptance of Justice Smithwick's conclusions demands that they adopt the same approach to the dozens and dozens of cases in this jurisdiction, many of which have not been properly investigated. Imagine how an approach that is consistent, non-partisan and cross-party in accepting the reality of collusion in this state could change utterly the climate of division, frozen anger and frustration that bedevils any attempt to come to terms with the past.

I appreciate that other Members addressed the families of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Robert Buchanan. For all I know, they will be very interested in the debate, and I expect them to be. I am very conscious of that, and I do not intend, by any word or deed, to add to their suffering. They have suffered too much.

Could we not begin in an honest way to address the issue? If you are prepared to accept the definition of collusion and to welcome and make proper demands, I assure you that you will get the investigation that you are demanding in the Twenty-six Counties. The political authorities and the judicial authorities have made that quite clear. In any event, I am quite certain that, compared with so many cases here in which there was interference and where the evidence was destroyed and hidden, there has been a very rigorous examination up to now. We have the opportunity, and I am prepared, if I get a response —

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he comment on his leader's response to the outworkings of the Smithwick tribunal on the murders of Breen and Buchanan? What does he think of Mr Adams's remarks?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Thank you. I have made it clear that I do not think that we should add to the suffering. However, I also want to point out that Gerry Adams quoted the Smithwick report; he did not invent any new terminology but found it in the report. If you read the report, you will also find it. The reference to not being able to find a "smoking gun" was very unfortunate, but it is also in the report. I just wonder what the Buchanan and Breen families thought about that.

I do not want to get distracted. I have one message: if you accept the new threshold, so will we. Let us work together to uncover all the issues that help to deal with the past. Do not expect what Gregory Campbell argued for: republicans are not going to go forward whilst everyone else hangs back, including all the key players on the British side —

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I am out of time, but I will give way because I was particularly thinking about you in my comments.

Mr Hussey: Thank you for giving way. Does the Member accept that there was collusion between the Provisional IRA and An Garda Síochána?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I have made it clear that I am not going to take issue with Smithwick. Why would I? The authorities there have accepted it, and they are going to follow up on it. They should do so, because that is part of their duty. I also want the authorities up here to do the same, and I want them to do it with the support of unionists as well as nationalists and republicans and the Alliance Party. The amendment provides that opportunity if people vote according to conscience.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate the findings of the Smithwick tribunal report into the ruthless and brutal murders of Chief Superintendent Harry Breen and Superintendent Robert Buchanan in 1989.

This was an important tribunal, and Judge Peter Smithwick is to be commended for his diligent work and his detailed analysis of the evidence presented to him. Over eight years, the tribunal team collected the evidence and carefully assessed each part of it as well as the reliability of the witnesses before them.

Judge Smithwick's conclusion that he was satisfied that there was collusion in the murders and that he was satisfied that the evidence points to the fact that someone in the garda station was assisting the IRA, however shocking, has been accepted by the Irish Government, an Garda Síochána and all Irish political parties apart from Sinn Féin.

The finding of collusion was particularly difficult for an Garda Síochána to accept. It too has suffered at the hands of the Provisionals. Trainee Garda Gary Sheehan was shot dead in 1983, and Detective Garda Jerry McCabe was killed by the Provisionals in 1996. Both were murdered on duty whilst serving the public.

Sinn Féin is alone in its denial of the findings of the Smithwick tribunal, but that denial echoes the denials of those who have rejected findings of collusion in the North by elements of the RUC, the UDR and the British Army and its agencies. There are many victims of collusion, including in their number members of my party. Those who deny findings of collusion, whether from the Smithwick tribunal or from those investigating acts of terrorism in the North, are in denial of the past.

That is not the only part of the findings of the Smithwick tribunal that Sinn Féin is in denial about. It is in denial about Judge Smithwick's assessment of the evidence — and I use that term loosely — that the representatives of the Provisional IRA who were responsible for the murders presented to the tribunal. Facilitated by Sinn Féin, those representatives gave their version of the brutal murders of Chief Superintendent Breen and Superintendent Buchanan. They failed to allow that version to be questioned and tested in front of the tribunal, despite the best efforts of Judge Smithwick. Instead, they demanded to dictate the terms and conditions under which they would answer the tribunal's questions.

In the end, after assessing all the evidence available to him and comparing independent eyewitness accounts, scene of crime forensic reports and the autopsy reports, Judge Smithwick concluded that the Provisional IRA had lied to the tribunal. Is that the conclusion that Sinn Féin denies? It denies that conclusion because it calls into question the organisation's professed commitment to open and transparent truth-telling on the past.

Judge Smithwick found that, when given the opportunity to demonstrate that commitment, rather than just talk about it, because talk is very cheap, representatives of the Provisional IRA failed the test. Not only did he find that they had lied to a tribunal, he concluded that they had lied due to "political considerations".

The proposers of the motion call on others to take all practical steps to prevent any repeat of such atrocities. Although I agree with that objective, the parties in the Executive are not in a very strong position when it comes to calling on others to take action on the past. The parties here have essentially failed to agree on carefully negotiated measures to deal with the past. We have a responsibility to lead the way in ensuring that there is no repeat of such atrocities. We can do that by ensuring that politics delivers and is seen to deliver. We still have the opportunity to deliver on the outcomes of the Haass negotiations, but that is not being helped by the grandstanding and posturing that we have seen in the media over the past few days by the First Minister as well as the deputy First Minister.

5.45 pm

The SDLP amendment also seeks to address something that the original motion neglects to mention, namely the huge strides that have been made by the police services on the island and by politicians across Ireland and Britain since the brutal murders at the heart of the Smithwick tribunal. There is greater and closer cooperation between the two Justice Departments, the PSNI and an Garda Síochána respectively than at any time since the partition of the island.

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

Mr McGlone: There is a joint and united commitment to together fight terrorism, organised crime and wrongdoing from whatever source. We welcome that commitment and the response of an Tánaiste to the report. We endorse the report's recommendations, and I support our amendment.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I thank the Members responsible for tabling the motion, which enables us to highlight some of the work being done by the two Departments and the two police services. I will say a little bit more about the virtues, perhaps, of the amendment.

Like others, I must start by referring to the reasons why the Smithwick report was necessary: the brutal and tragic murders of two highly respected RUC officers. Superintendent Bob Buchanan and Chief Superintendent Harry Breen were murdered because of the duty that they carried out on behalf of this society against cross-border crime and terrorism.

As others have done — as, indeed, nearly everybody who has spoken has done — let us recognise and remember the impact that the brutal murders had on the two families. The dignity that the families have shown since the publication of the Smithwick report is certainly an example to us all in this society.

I welcome the publication of the Smithwick report. Much has come out of it that should be considered. The conclusion that there was evidence of collusion between an Garda Síochána and the Provisional IRA is, as the Garda Commissioner said, horrifying.

As I mentioned in the House in the matter of the day discussion on 9 December 2013, the speedy responses by the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Justice and Equality are very welcome. In particular, I welcome the absolute and unqualified apology for any failings of the Irish state or its agencies.

As we look forward, I know that the Garda Commissioner is considering whether new lines of inquiry arise with the murders. Beyond that important consideration, the report makes seven specific recommendations. Three of those have a direct North/South bearing, and I will deal with them shortly. Let me first say that I remain committed to strengthening North/South cooperation wherever possible and building on the progress that we have already made. That is why I report regularly to the House on North/South meetings under the intergovernmental agreement on criminal justice cooperation.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Does he not, however, share my profound concern that there was a potential throughout the entire Troubles for substantial collusion between the security authorities in the Irish Republic and the IRA and that, therefore, the current Administration must address that issue with full openness and transparency?

Mr Ford: I appreciate the fact that the Member would wish to make such a point, particularly representing the constituency that he does. As Minister of Justice, my duty in the devolved settlement in 2014 is to ensure that we learn from the lessons of the past and put the necessary structures in place at this stage. That is why, since the publication of the Smithwick report in December 2013, I have had face-to-face discussions with Alan Shatter on two occasions in addition to a number of telephone calls. The first discussion was when we met in Brussels, on the margins of the European Justice Council on 6 December 2013. We also had a substantive discussion at our meeting on 17 December 2013 in Dublin, when the Garda Commissioner, the Chief Constable and senior officials from the two Departments were also present. We had a constructive discussion on the Smithwick recommendations and on the work that will be done to take them forward.

Let us recall that the conclusion, as others said, from Judge Smithwick is that, on the balance of probabilities, there was collusion between an officer or officers of an Garda Síochána and elements of the Provisional IRA. He reached that conclusion despite the failure of the IRA representatives who engaged with his staff to cooperate fully. It shows the virtue of that inquiry process and the benefits that were achieved by the work done by Judge Smithwick and his team.

Three recommendations of the seven are relevant to us in Northern Ireland. First, Judge Smithwick recommended that frameworks and procedures be put in place for the structured and regular exchange of intelligence between the two police services. Members are aware that intelligence gathering is an excepted matter and, as such, remains a matter principally for the Secretary of State. Nonetheless, I am aware that there is already a protocol in place that allows for the exchange of intelligence, and I know from my discussions that the PSNI believes that it works well, including in its role in engaging with an Garda Síochána and in the role of the security service. I am assured by the Chief Constable that he continues to receive the fullest possible cooperation from the security service and the Commissioner of an Garda Síochána on the sharing of intelligence.

Secondly, Judge Smithwick noted the need for continued personnel exchanges and secondments. The opportunity for such programmes already exists across a range of responsibilities, with almost 200 exchanges having taken place between the two police services. I have no doubt that they are to the mutual benefit of both services, and they are underpinned by legislation. Alan Shatter and I, at our meeting with the Chief Constable and the Garda Commissioner on 17 December, discussed current arrangements on cooperation and inter-service exchanges. The two Ministers asked for them to be reviewed to see what more might be done. As a result, meetings are due to take place to identify, and iron out as necessary, any issues, and especially to ensure that secondments between the two jurisdictions can become more regular and routine. So far, most secondments have been short-term because it is much easier to arrange them on a short-term basis, when pay and pension problems do not arise — issues that are a block to cross-border cooperation in a number of areas, not just the justice field.

Thirdly, Judge Smithwick recommended the establishment of protocols providing the legal and procedural structures for the seamless investigation by joint police teams on cross-border crime. There are already such procedures and protocols in place: for example, a cross-border policing manual has been agreed by the PSNI and an Garda Síochána. The manual provides operational guides to assist police officers dealing with cases with a significant cross-border element. As well as the existing manual for police officers, a manual is under development between prosecutors. There is also a cross-border policing strategy. It was launched three years ago and, on the basis of those three years' experience, is being reviewed by the two police services. Naturally, both services will review those arrangements in light of the comments of Judge Smithwick.

Minister Shatter and I, along with the Garda Commissioner and the Chief Constable, have agreed to meet again in the near future to discuss progress on the recommendations.

The motion calls for urgent action by the Minister and Chief Constable. It is fair to say that significant action has already been taken. The strength of the relationship between the two police services and the excellent cooperation between them are well known. I already enjoy an excellent working relationship with Alan Shatter, and our recent meeting afforded us the opportunity to reinforce that positive relationship. We are clear that there should continue to be engagement between our Departments. That happens not only formally through the intergovernmental agreement on criminal justice cooperation but weekly, if not daily, between representatives of the PSNI and an Garda Síochána, between members of the Departments, North and South, and between those working in arm's-length bodies on probation, prisons and a number of other areas.

That is the way in which cross-border crime and terrorism are being fought in a practical way. When Members refer to, for example, problems with extradition in the past, we should acknowledge that under the current arrangements for the European arrest warrant, significant positive, good work is being done, though we need to ensure that that provision continues as the Home Secretary looks to make changes to European arrangements.

I believe that good cooperation between the two Justice Departments, police services and other agencies has already shown significant success in dealing with the terrorist threat, which is a threat to all of us in both jurisdictions, and with organised criminal gangs that take no notice of the border except to see how it might enhance their profits.

For the security of communities on both sides of the border, I am determined that we seek to build on the many areas where that cooperation is a fact of daily life. The Chief Constable is on record as saying of Smithwick:

> *"This report should not and will not distract us from the strong working relationships we enjoy with our colleagues in An Garda Síochána."*

He added:

> *"We have well established protocols, excellent cross-border cooperation and we remain resolute in our determination to build on these solid foundations and our commitment to jointly combat crime and to protect all our citizens."*

I believe that is the reality of life for the agencies, North and South. I believe that is what we need to build on. I believe that is what our people, North and South, expect us to do.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: I will.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister express any dissatisfaction and surprise that the Garda Commissioner, having initially said that he accepted the Smithwick tribunal findings, backtracked on one specific, namely when he said that he could not accept the finding that there had been a "culture" of "misguided loyalty" to the organisation above loyalty to the truth, which caused some of these matters to be covered up? Will the Minister join in expressing regret that the Garda Commissioner was ambivalent, therefore, about that aspect of the outcome of the tribunal?

Mr Ford: I have already said that my concern is 2014, not the 1970s and 1980s. If we look back too far, it would be easy to point fingers in a number of different directions. I believe that my responsibility is to ensure that my work with Minister Alan Shatter, my officials with his, the Chief Constable with the Garda Commissioner, and others, ensures that we get the best possible tie-up these days, and we ensure that the fight against cross-border crime and against terrorism is a united one. I believe that that is the case. I have outlined the work that has been done since Smithwick reported. That work will continue, and I expect to meet Alan Shatter and his officials next month to see what progress has been made in this area.

I welcome the motion. I think it was important that we did not just have a matter of the day on the subject, but the opportunity to discuss the issues in some detail. I certainly hope that the debate has enabled me to set out to the House the work that is being done by the two Departments and the two police services. That work is under way, is being carried out in response to the Smithwick report and will underpin a safer society for all of us on this island. I will look closely at Judge Smithwick's recommendations as they relate to this region, as well as to cross-border matters.

I have no real issues with the motion as tabled, except for the slight historical inaccuracy in being called on to do things that have already been done. However, a little bit shone through, particularly in Mr Anderson's speech a few minutes ago, and I believe that the amendment, in recognising the work that is being done, more accurately reflects the situation that we are in. I recommend the amendment to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Dolores Kelly to conclude on the amendment, it is quite obvious that the business on the Order Paper will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until it is completed.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will pick up where the Minister left off and ask whether those on the Benches opposite, the proposers of the motion, will accept our amendment. I think that it more accurately reflects the situation that pertains following the publication of the Smithwick tribunal findings. I ask them to consider that.

I want to establish a couple of points at the outset. I welcome all contributors' recognition of the views and feelings of the families, particularly those who were bereaved by these two brutal murders. I also want to rebut Mr Kelly's assertion about the "Irish Republican Army". It is my view and that of my party and most democrats throughout this island that there is only one legitimate army of the Irish Republic, and that is the Irish Army. It is important to recognise that.

Over the past number of months, the voices that impressed most of us during the Haass talks and deliberations on dealing with the past was the chorus of voices from the victims. They had a tremendous impact on the findings, decisions and conclusions that were reached in the Haass talks. That came from victims' groups right across the divide. Their voices are the ones that, I believe,

most politicians heard when they tried to deal with the thorny issue of the past.

6.00 pm

Of course, dealing with the past has a direct bearing on the present if we want to build a reconciled people and a shared future for future generations. As others said, it is not something that we can draw a line under but it is something that we must deal with.

It is also worthy of note that, early on in the tribunal, the judge made the decision that he would adopt the Cory definition of collusion: that it was in its widest sense. As other Members have said, there was no direct evidence of collusion. However, on the balance of probabilities, the judge believed that there was collusion by two or more people.

In relation to dealing with the past, Richard Haass's words as he concluded were:

> *"The burden of the past rests most heavily on those, whether paramilitary or state actors, who acted outside the rule of law."*

That is a very important message for all of us. He recognised that, in dealing with the past, we are not all guilty to the same measure and that acknowledging and saying sorry is not enough. There needs to be much wider and deeper acknowledgement, truth-telling and information recovery.

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr Dallat: Just to give some balance to this debate, does the Member agree with me that, during the darkest days of the Troubles, when the Republic of Ireland was suffering financially, largely because of the Troubles in the North, the Irish Government spent more money per head of population than the British Government on border security and that more police officers were employed on the southern side of the border? Does the Member also agree with me that, like Superintendents Breen and Buchanan, courageous officers in an Garda Síochána are deserving of our honour for their contribution to preventing a holocaust?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mrs D Kelly: It is very true to say that many people made the ultimate sacrifice by standing up and defending the rest of us from terrorism; we have to acknowledge that. It is also worthy of acknowledgement that, while an Garda Síochána was unarmed, many RUC officers were off duty when they were murdered and, therefore, were often easy prey; that ought to be noted.

As Mr McGlone said, if we are going to deal with the past, we, particularly those in political leadership around the Executive table, have a responsibility to deal with it in a way that is inclusive and that helps us to build a reconciled people. Therefore, there is much more work to be done. Others need to step up to the mark of the leadership shown in recent days and weeks by the Tánaiste in his commitment to the Irish Government's opening their books for full access to the reports.

Finally, I understand the reticence on unionist Benches, given the failure of the IRA to grasp the opportunity to show its commitment to telling the truth in inquiries that have taken place thus far. However, the IRA has given a public commitment, and I believe that it should be put to the test. Unionism should be unafraid to challenge the IRA and make it face up to its responsibilities. It is not enough for the IRA to get off in the smoke because of unionism, once again, backing down and not understanding and listening to the voices of the victims, who, quite often, know that they will not get justice. The very minimum that they should get is the truth about the past.

Mr Humphrey: At the outset, I echo the words of our Committee Chair and my party colleague in paying tribute to Bob Buchanan and Harry Breen for their bravery as individuals in serving this community and, indeed, to the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the Ulster Defence Regiment and the regular army for their collective bravery in protecting Northern Ireland from what, at times, seemed like anarchy from across the border. Indeed, the Chair of the Committee started his comments by expressing his thoughts about, and paying warm tribute to, Mr Breen and Mr Buchanan. He talked of the two officers being ambushed following a meeting in Dundalk garda station and described them as two outstanding officers. He said that Justice Smithwick had clearly established that collusion had taken place, and he mentioned garda officers who may have been involved and were named in that inquiry. He also mentioned the gardaí culture of loyalty to the service and to each other as opposed to honesty. He also mentioned Sinn Féin's appalling attitude to the tribunal and Gerry Adams's laissez-faire remarks about the two officers when he said that their lack of personal security meant that, in some way, their murder was their responsibility.

Alban Maginness, in proposing the SDLP amendment, said that Smithwick had concluded that there was indeed collusion between the gardaí and the Provisional IRA, and he quoted extensively from the Irish Deputy Prime Minister. He said that Smithwick was an outflow from the Weston Park talks and mentioned the recommendations from those talks.

Gerry Kelly, in a bizarre contribution, provided us with a tour de force of all that the British establishment had done in Northern Ireland and on this island and made absolutely no comment on the Smithwick tribunal bar one line. He also attacked the Democratic Unionist Party on our position over the Haass process.

Ross Hussey quoted Fianna Fáil leader, Micheál Martin, and paid tribute to the gardaí for the service that they had given in protecting the border and the Irish Republic from the IRA. He also mentioned Castlederg and the Irish Deputy Prime Minister.

Stewart Dickson paid tribute to both officers, said that most people were horrified at the outcome of the tribunal and welcomed the SDLP amendment. He said that the past had to be dealt with and could not possibly be avoided.

Gregory Campbell talked about Weston Park and the inquiries that flowed from those talks. He said that the Provisional IRA had not cooperated with — would not cooperate with — the Smithwick tribunal and that the deputy First Minister, Mr McGuinness, had refused to cooperate with the Saville inquiry in Londonderry.

Ms McCorley went on another tour of the alleged British collusion before Mr Sydney Anderson said that there

needs to be an open and transparent response from the Irish Government, which need to own up to their predecessor Governments' record in dealing with cross-border terrorism. He said that the unionist community needed to believe that the Irish Government were dealing with the issue. He also said that collusion was widespread.

Mitchel McLaughlin attacked the British state and named a number of appalling atrocities. On behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party, I condemn the atrocities that you named. It is a pity that your party would not condemn others, not least the murder of those two police officers, instead of excusing away their murder as their fault and their responsibility.

Mr McGlone paid tribute to the gardaí and said that all political parties in Ireland, apart from Sinn Féin, had accepted Smithwick. He pointed out that the levels of cooperation between the Irish Administration and Northern Ireland Executive and both police forces are at an all-time high.

The Minister, in coming to the Dispatch Box, paid tribute to both officers. He said that he regularly meets with his Irish counterpart, Mr Shatter, and that the cooperation of the two police forces is at a very high level. He was pleased with that. He paid tribute to Smithwick and spoke of the three recommendations that directly affect Northern Ireland. In terms of extradition, he said that we were in a better place than we were but said that more work needs to be done and that work will continue with the national Government.

In winding up the debate on the amendment on behalf of the SDLP, Mrs Kelly said that there was one army in the Irish Republic and said that victims' voices from across the political spectrum had been compelling and very powerful during the Haass process. She praised the Irish Deputy Prime Minister for his contribution to the process in the aftermath of the Smithwick tribunal.

In my view, as a unionist who has watched it from afar, the whole debate is about confidence, transparency and trust. In my view, it is essential that the current Irish Administration deliver all three. It is their duty, in moving this place forward and in building better cross-border communication, cooperation and political dialogue, that they do so. Historically, however, it is clear that elements within Fianna Fáil were involved in the formation, aiding and abetting and gunrunning of the Irish Republican Army. The role of Captain Kelly and members of Fianna Fáil such as Blaney and Haughey must be explored. Indeed, I believe that the role of Lynch's Government must be fully investigated.

Suspicion still remains that past Irish Governments and Administrations also aided the IRA. It is very clear that a full inquiry into that is sought and deserved not just by the unionist community but by people who were serving in the Irish Administration politically and in the police and Irish defence forces.

The Smithwick tribunal found that elements in the garda station in Dundalk had inappropriate relationships with the IRA. That has been established across this House. I asked Mr Maginness for an intervention because I wanted to explore that point. I agree with what he said about the recommendations and how things should be explored and how people should be pursued to give evidence to bring closure on many of these things, because justice has not been completely delivered to the Breen and Buchanan families. I appeal to the SDLP. I know that they have differences on the issue of the National Crime Agency, but those should be worked through with the Minister of Justice and the Home Secretary so that the National Crime Agency is in a position in Northern Ireland to work to help bring people to justice.

As a unionist, I pay tribute to the current Irish Government, particularly to the Irish Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Justice Minister, Mr Shatter, for striving for openness and transparency. However, many questions remain — my colleague Mr Anderson referred to them — around the murders of Lord Justice Gibson and his wife, the Hanna murders and many more along the border.

There was a suspicion, despite Mr Dallat's intervention, that the Irish Government and particular Irish Administrations did not provide adequate security along the border when there was a programme of genocide. Yet — let us be absolutely honest about this — when mad cow disease broke out, suddenly resources could be found for policing the border that never could be found before. That is a view that is held in many unionist communities, particularly along and across the border.

Progress has been made and more remains to be done, but in the interests of moving Northern Ireland forward and building better relationships with the Irish Republic, more tribunals and investigations like the Smithwick tribunal must be had so that we, in this community, will have closure and can have surety and see the transparency and openness in the Irish Administration to deal with the past and admit to wrongdoing where it was done against citizens of this nation and the Irish nation.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 52.

AYES

Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Byrne.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, 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 G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 58; Noes 39.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr 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, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, 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 G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Ms Ruane.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly expresses concern at the findings of the Smithwick tribunal report; calls on the Irish Government to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; and further calls upon the Minister of Justice and the Chief Constable of the PSNI to have urgent discussions with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that they take all practical steps to prevent any repeat of such atrocities.*

Adjourned at 6.36 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 January 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

January Monitoring 2013-14

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to update the Assembly on the outcome of the January monitoring round.

Before moving to January monitoring, I want to provide the Assembly with a short summary of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's autumn statement and, in particular, the implications for the Northern Ireland Executive Budget going forward.

The Chancellor's 2013 autumn statement continued the recent trend of reducing resource expenditure, with Whitehall Departments being asked to find a further 1% saving in 2014-15 and 2015-16. However, the continued protection for health and education budgets in England meant that the impact on Northern Ireland was largely mitigated because those areas have full comparability under the Barnett formula.

The reallocation of resources outlined by the Chancellor then resulted in a number of Barnett additions to our resource and capital budgets in 2014-15 and 2015-16. That means that, as a result of the autumn statement, our resource expenditure will increase by £48·9 million in 2014-15 and £55·7 million in 2015-16, while our capital expenditure will increase by £7·1 million next year and £6·1 million in 2015-16. We also received additional financial transactions capital funding amounting to £3·3 million in 2014-15 and £22·3 million in 2015-16.

Members will recall that, in my statement to the Assembly on the October monitoring round, I made reference to the significant challenges facing the Executive next year in managing the significant resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and capital DEL overcommitments. Although the additional autumn statement Barnett consequentials are helpful, there are other significant financial pressures building up across the Departments for next year and beyond. In fact, the financial outlook is becoming ever more challenging. The latest Office for Budget Responsibility projections suggest that our resource DEL budget, in particular, will remain severely constrained until the end of the decade.

It is in this context that I am particularly concerned about the lack of progress on welfare reform. I find it simply astonishing that some in the Executive still fail to grasp the serious financial consequences involved. Not only will a continued lack of progress reduce our resource DEL budget by £15 million in this financial year but the penalty next year will be at least £60 million. Indications are that the cost to the Executive will very quickly increase to over £200 million a year. That is simply not affordable within a reducing resource DEL budget envelope. Of course, it is also money that would otherwise have been used to deliver public services for the people of Northern Ireland.

Before I go into the detail of the monitoring round, it is worth pointing out that the focus continues to be on non-ring-fenced resource items, which I will hereafter refer to as resource expenditure or resource DEL. The Executive still monitor the ring-fenced resource and administrative expenditure positions, and those are included in the tables attached to the statement.

The key strategic financial management issue for the Executive for the remainder of this financial year will be to ensure that Her Majesty's Treasury Budget exchange scheme limits are not breached at the year end. However, given the resource and capital DEL overcommitments next year, combined with the other potential pressures, we aim to maximise the funding carried forward into 2014-15.

The limits on the Budget exchange scheme amount to 0·6% of resource DEL and 1·5% of capital DEL. That, of course, excludes the Department of Justice, which is subject to separate end-of-year flexibility arrangements. The actual amounts will be finalised and agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury later this year, but they are likely to be around £51 million in resource DEL and £12 million in capital DEL. Importantly, any end-of-year underspends in excess of those amounts will be lost to Northern Ireland.

The starting point for this monitoring round was the October monitoring outcome, which concluded with a £19·4 million overcommitment of non-ring-fenced resource expenditure and £8 million with regard to capital investment.

A number of adjustments made at the centre impacted on the overall financial position in this monitoring round. I will highlight those items.

Members may recall that, after the October monitoring round, the Executive held a balance of £4·8 million resource DEL to fund spend under the social investment fund, childcare strategy and Delivering Social Change projects in this financial year. Further expenditure on those funds of £2 million meant that the remaining £2·8 million became available for allocation in this round.

As I mentioned, the Budget exchange scheme allows the Executive to carry forward and draw down end-of-year underspends up to a limit agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury. The scheme requires the devolved Administrations to adjust drawdown to the final out-turn

position. It became available only recently and showed that there were additional underspends in 2012-13 at block level of £1·8 million resource DEL and £0·6 million in capital DEL. There were also additional resource DEL Barnett consequentials for 2013-14 amounting to £0·3 million, as announced in the Chancellor's 2013 autumn statement. Those additional amounts were also made available for allocation.

The latest regional rate forecast indicated that income in this year is expected to be £0·8 million less than was anticipated at the October monitoring round. This is due to the continued difficult property market conditions and created a £0·8 million resource DEL pressure in this monitoring round.

The Executive previously set aside £5 million of resource DEL to meet the cost associated with the devolution from Westminster of powers that would allow the Assembly to set the rate of air passenger duty on long-haul flights. I am pleased to report that Her Majesty's Treasury has now agreed that the actual cost in this year will be only £2 million. The remaining £3 million was, therefore, made available for allocation.

Funding was also released to the centre for reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing, the centrally managed EU budget and salaries for individuals working in statutory bodies. In total, that amounted to £4·6 million resource DEL and £1 million capital DEL.

All of those centre items impacted on the starting position in this monitoring round. When those were taken into account, along with the October monitoring overcommitment, the result was a reduction in the starting overcommitment to £7·8 million of resource expenditure and £6·4 million of capital investment.

That set the starting position for the January monitoring round, before departmental reduced requirements, reclassifications and internal reallocations were taken into account.

The Departments declared reduced requirements in this monitoring round of £32·6 million in resource expenditure and £34·9 million in capital investment. Full details are included in the tables provided. In that context, a particular issue that I wish to highlight is the schools and further education end-year flexibility (EYF) schemes. Starting with the schools end-year flexibility scheme, I confirm that the Department of Education has not drawn down any of the existing £46·7 million EYF stock and has also not declared any reduced requirements for school reserves this year. As a consequence, the existing schools end-year flexibility stock of £46·7 million will be carried forward into 2014-15.

Members will recall that, in the June monitoring round, the Executive agreed to establish an end-year flexibility scheme for the further education (FE) colleges. That scheme commenced this year, with an EYF stock of zero. The Department for Employment and Learning has advised that it intends to add £6 million to the FE college EYF stock in this monitoring round, resulting in a reduced requirement of that amount being surrendered to the centre. That amount will be added to the EYF stock, meaning that £6 million will be carried forward into 2014-15.

It is good practice that Departments seek to manage any emerging pressures internally before bringing forward bids for additional allocations. Although the public expenditure control framework allows Departments scope to undertake many such movements on a unilateral basis, movements across spending areas in excess of the de minimis threshold are subject to Executive approval. In some instances, Departments have also sought permission to move allocations across spending areas to facilitate the transfer of responsibility for a particular function from one business area to another. The internal reallocations agreed by the Executive in this monitoring round are included in the tables. The Executive also agreed a number of reclassifications between the resource and capital categories in this round. There were also reclassifications between the ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced resource DEL categories. Those reclassifications are also shown in the tables.

Before I move on to the allocations made in this round, I have to return to the welfare reform issue. As I have said, I am hugely disappointed that no progress has been made on that issue. As a result, the Executive had no option but to set aside £15 million to cover the cost of financial penalties for the remaining three months of this financial year. This, in effect, as one Executive colleague described it, is dead money returning to the Treasury, which is unable to be spent on services that benefit our citizens.

Mr McCarthy: Shame.

Mr Hamilton: Those who resist the inevitability of welfare reform can answer for why our health budget, our roads budget or our schools budget have to lose out this year, and potentially next year too.

All the above issues impacted on the amount — *[Interruption.]* Maybe that is a resolution on welfare reform coming through. I might have known.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. I ask all Members to please check their mobile phones.

Mr Campbell: It is not as bad as £5 million leaving.

Mr Hamilton: That is right. It is not the worst crime.

All the above issues impacted on the amount of resources available to the Executive in this monitoring round. Taking into account the starting position, the reduced requirements, reclassifications and welfare reform penalties resulted in £13 million of resource expenditure and £26·9 million capital investment resources being available to the Executive.

Against the available resources, the Departments submitted bids amounting to £98 million for resource expenditure and £26·6 million for capital expenditure. The bids are detailed in the tables. The Executive agreed allocations totalling £37·9 million in resource expenditure and £26·6 million in capital investment. Those allocations are detailed in the tables, and I will highlight just a few of the main ones.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will receive an allocation of £30 million towards key healthcare pressures. Although there are further significant pressures in our healthcare system this year, I have made it clear to the Health Minister that I expect his Department to contain the remaining costs. That said, the £30 million will help to alleviate the significant front line pressures that have emerged across the health and social care system during 2013-14. It will play a critical role in addressing a range of pressures on the front line services

that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including patients, looked-after children and the elderly population. It will also directly benefit a large number of patients and other service users.

10.45 am

The Department for Regional Development was allocated £23·8 million, which will go mainly towards improving and maintaining our road network, with some funding also going towards improvements to local bus stations. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development will receive an allocation of £3 million for expenditure disallowed under the common agricultural policy. Furthermore, the Executive agreed to provide a further £3·3 million for the rural development programme. The Department for Social Development will also receive an allocation of £2·5 million for urban regeneration schemes.

I would also like to update Members on the position in relation to ring-fenced financial transactions capital funding. Members will recall that this funding can only be used for the purpose of providing loans or equity investment to the private sector. Following the October monitoring round, some £20·9 million of financial transactions capital remained unallocated. However, due to delay in the implementation of the agrifood loan scheme, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment surrendered £10 million in this round. My officials have been working closely with Departments to identify schemes that could use this type of funding. As a result of this work, I am pleased to announce that the Executive agreed to provide £35 million of financial transactions capital funding to the University of Ulster to assist in financing its greater Belfast development scheme. £25 million of this funding will be provided in this year, with a further £10 million to be provided in 2014-15. This loan funding is, of course, repayable, but the university benefited from a zero rate of interest and, in return, agreed to provide the Executive with £7 million from its accumulated reserves. This will be an extra benefit to the Executive in 2015-16 and 2016-17.

This is exactly the sort of infrastructure project that Northern Ireland needs, not just to improve higher education provision and regeneration of that part of Belfast city centre, but to provide a much-needed boost to our construction sector. This funding demonstrates the Executive's commitment to the University of Ulster scheme, which hopes to receive significant financing from the European Investment Bank (EIB). The University of Ulster relocation will bring huge regeneration benefits to that area of Belfast, and I am pleased that the Executive agreed to play their part. I also thank the Employment and Learning Minister and his officials, and, indeed, the University of Ulster, for their part in taking this forward.

Following this allocation, £5·9 million of ring-fenced financial transactions capital funding remains unallocated. Members should note that I, along with Finance Ministers from the other devolved Administrations, recently negotiated a scheme with Her Majesty›s Treasury that will allow us to carry forward up to 20% of financial transactions capital funding into 2014-15 and 10% into 2015-16. The Executive will now carry forward the remaining balance of £5·9 million under this scheme, which of course means that no financial transactions funding will be lost to Northern Ireland this year.

The Executive exit the January monitoring round with an overcommitment of £24·8 million of resource expenditure, while £0·3 million of capital investment remains unallocated. I believe that this level of resource expenditure overcommitment is perfectly manageable. I intend to closely monitor the financial position across Departments over the remaining months of this year to ensure that the carry-forward of funding under the Budget exchange scheme is maximised and that no funding is lost to Northern Ireland. Executive colleagues have agreed to cooperate fully in this task.

The Executive have shown that they can deliver on cross-departmental working, as evidenced in the financial transactions capital deal struck with the University of Ulster. We have shown that we can deliver on innovative proposals and, with public expenditure in Northern Ireland under pressure in future years, it is in that spirit that I wish to move forward on all areas of Executive business.

I commend this statement to the Assembly.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. It is my party's view that the £15 million welfare reform money that the Minister referred to is not dead money. That £15 million is still in the pockets of many low-income people on working household budgets. It is more likely to be spent in the local economy through retail and other areas. That £15 million is not dead money; it is money that is quite important to the local economy.

As to the Committee's concerns about the moneys being returned and allocated, once again we find that £30 million has been given to the Department of Health. Although we are all sympathetic with the Department of Health and the needs of our communities and patients in the system, it is quite clear that the Department of Finance here is pumping huge amounts of money into Health with each monitoring round. Is it the case that the Department of Health and its Minister are not managing their budget correctly? Will the Department of Finance continue to prop up the Department of Health through these interventions in 2014?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Chair for his question. I want to begin by saying that he is wrong about welfare reform, and I think that everybody in the House, apart from the colleagues sitting around him, know that he is wrong about welfare reform. Whether we proceeded with the Bill or not, the £15 million the Member is talking about would not have been taken out of the pockets of any recipient of welfare in Northern Ireland. Work continues, and I have to commend my colleague the Minister for Social Development for the sterling work that he has done in negotiations with the Department for Work and Pensions to develop a package of measures that I believe will ameliorate the worst effects of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. It will ameliorate it in a way that will be the envy of anyone in England, and certainly, from my discussions with the finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales, I know that it is something that they are incredibly jealous of.

If we had not made provision for that £15 million, which will be £60 million next year and will rise very rapidly to over £200 million, we would have denied that money to some of the very same people whom the Member stands and tries to speak fondly about. By taking £15 million away this year from expenditure that we could put into health, education and other areas of DSD, we would have denied some of

the very same vulnerable people key services that they require from day to day.

When the Member and his colleagues deny the inevitability of moving forward on welfare reform, which will be based on a package of measures that will take away some of the worst effects that people in Northern Ireland will suffer as a result of welfare reform, let him think about the effects that he will have — not in the future but right now — on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. Denying that £15 million of expenditure in the remainder of this year, £60 million next year and £200 million thereafter will have a very serious effect on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland.

I am not sure whether the Member supported the allocation of some £30 million to the Department of Health. I would have thought that most Members think that it is a positive thing to give that money to a health service that is under constant pressure and is always looking for resources to do the sorts of things that it can do. I would have thought that that would be universally welcomed in the House.

I accept that, along with the Department of Justice, the Minister of Health should not be bidding for resources. However, when he faces the sort of pressures he does, I think that it is only right that he brings those to the attention of the Executive, if not to get additional resources, which, in this case, he has, then at least, as we head towards a new spending round in 2015-16 and beyond, to make the Executive aware of the pressures that he is under. I am happy to recommend to the Executive and gain agreement on an allocation of £30 million to the Health Minister, not just because of the good work that that will be able to do in relieving some of those pressures towards the end of this year but because I know that his intentions are good. He has shown that his intentions are good through the £700 million that he has taken out of the system in waste and administration costs, and, through Transforming Your Care, he has outlined a future for the health service that will ensure that, although we still provide the highest level of service, it will not cost as much in the future as it has in the past.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Some elements of it are welcome. Is the Minister confident that all financial transaction capital funding will be spent? I am aware that some moneys can slip, and I want to make sure that it hits the ground and is spent before it has to be redeemed or handed back.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. In asking about financial transaction capital funding, he highlights something that, on one hand, will pose a rising benefit to the Executive but, on the other, will pose an increasing challenge.

It is very clear that the Treasury wants to increase the element of capital expenditure that it gives to us through the block grant. That is a good thing, but it will do that through financial transactions capital funding, which will pose us some difficulties, as it will require us to work directly with the private sector and give it a loan or an equity share of projects. I think that that is positive in that it will see the public sector work with the private sector and that is to be encouraged. However, it has been something of a culture shock to many that we now have to think proactively about bringing forward those projects.

At the start and certainly back in June or July when I took up my post — I am sure that my predecessor will agree with this — I have to admit that we were somewhat concerned that we might not be able to spend all the money in this year because of the need to develop schemes.

Thankfully, we have negotiated an arrangement with Treasury whereby we can carry forward 20% of expenditure this year. That is roughly £8 million, and we can carry forward £10 million next year, which is a higher total. It is around £60 million next year, so that is about £6 million that we can carry forward next year. I hope that next year we will be able to develop some more projects that will absorb all that expenditure. The answer to the Member's question is that I think that we will spend it all. More importantly, none of it will be lost, but there is still a challenge for Departments to come forward with innovative projects that can absorb that expenditure. I also have to say that there is a challenge to the private sector to come forward with some ideas as well.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis.

I thank the Minister for his statement. Referring to the reduced requirements in table A on page 14, we see that the figure against legal cases is £2·1 million. Officials told the Committee a short time ago that that figure would be £1·9 million. Will the Minister give us the detail that lies behind that figure?

Mr Hamilton: I cannot at this stage. I am happy to respond in writing to the Member, and I will, in fact, even copy the response to the Committee. I am not sure exactly what legal costs he refers to, but, rather than give him a half-baked answer, I will correspond with him and give him as full an answer as I can.

Mr Cree: It is good to see the statement this morning; it is very helpful. It is also good to see the centre and the moneys that are in it referred to, because that was a cloudy issue for a long time. Minister, you touched on financial transactions capital. I see from your report that £3·3 million additional moneys are coming in for 2014-15 and £22·3 million for 2015-16. We are carrying forward £5·9 million, presumably into 2014-15. How much will that actually be for 2015-16?

Mr Hamilton: It is just shy of £130 million; I think that it is now about £127 million for 2015-16. That emphasises the point that I was making to Mr Girvan, which is that this is quite rapidly ramping up as an element of our capital expenditure. The slower lead-in, where we have had roughly £40 million this year and slightly more than £60 million now with some changes that the Member pointed out for next year, kind of eases us into this mentality where we have to think about what sort of projects we can bring forward. Next year will be a bit more challenging again, given that there is a slight increase. However, the Member is right to highlight the fact that 2015-16, as we stand at the minute looking at it, will be a challenge with financial transaction capital. However, we have that intervening period in which to devise schemes, and I have been quite encouraged by how, all of a sudden, many Departments have started to get the potential of this. We have made some progress, as I said, on the agrifood loan scheme, which, I think, will absorb a significant amount of money next year and into the future. The University of Ulster scheme is taking not

just a sizeable chunk this year but £10 million next year. I am actively working with Executive colleagues to devise other schemes, including some that are in the transport sector that I am looking at with the Member's party colleague the Minister for Regional Development.

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

Lots of ideas and thoughts are coming forward. We need to spend the next number of months working those up into viable propositions. We can then start to take them forward so that they can absorb some of that money in future years.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his statement. Much has been said about the welfare reform fines, and I wonder whether the Minister can say a bit more about which budget lines will be affected by the need to find that money. Can he also comment on the concerning fact that, once again, the Housing Executive has given up another £17 million of its maintenance budget? In this full year, that now amounts to almost 50% of that budget, which surely is an area where we could really help our most vulnerable.

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right to point out the work in reverse and the concern with the Housing Executive not spending all its allocation on maintenance. It is disappointing that that money, which was earmarked specifically for that purpose at the start of the year, has not been spent in that area. That is where we wanted it to be spent, where it should have been spent and where it needed to be spent. It is unfortunate that it was not able to be spent on that. There are very good reasons around the procurement of contracts and ensuring that we got the right value for contracts, as well as ensuring that the Minister was not paying above the odds for some of the work that he wanted to see done in the Housing Executive's estate. In that sense, I am glad that we did not proceed, because we would have had a different problem in the future, which would have been people asking, "Why did you spend x amount more on this than you should have?". I am also grateful that he has consistently surrendered that money throughout the financial year in a timely way to allow us to reallocate it to other priorities. Other Departments will be the beneficiary of his sensible financial management in the Department for Social Development.

11.00 am

In respect of welfare reform — I dare say that this may not be the last time that it is raised today — it is not a matter of this, that or another Department having lost out. The Executive as a whole have lost out. As a consequence, Northern Ireland as a country has lost out, and our people, including the vulnerable people who may be most in receipt of social security, will lose out. Some of the pressures that were not met in the bids in this monitoring round include the likes of Health, which has vulnerable people in need of additional healthcare. There are severe pressures even in the Department of Justice, the Member's party colleague's Department. This will get only worse because, in the public expenditure landscape, we see not only pressures in our own budgets but pressure coming from Westminster in the allocations that it gives us. It is on the resource side, where this money is coming from, that the biggest pressures are, so I am deeply concerned. It is regrettable, to say the least, that we have had to make this provision now. It would be shameful if we had to do the same for £60 million next year. When we get into the scale of £200 million in future years, that is unthinkable.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. Despite the bad and not unexpected news around the welfare fines, it contains a lot of positive elements. Identified in the statement are the levels of unfunded pressures along with levels of overcommitment. Is there any concern, in light of the levels of those two elements, that we risk any breach of Treasury controls?

Mr Hamilton: Unthinkable as it would be to make provision for £200 million, it would be unthinkable that we would breach Treasury control totals. That is certainly not something that I want to do in my first year in control of Northern Ireland's Budget.

Exiting the monitoring round with pressures of £24·8 million on the resource side and around £0·3 million on the capital side is manageable at this time of year if we look at historical patterns in our public expenditure. The Member is right to highlight the unfunded pressures that are emerging. We will allocate resources to Departments at the start of the year, but pressures just emerge or sometimes we can see them looming on the horizon.

In the context of the Chancellor's remarks in the past fortnight when he expressed his belief that the UK Budget required a further £25 billion in cuts and the effect that that would have on Northern Ireland, it is important that Departments start to think now about how they can continue to reform the services that they provide so that we still get the same high quality of service, protect the most vulnerable and encourage the growth of our economy but do so in new, innovative and creative ways, so that we get more for less. The picture that we face moving forward is that we will be under serious pressure on the resource side and there will be emerging unfunded pressures in future years, as there have been in the past.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. A significant increase in capital funding is being surrendered this year compared with last year, and a large chunk of that is from the Helm Housing grant repayment of £8·1 million. Given that DSD faces significant pressures on social housing right across the district, can the Minister give me any further clarification of why that crucial money was returned rather than spent on social housing?

Mr Hamilton: I think that there was a particular issue with the repayment of a housing association grant for advanced land purchase in the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure's constituency, so she probably has better detail on the local aspects of that than I do. These situations arise from time to time where there is a requirement to surrender money. It is unfortunate that the projects that the money was earmarked for have not gone ahead. However, it is good that the Minister was able to relinquish it early. I would rather have got it earlier in the year, but it is better to get it now than to face the situation where that crystallises closer to year end and there is an inability to do anything with the money.

It is not as if we are sitting with lots of unallocated capital funding either. We have been able to put the money that the Minister for Social Development relinquished to good use elsewhere, including the roads budget. From time to

time, circumstances like this arise in which Departments have to relinquish some of their capital money. In fact, even the Minister of Culture had to relinquish £4·5 million for the stadia issue. That was through no fault of hers; it was because of legal challenges and planning issues. So, from time to time, these issues materialise, where a good project is progressing but perhaps a little more slowly than we would want it to, and it is far better that Ministers, like the Minister of Culture and the Minister for Social Development, relinquish money early so that we can spend it elsewhere on other beneficial projects.

Mr McQuillan: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. How beneficial will the allocations be to our construction sector?

Mr Hamilton: The allocations that we have made in this monitoring round will be extremely beneficial to and continue to assist the sector, which has suffered very badly in the downturn. Pre-Christmas, I was encouraged by indications from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors that its analysis of the work of that sector in Northern Ireland suggested that it was coming out of recession and, in fact, may even be out of its recession. That has to be weighed against the news of the likes of Mivan going into administration in the last week or so. It is a sector that is still very finely balanced. We as an Executive cannot take our concentration away from doing what we can, within our available resources, to assist the construction sector, which has suffered so heavily during the downturn.

On specific projects, the allocation of over £20 million to the roads budget will greatly assist aspects and areas of the construction sector, as will the very sizeable allocation to the University of Ulster's Belfast campus. That project was going ahead already, but it is a sign of our commitment not just to the project itself but to that type of project and to projects that are very labour-intensive on the construction side that we have decided to use £35 million worth of financial transactions capital to underpin the scheme.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister. I refer to the £30 million heath allocation. The Minister referred to "key healthcare pressures" and went on to talk about children, the vulnerable and the elderly. Against the growing narrative of pressures in accident and emergency, which we believe amount to a crisis in the health service, how are his comments consistent with the fact that £20 million of the £30 million is for clinical negligence cases? Is that not, in fact, a health service failings scandal and a waste of public money?

Mr Hamilton: Let me just correct the Member on the issue of clinical negligence: bids of £65 million that were put forward by the Minister of Health included £20 million for clinical negligence as a pressure. The Health Minister will be able to give the Member finer detail than I will be able to, but I understand that the origins of the pressures are that the courts are starting to move through settling and deciding on those cases much more quickly than they did in the past. In fact, I understand that the courts were picking up on a recommendation made by the Public Accounts Committee, of which the Member's colleague is the Deputy Chair, to settle cases as quickly as possible. Therefore, although that is not an unforeseen pressure, it is a pressure that has materialised much more quickly than was previously expected.

If the Member cares to look at the way in which the statement has been crafted and at what that money has been allocated to, he will see that it is £30 million for pressures in the health service. I have had discussions with the Health Minister, and he has assured me that the money will go primarily to front line pressures, the likes of which the Member has spoken about; to other pressures in the care system; and to pressures in looking after the elderly. The front line is where I expect the money to go, and that is where Executive colleagues agreed for it to go. However, that is not to say that the Minister does not face other pressures, including clinical negligence pressures. The Member can dismiss them, but they are a legal reality and have to be dealt with because of past mistakes.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his statement. In it, we see a reduced capital expenditure requirement of £3·5 million against the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. I am interested in hearing the Minister's understanding of what is and what is not happening at the Maze site and the reasons why.

Mr Hamilton: What goes on or does not go on at the Maze site is not a direct responsibility of my Department. I have to deal, as I have in this set of circumstances, with the reality of no progress on particular projects on that site. That question is better put to those who are responsible, namely the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. It is unfortunate that we are not able to progress the full potential of the development of that site. I appreciate that there are huge sensitivities around certain aspects of the development of that site and I share those sensitivities, but I am sure that the Member will agree that, beyond one particular project earmarked for that site, there is huge economic and social benefit for Northern Ireland. I want that to be progressed as a matter of urgency because, like the University of Ulster's Belfast campus, there is huge regenerative potential and huge economic benefit from the site. I want to see progress on that, and I do not see why, if we cannot move on one aspect, that means that we cannot move on the important redevelopment and economic aspects that have the potential, I understand, to create around 5,000 jobs for Northern Ireland.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that the Minister, like me, will be somewhat surprised that the official opposition are not in their place to question his statement. Nonetheless, I am sure that he will not lose any sleep over it.

The Minister will have heard the Chair of the Committee's lame excuse for its opposition to welfare reform, but can the Minister outline when the £15 million will be paid out by the Executive for not proceeding with welfare reform?

Mr Hamilton: The Member referred to them as the official opposition; I would not refer to them in such grand terms. I understand that one member of the party that he refers to is off today because his wife has given birth. I do not know whether that accounts for where Mr McCrea is, but I am sure he is offering his congratulations in some way or another.

I will move quickly on to welfare reform. The Member rightly identified that the defence put forward by those who are denying progress on welfare reform is pretty feeble, and I do not think that there is a sound and robust argument coming back on why they think that it is a good thing that Northern Ireland's budget has lost £15 million this year and will lose £60 million next year and £200

million beyond that. It is not a matter of talking about when we will lose it; through January monitoring, we are making provision for £15 million because we fully expect that £15 million will be taken out of our Budget when we finalise the accounts at the end of the year, around August. Treasury does not withdraw money from your account or anything like that, nor does it not send the money over. Treasury will correct it all at the year end. However, the prudent and sensible thing to do is to make provision for that now.

The effects of not moving forward on welfare reform are starting to hit the people of Northern Ireland. Up to now, it was just seen by some as being a threat that was never going to materialise. Let me say to the Member and to the House that it is no longer a threat; it is a reality. We are starting to see that money is coming out of our budget, and that is affecting our ability to deliver key services to vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. That figure will ramp up and ramp up and, therefore, the effect on vulnerable people will ramp up and ramp up as we move into future years.

It is indefensible that we are losing that money when we have not moved forward on something that we know we have to do. It is not as though everybody in the House thinks that welfare reform is a wonderful and great thing. If we had had a blank sheet of paper, we would not have come forward with the proposals that the Government came forward with. However, we all know that we have to move forward on it. We have, through the good offices of the Minister for Social Development, negotiated a package of measures that will take away the worst effects for people in Northern Ireland. My party and, I think, other parties are content to sign up to that. In circumstances where that package of measures is in place and, at the same time, where £15 million this year, £60 million next year and £200 million in years beyond will come out of our budget, it is up to others to defend why they are not moving forward on welfare reform.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his statement. As Chair of the Committee for Regional Development, I welcome the £23·8 million for mainly road improvement schemes. There appears to be a significant reduced requirement from the DRD for roads.

Can he give the House an explanation for the reduction?

11.15 am

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I am pleased to be able to allocate, with Executive support, over £20 million to the roads budget, particularly for structural maintenance, road patching, and so forth. As the Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development, the Member will know that DRD is very good at spending those sorts of volumes of money at year end to improve the road network across Northern Ireland.

The reduced expenditure that the Member highlighted is another example, as Ms Boyle pointed out, of reduced requirements on the capital side, but this is another example of a good thing. There are two tranches: £2·3 million for the A2 and £8·9 million for the A8 and the Coleraine to Londonderry railway line. We were able to get money for the A2 from the EU sustainable competitiveness programme, and we got money for the A8 and the Coleraine to Londonderry line through the EU Trans-European Transport Network scheme. That money came to Northern Ireland from the European budget, which meant that we could release the money that we had granted to both schemes as an Executive and spend it on other capital projects. Although it may appear in the tables in the report as a negative, because we do not want Departments to give up money that was earmarked for certain projects, in these cases, it is a good thing for Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his statement. He will have heard me cry "shame" when he said that £15 million had to be handed back. It is a crying shame and a disgrace that people who desperately need that funding will be deprived simply because Members will not get their heads together and realise that welfare reform will come about whether we like it or not, and people will be denied that funding.

I want to ask the Minister about the £30 million that will be allocated to the Health Department. Why has he left it open to the Health Minister to distribute that allocation as he sees fit as opposed to other allocations that are made for specific purposes? I am thinking particularly about children's services. I got an email this morning, as would indeed the Minister because he represents Ballynahinch and Newcastle, stating that Home-Start is on its knees and is going to close. This is about children's services. The email mentions £5 million for children's services, but how can we guarantee that that £5 million will go to children's services in places such as Newcastle and Ballynahinch or other areas where Home-Start is on its knees and on the way out?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his series of questions. He was absolutely right to shout "shame" when I revealed the extent of the penalties that we will face as a result of not moving forward on welfare reform. I have worked with the Member in the constituency for a number of years and, previously, as a councillor. Throughout that time, no matter what political disagreements he and I might have had from time to time, I have known him as somebody who stood up, in particular, for the most vulnerable people in our society, especially in the Strangford constituency. With his track record in doing that, he has realised and highlighted the fact that, although we know that welfare reform is not all good news, and there are bad elements to it, we face a reality here that we will have to deal with.

He and I know that we will lose £15 million this year, £60 million next year and then £200 million. It is worth emphasising that we have now started on this conveyor belt towards £200 million of resource budget, which goes to the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland, whether it be through the Health Department, DSD or whatever. That will have a seriously detrimental effect on his constituents, my constituents and the constituents of every Member.

If we were to give £300 million to the health budget, we would be able to spend it. However, I think the Member will agree that, in the very tight financial circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is good to be able to find £30 million to give to the health budget to relieve some of the pressures that it faces. I said that I expect the Health Minister to continue to manage the pressures in his budget proactively and aggressively. I want him to bear down and hollow out the pressures as best he possibly can. The allocation is not earmarked because many of the pressures, as the Member will know, are

continually evolving. Mr McKinney, for example, raised A&E pressures, which we have seen very graphically, and there are other pressures that go up and go down. The Member mentioned child services, and there is a range of pressures in that area. I understand, from talking to the Health Minister, that many of them are coming from inquiries into what the likes of Jimmy Savile and other individuals have done. More people are coming forward and that is putting pressure — a good pressure — on that budget.

On the specifics of Home-Start, our Member of Parliament Mr Shannon has been in correspondence with me on its behalf, and I replied agreeing to have a meeting with him. I do not have responsibility for what it does, but I have an interest in what it does, and I am content to meet representatives of the organisation as a whole. It is maybe unfair to single out Home-Start, but I think that organisations such as that do a lot of good work, not just in delivering services here and now but in preventing other areas of government in Northern Ireland having pressures on their expenditure in the longer term, whether that is justice, social development or whatever it might be.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the investment in the Belfast campus of the University of Ulster to assist in the financing of its development scheme. Can the Minister give us any indication of when that work is likely to start on the new campus? Is a date set for its completion?

Mr Hamilton: Even though we are funding the project through the financial transactions capital allocation that I announced today, it is not a project that we manage. That is the nature of financial transactions capital: it is money that goes from the Executive to people in the private sector. In this case, it is the University of Ulster, and it is managing the project. There is an interest from the Department for Employment and Learning, and I know that the Member sits on the Employment and Learning Committee. In addition to what we are giving in the shape of a loan of £35 million over the next two years, I understand that that Department has given a capital grant of £16 million. One of the conditions of that is that twice-yearly progress reports have to be produced by the university so that the Department for Employment and Learning gets appropriate oversight.

I understand that preliminary work has already started on site. Those driving past it will see cranes on the horizon and that some buildings have been demolished to prepare for the more substantive work. I understand that it is the intention of the university to complete the work by March 2018, the idea being to start moving the first tranche of students onto the site in the academic year beginning in September 2018.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am glad that he is here in person and not down at the High Court indulging in that ministerial squabble.

On the DARD issue, will the Minister explain what the £3 million reallocated due to the CAP disallowances from Europe is for? I also note the Omagh hospital reallocation of £3·2 million to the fire station, which is welcome, but may we seek an assurance that the Omagh hospital will not be unduly delayed?

Mr Hamilton: That is more a matter for the Minister of Health as his Department's centre of procurement expertise will deal with the specifics of taking that forward. I am glad that this is another example where, even though a particular project cannot move forward, we have been able to reclassify the money for another worthy project in the west Tyrone area.

As the Member will know, the CAP disallowances are a pressure that we have been facing for some considerable number of years. The amount going back to the European Union because of disallowance was incredibly high. Considerable effort has been put in by officials from Land and Property Services to better map Northern Ireland so that the disallowance is minimised in years to come. It is incredibly difficult to get a complete handle on that, but I am confident and have been assured that the work that we have invested in getting better mapping is paying off and that the amount of disallowance is dropping as a result.

Mr Beggs: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement and the additional £30 million for the health service. However, the health bid submitted to the Health Committee was for £67 million, and it included £43 million for inescapable pressures: clinical negligence, children's services, quality and safety of services, unscheduled pressures and winter pressures. Does the Minister believe that, given this time of peak winter demand, with the trusts already in deficit, it will be possible for them to balance their budget without affecting front line services or extending waiting lists?

Does he accept that the comment using the word "obscene" made by the First Minister towards the then Health Minister in 2011 seems more and more out of touch with what others are finding as they operate as Health Minister?

Mr Hamilton: Let us set the context of this. The Member's party colleague the then Health Minister got one of if not the most generous allocations of all Ministers in the previous Budget. The Member will remember the context of the Budget that we faced back in 2011. That was the time when the Member's party was still running around with the Conservatives, which was the party that was slashing away at the Budget. That meant that we faced the pressure —

Mr Beggs: Protecting health services.

Mr Hamilton: The Member said "protecting health services" but, as he full well knows, we got the Budget envelope that we got. We received a considerably reduced Budget, yet, even out of that overall reduced total, we still gave a considerably more generous allocation to the Health Department than any other Department in Northern Ireland. Following that, since the current Minister took over from the Member's party colleague, he has aggressively cut away at the waste and mismanagement that was still in the system when his party colleague was responsible for health.

The previous Health Minister turned a completely blind eye to the waste and inefficiency that was in the system, to the extent where the current Minister has reduced costs by £700 million. Let us think about the consequences of the fact that £700 million of costs have been reduced from the Health budget. The mapping out of a vision for the future of the health service through Transforming Your Care has given us a road map to a health service that will be better for the people of Northern Ireland and which will deliver more for the same amount of money than in the past.

It is a fact and a reality that the Health budget will always face pressures, because things sometimes come from nowhere. The Member will be aware of that from his

constituency work and, indeed, from what we have seen in the news in the past number of weeks. I am glad that, even under the current budgetary pressures, we have been able to release some £30 million for the Health Minister to deal with the pressures that he is facing in the way that he sees best.

Mr Wilson: The Minister is quite right to set aside £15 million this year for the consequences of the head-in-the-sand economic policy that is being followed by Sinn Féin. I notice the silence of the SDLP on that issue as well, and I think that it is a bit ironic that we got £49 million in the autumn statement and then volunteer to hand over £60 million. I have to say that that will not be lost on the Treasury, where there are some people who think that we have too much money already.

I want to ask the Minister about the return of the money from the Housing Executive for the window maintenance contracts. The Minister for Social Development has done an excellent job in getting the price of those contracts down by 21·7%, although he has been criticised and is now subject to a political inquiry for doing it. Can the Finance Minister give us an assurance that, although the money has been handed back this year, the price-cutting, value-saving, resource-saving contracts that have been negotiated as a result of the work that the Minister for Social Development has done will be financed in the 2014-15 year?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. As I said in response to a couple of other questions, sometimes, as the Member will know better than most, reduced requirements appear in the tables that accompany the statement, which are automatically seen by others as negative. Sometimes, there can be a negative reason for that but, in this case, it is a positive thing. Our colleague the Minister for Social Development has seriously drilled down on the price of the contract and, if he had followed advice, he would have let the contract at inflated prices of a fifth more, and we would have spent all the expenditure allocated this year. The taxpayer and the ratepayer in Northern Ireland would have been the worse off for that. In the longer term, we can use those savings to spend on other services, as we have done this year.

It would be wrong if, after having been so sensible and prudent, the Minister for Social Development were to suffer in some way in his budget. Of course, we must never lose sight of the fact that, while he has been negotiating reduced prices for those contracts, people who have required the service of those windows and the maintenance of their properties have been missing out. There are still people who are in need, and we need to ensure that, with the money that the Minister for Social Development has saved, we serve those people as best we can in future years.

11.30 am

Mr Givan: I commend the Minister for finding the money, in a very difficult financial environment, to allocate £30 million to the Health Department. However, I think that the public will focus on the issue that, due to the failure of others in the House to take tough decisions and act as responsible people in government, they are being penalised and deprived of £15 million in key services that will now have to be returned to the Treasury.

Look at the Department of Justice. The Minister will know that, outside Health, it is the other Department that faces significant financial pressure. The Prison Service exit scheme, which, as the Minister will be aware, is an invest-to-save programme, has released upwards of 500 officers. There are now fewer than 30 individuals remaining. Behind those individuals are families who are ready to move on. Those individuals have been told that they will be allowed to leave, but the money still has not been found. Looking into the next financial year, will the Department of Justice be able to meet that commitment to allow that programme to complete?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. He will know better than most, through his role as Chair of the Justice Committee, the extent of pressures that the overall justice budget is under. I can say on that front that the Minister of Justice and I have begun engagement on those pressures, principally around the police budget. There are obviously other pressures in the justice family as well. We are having engagement to hollow out the full extent of those pressures and, indeed, whether there is scope for further efficiencies and savings in the justice budget.

On the issue of the unmet bid, I regret that I could not recommend an allocation to the Prison Service exit scheme, because it is a good scheme. It has been proven to work in the past. Unfortunately, a lack of financial resources has prevented us from allowing it to go forward at this time. The Executive have agreed to ensure that we put the appropriate mechanisms in our Budget process, which we will start again next month, to ensure that if funds are released in year, we can channel them into other schemes. We can channel them towards Health and Justice, and quite possibly towards the Prison Service exit scheme. I support the scheme because it is genuinely reform-orientated in that it releases some long-serving members of the service and also brings in others. Savings are made as a result. I would like to see an allocation go towards it if resources permit this year or, if not, next year, if possible.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement. We are probably all aware that in his autumn statement, the Chancellor at Westminster announced that free school meals for all infant schools would happen in years 1 and 2. Has that commitment in England been translated into Barnett additions for Northern Ireland's resource budget? Can the Minister quantify those additions? If there is extra money, where has it gone and how is it being spent?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. He is correct: there were Barnett consequentials for the allocation in respect of free school meals in England for the first three years — nursery and years 1 and 2. I cannot remember offhand the exact quantity of the Barnett consequentials. However, I will get the Member that information. How we, as an Executive, move forward on that is an issue for us to agree on. Principally, in the first instance, it is for the Minister of Education to come forward with his views on whether spending those consequentials on a replica project in Northern Ireland is the best way to spend that money.

I have had interesting engagement with colleagues in other devolved Administrations who have suggested that, perhaps, it is not what they would do, and that they might better fund some existing schemes that provide similar support, such as breakfast clubs. We have some in Northern Ireland through extended-schools funding. However, they are not universal throughout the system. There could be other ways that we could have similar positive effects without having a direct facsimile of what

England has done. Of course, that is the beauty of devolution: we have got the Barnett consequential and we can take a decision as an Executive as to where that is best spent, either in the education budget or indeed elsewhere in the Executive's budget.

Mr Allister: I note that Mr McCrea and, indeed, the Minister were concerned about the whereabouts of the other Mr McCrea. I understand that he may be in a faraway place. I am sure that there are many Members on the DUP Benches who, last night and this morning, wish that they, too, were in a faraway place.

With regard to the Minister's allocation of his resource fund, he gifted £30 million of the £38 million that he had available to the Department of Health. I think, in consequence, the House and the public are entitled to know a bit more about where the £30 million is going. I am really backing Mr McKinney's point that a third of that was asked for on the basis of medical negligence claims. Surely the Minister knows, before he pays it out, whether part of his £30 million is going to medical negligence cases. Is it going to actual front line services? Surely the public — no matter how necessary it is to deal with medical negligence cases — are entitled to know whether the £30 million is actually going to front line services.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that my colleagues and I could have a whip-round to get the Member to a far-off place.

Mr Allister: I am sure that that would suit very well.

Mr Hamilton: He is far enough away over there. That will do.

Mr Givan: He could not get to Westminster.

Mr Hamilton: He could not get to London. We will not help him to get to London anyway, that is for sure.

The Member will note that, in fact, all of the resource bids that I received from Departments other than the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, which should not have been bidding but did, were met. I am sure that the Member does not intend for it to sound like this, but, as have others, his remark sounds almost unwelcoming of the £30 million that is going to the health service. I am sure that that is not the intention of the Member but, of course, in his usual tone, that is the way that it sounds. It is an allocation to deal with pressures that the Minister of Health is facing. From extensive discussions that I had with him, I know that he is having a series of evolving pressures.

In making the allocation, I have been very clear that the Minister of Health has not got all that he wanted; he wanted in excess of £60 million — £65 million. Therefore, he is still facing pressures within his budget, and it is up to him to proactively manage that. I expect, as the Executive expect, that the predominance of the funding going to him will go to front line pressures, and we have seen evidence of those over the past number of weeks in newspapers and on television screens in Northern Ireland. That is where the most acute pressures are, and that is what I want to see dealt with.

The Member will be particularly aware, given his background, that when medical negligence cases are agreed, they have to be settled and dealt with in-year. The Minister of Health certainly faces pressures on that front as well, every bit as much as he does in relation to acute care, A&E, children's services and other aspects of his budget.

North/South Ministerial Council: Inland Waterways

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Inland Waterways meeting, which was held in Armagh on the 20 November 2013.

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

The Council received a progress report from Dawn Livingstone, chief executive of Waterways Ireland, on the work of Waterways Ireland, which included the following achievements: the provision of 742 metres of additional moorings; sponsorship support was offered for 112 events with a total expenditure of €200,000; maintenance of the waterways with 99·65% of waterways remaining open to 30 September; and the production of three new publications — 'A Taste of the Waterways 2013', 'What's On 2013' and 'Guide to the Grand Canal'.

The chief executive set out the key strategic direction for Waterways Ireland for 2014-16 and highlighted the following strategic objectives: to manage and maintain the 1,000 kilometres of navigation that are in Waterways Ireland's care to provide safe, open and accessible outdoor access; to inspire more people to discover and enjoy recreational activities on the waterways and to explore their rich environment and heritage; to focus future development on unlocking opportunities to achieve recreational growth, economic benefits and social inclusion; to reorganise and optimise the use of resources to deliver a high-quality public service and to achieve budget efficiencies; to explore and optimise opportunities to earn income to fund future investment in the waterways; and to continue to develop Waterways Ireland to be the respected, valued custodian of the inland waterways.

Ministers noted that sponsor Departments are working with Waterways Ireland to finalise the business plan and budget for 2014. The Council received a presentation from the chief executive detailing the strategic challenges and how they can be met over the corporate plan period of 2014-16. Once agreed, both plans will receive approval at a future NSMC meeting, following approval from both Finance Departments.

Ministers noted that planning approval for the project to reopen the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones has now been received from all relevant authorities. The interagency group that was set up to explore funding options for advancing the project met again on 9 October 2013 and continues to examine funding opportunities for the project.

The Council consented to three property disposals. They included two leases: one at Knockvicar, County Roscommon, for the construction of a 10-berth boat mooring facility; and one for an area of land to Grand

Canal Sports to facilitate the provision of a ramp and platform for wheelchair access to the canal. The third involved granting a way leave to Leitrim County Council for an area of the Shannon-Erne waterway at Ballinamore for the installation of a new storm overflow pipe at its wastewater treatment works.

The Council agreed to meet again in inland waterways sectoral format in spring 2014.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): The statement advises that the interagency group continues to examine funding opportunities for reopening the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. What progress has been made to secure funding? Can she update us on any discussions that she has had with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister about tourism opportunities on the waterways?

Ms Ní Chuilín: With the Member's indulgence, I will take the last part of her question first. I have not had any discussions with Arlene Foster about tourism, but that is in the planned schedule for things to do on this matter. It is quite important that the canal is reopened, because the benefits of tourism are huge, particularly in Mrs Foster's constituency.

On the interagency meeting about securing funding, my economists are finalising, if they have not, the latest economic appraisal. They are also looking at its status, given that it has been some time since it was last done.

As the Member is aware, I have also met Pat Colgan from the Special European Union Programmes Body (SEUPB) about any potential European funding. Again, in advance of the next sectoral meeting on languages and waterways, I hope to have discussions with my ministerial counterpart, Jimmy Deenihan, about anything additional that we can bring. Certainly, the Ulster canal remains top of my priorities. I hope that the Irish Government's economic situation has changed to a point where we can now start looking at ways in which we can develop that project.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chéad ráiteas ar maidin.

Further to the options for opening the Upper Lough Erne to Clones section of the Ulster canal, does the Minister have a definite time frame for that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and, indeed, his ongoing interest in waterways and the Ulster canal. As I stated previously in the House, given that this is a very significant project for both Governments, certain timelines have to be considered based on the availability of funding.

Funding availability has dictated options for timelines. A single design and construction contract, for example, can take up to two years. Three or four smaller contracts spread over three to five years is an option, as is a large number of small contracts over six to eight years. We are looking at additional options.

11.45 am

As the Member may be aware, the fact is that the original proposition has changed, but not just because of the availability of funding. We are looking at options based on funding that we have and potential funding that may be realised in the future, because, frankly, doing nothing or standing still around this project is not an option for me. I believe that it is certainly not an option for Minister Deenihan either.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. The chief executive set out a strategic direction for Waterways Ireland for 2014-16. In that, she mentioned budget efficiencies. Can the Minister highlight to the House what those might be?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right: the new chief executive gave us a very good and detailed presentation. Indeed, the Member will be aware — if she is not, she will be when I finish my answer to her question — that there have been additional pressures on everybody across the board in achieving efficiencies. However, as I have repeated to the Member and to other Members, and despite the meetings that I have had with Minister Deenihan around any proposed additional efficiencies that the Irish Government are saying are required, I am totally reluctant to go above and beyond any efficiencies that we agreed previously, and I have stated that to the chief executive of Waterways Ireland. That is the position. Following that, the Finance Departments and, indeed, officials and Ministers will hopefully be submitting additional or new budget plans very soon. I think that issues relating to any agreement to additional efficiencies lie beneath the Member's question, but I can categorically state that I have not agreed to those.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for her statement. Looking at the strategic direction for Waterways Ireland, I see that the need to explore and optimise opportunities to earn income has been highlighted. I also note and welcome the production of three new publications, 'A Taste of the Waterways 2013', 'What's On 2013' and 'Guide to the Grand Canal'. Does she believe that those initiatives have been successful in achieving an uptake in the number of users of the canal? What effect has that had in 2013 on the need to increase earnings and to up funds?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He is right: the three publications that he mentioned have been very significant work for Waterways Ireland, but I want to use this opportunity to congratulate its partners as well. Waterways Ireland does not have enough money to do the things that it wants to do, as is the case with many of our all-island bodies. One of the things that struck me, and I remember junior Minister Bell asking a lot of questions of Dawn Livingstone, related to opportunities on the waterside to develop initiatives and events that could raise money. The difficulty is that, in order to achieve that, Waterways Ireland would have to spend significant money to make significant money to offset some gaps in its budget, and it is not in a position to do that.

One thing about the publications is that they reflected the opportunities for people who live and work on the waterways to make income. That is to be welcomed. I would like to see that developed to ensure that it is maintained and that those people have additional earnings and employment opportunities for the years ahead. Hopefully, in the years ahead, that will have some kickback for Waterways Ireland, in conjunction with the tourist product and partners in local government, to try to develop a better product from one length of the waterways to another.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. I want to follow up on the question from the Chair of the Committee in relation to the Ulster canal project. Has the interagency group been working with our four EU officials from the Assembly to explore any cross-border projects that may arise from the next round of EU funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. She will have noted that I mentioned the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body, Pat Colgan, the meeting that I had and the work of officials in both Departments with not just SEUPB but local government on the proposed areas for the Ulster canal. It is really important. From what I see, the theme of social inclusion in INTERREG V is where the potential lies to have any future money from Europe. I took part in some of the INTERREG IV waterways exchanges. They were very beneficial for people who have lived all their life and have their livelihood around the waterways, but we are also keen to open up our tourist product.

I assure the Member and others that I will continue to ensure that every opportunity, particularly through Europe, is explored. We need development to happen. It not only will provide construction opportunities for an area that has been starved of construction and investment for decades but will open up a waterway and connect people, families, villages and communities. It will provide social inclusion and enhance the tourist product for those areas. At the minute, the officials are doing their best, but they certainly need people like me in government to produce the goods in order to make that and their plans a better reality.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister indicate what level of economic return is anticipated following the investment in the development of our waterways?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The economic return has continued to increase over the years, albeit in a very steady way. As a result of the publications and the presentation that we received from Dawn Livingstone and the staff at Waterways Ireland, I became aware that the level of economic return has yielded significant economic benefits for people. By way of a couple of examples, private boating contributes €44 million per annum and the hire sector contributes some €20 million per annum. Indirect spend on recreation is estimated at €100 million, and it provides 3,000 full-time jobs. That is fairly significant. Part of the answer that I gave to Anna Lo mentioned opportunities for people, particularly around waterways and areas that have been deprived of significant investment for decades. I am convinced, particularly when it comes to places such as the Ulster canal, that, if the construction happens and the project is developed to its full potential, the figures will certainly be multiplied to a better level. It is important that we concentrate on what we are doing best now, add to it and keep our eye on future developments, which are really crucial for economic regeneration in those areas.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis ar an fhoras um uiscebhealaí intíre na hÉireann. Ba mhaith liom cuireadh a thabhairt arís don Aire teacht agus an dea-obair atá ar siúl ag Cumann Uiscebhealaí Intíre na hÉireann ar an chainéal idir Iúr Cinn Trá agus Port an Dúnáin a fheiceáil. Ceapaim go dtabharfadh cuairt ón Aire spreagadh dóibh le gabháil ar aghaidh leis an obair sin.

I thank the Minister for her statement. I once again invite her to come down to Newry to see the excellent work being carried out by the Inland Waterways Association of Ireland (IWAI) on the canal between Newry and Portadown. I am sure that a visit from the Minister would be a great inspiration for it to continue that good work.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member again for his invitation. I appreciate it. I will liaise with him to ensure that we set a date this side of Easter, and I will be happy to accept his invitation to visit the canal in Newry. I am very supportive of the work, even though it is not within the remit of work that people have done around canals and waterways in towns and villages. I look forward to setting an early date and joining him in a visit to the canal.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire, agus gabhaim buíochas léi as a freagraí go dtí seo.

Given that Waterways Ireland does not report to any board, can the Minister tell us what arrangements are in place for governance and accountability?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is right that there is no board for Waterways Ireland as there is for other all-Ireland bodies. However, Waterways Ireland is accountable to DCAL and to the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG) and, indeed, the NSMC. As Ministers, we discharge our oversight responsibilities for Waterways Ireland through the NSMC. That includes consideration and agreement of the budget, corporate plans, business plans, progress reports, business targets and project milestones.

I also want to provide the Member with the assurance that, in addition, we have bimonthly monitoring meetings that are chaired by senior civil servants from DCAL and DAHG. The chief executive and appropriate directors attend to account for business performance and corporate governance. Waterways Ireland's audit committee meets three times a year. It comprises three external members and has unrestricted access to internal and external auditors who access the work of internal audit and receive reports/ Finally, I can give additional assurance that DCAL and DAHG have increased the remit of Waterways Ireland's finance committee to enable more detailed scrutiny of audit and recommendations.

Mr Allister: For all its double-spaced padding, what is really in this statement? We hear about a few extra metres of moorings. We hear that there are three new publications: wow. We hear that we want to inspire people to discover and enjoy recreational activities on the waterways. Do we really need to spend time and money on sending Ministers to the formality of a council to talk about such mundane and inane things, which really are at the level of council functions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am disappointed that the Member has such a disparaging and pitiful attitude towards the work of Waterways Ireland and has no regard for the people who work, live and try to develop their businesses on the waterways and around those communities. He has no knowledge whatsoever of how important these publications and the government support are, and, as we all know, he has no regard for the connection of waterways the length and breadth of this island. If the Member has so little regard for anything that is said in the statement, I wonder why he is here today.

North/South Ministerial Council: Language Body

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission and in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, I wish to make a statement regarding the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) language body meeting that was held in Armagh on 20 November 2013.

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

12.00 noon

The meeting dealt with issues relating to the language body and its two constituent agencies. Ministers noted progress reports from the chairpersons and chief executive officers of Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, which included the following achievements from July to November 2013. Foras na Gaeilge has maintained ongoing measures for the implementation of the new funding arrangements, including seeking expressions of interest from qualifying organisations wishing to be considered for selection as a lead organisation. Progress was also made with key schemes, including the advertisement of scéim na nOifigeach Gaeilge 2013-16, the Irish language officers scheme. In order to support the Irish language in the arts sector, 57 applications for funding were approved under the festivals scheme 2013 as well as 10 applications for funding under the drama companies scheme 2013. Seventy projects were approved in order to provide opportunities and events for 3,000 young people to use the Irish language, and seven Irish language booklets were circulated with the 'Irish Daily Mail' in September.

The Ulster-Scots Agency oversaw the enrolment of 20 primary schools in the scheme to work towards securing Ulster-Scots flagship school status and provided support for the Walled City Tattoo, which attracted 13,979 visitors to Derry as part of the City of Culture programme. It also delivered the Donegal Peace Proms in Letterkenny, which was the largest event of "The Gathering" in the county and involved the agency's first-ever collaboration with the Cross Border Orchestra of Ireland. In conjunction with North Down Borough Council, it showcased Ulster-Scots culture at Cockle Row Cottages in Groomsport in July and August, attracting over 17,000 visitors. It also developed an east-west heritage project with the Scottish Maritime Museum about the Ulster-Scots shipbuilders of Belfast.

Progress was also made on collaboration between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. This included the submission of the joint revised equality scheme to the Equality Commission for approval, the updating of the safeguarding policy to include cyberbullying and the development of an initiative to provide cultural workshops for secondary schools in the integrated sector in conjunction with the delivery of the citizenship curriculum. A series of lectures took place on Ulster place names as part of two open days at the Public Record Office (PRONI), and there were discussions on a number of joint projects, including a display about the charter towns, a series of lectures for Key Stage 3 children and a heritage project on the stories of Hamilton, Montgomery and Conn O'Neill.

The Council noted progress to date on the development of the 2014-16 corporate plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency, including the emerging strategic objectives. Ministers further noted that draft 2014 business plans for Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency had been prepared, with the focus on the delivery of key priorities for each agency. The Council also noted that the sponsor Departments would work together to finalise the 2014 business plans and budgets and the 2014-16 corporate plans. After Finance Ministers' approval, they will be brought forward for approval to a future NSMC meeting.

Ministers noted that the 2010 consolidated language body annual report and accounts were laid in the Houses of the Oireachtas and the Assembly on 5 July 2013, and it is envisaged that the 2011 consolidated language body annual report and accounts will be certified and laid by 31 January 2014. The Council also noted that, with regard to the 2012 consolidated annual report and accounts, the field audit had been completed for Foras na Gaeilge and was due to take place shortly for the Ulster-Scots Agency. It further noted that certification by the Comptrollers and Auditors General will follow as soon as possible in the new year. Ministers acknowledged the ongoing cooperation with the independent offices of the C&AGs in both jurisdictions, as a result of which 11 consolidated annual reports and accounts for the language body have been published since 2005.

The Council agreed that its next language body meeting would take place in spring 2014.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I note that the business plans, budgets and corporate plans for 2014 are to be brought forward to a future NSMC meeting. Given that it is already 2014, will the Minister confirm that that will be sooner rather than later?

The Minister referred to the Walled City Tattoo. Will she support that project from the legacy funds, or will the burden for that fall to the Ulster-Scots Agency?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share the Member's frustration. I am trying to the best of my ability to ensure that the reports and everything else that needs to be done are brought to the NSMC sooner rather than later. I raised that and other issues at the last NSMC meeting. I offered assistance to both bodies to achieve that much earlier. We are looking at everything that we can do because it is unacceptable to me, as it is unacceptable for Members to hear the same thing from me, time and again, about what we intend to do. Sometimes an intention is realised; at other times it is not.

I am very supportive of the Walled City Tattoo and have gone on record as saying that. Since then, I have had a meeting with the Speaker and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster. I am looking at channelling investment to future tattoos through legacy programmes rather than having the burden fall on the agency, though it will still have a role to play. Given the significance of the event, which I attended, and its potential not only to provide social inclusion and cultural awareness but as an economic driver, the Executive need

to look at opportunities to provide investment and have a better, joined-up approach to it and similar events.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a dara ráiteas anseo inniu.

I thank the Minister for her second statement today. Will she outline the key strategic priorities for the Ulster-Scots Agency in the corporate business plans?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Ulster-Scots Agency presented its key strategic objectives, which include the recognition of 20 Ulster-Scots flagship school programmes. That has been very successful. The agency also intends to establish two Ulster-Scots heartland areas; brand and market 50 Ulster-Scots heritage sites through the Discover Ulster Scots initiative; and develop a programme of activities around the Ulster Scots and the Great War of 1914-18, leading into the decade of centenaries. It also intends to support the development of a North/South and east-west Bruce heritage trail. Those are the key themes in the strategic objectives to which the Ulster-Scots Agency is working, and I fully support them.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she explain to the House the detail of the latest developments in the new funding arrangements announced by Foras na Gaeilge last week whereby certain groups have lead organisation status? What responsibilities will each of those have?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is aware that Foras na Gaeilge met last Friday, when it decided that the lead organisations would be as follows: Gaelscoileanna, which will have responsibility for Irish-medium immersion education and Irish-medium preschool; Conradh na Gaeilge, which will have responsibility for awareness raising, language protection and representation; Gael Linn will have responsibility for education in the English language sector and for adults; Oireachtas na Gaeilge will have responsibility for supporting the use of Irish and the establishment of networks; Glór na nGael will have responsibility for community and economic development; and Cumann na bhFiann will have responsibility for the development of opportunities for the use of Irish and of networks for young people.

I am sure that Foras na Gaeilge will come before the Committee, not only to explain the decisions that it made last week, which I just read out for the record, but to look at practical ways in which they can be implemented across the island. These programmes and this core funding are about all-Ireland responsibility for the Irish language, focusing on those in most need and making sure that it goes to people in the community and has a longer and more enduring impact on the development of the Irish language.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for her statement on language. We see good levels of activity and delivery through both Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency. However, I want to ask about the ongoing implementation of the new funding arrangements under Foras na Gaeilge. The Minister is aware of reservations about those arrangements among a number of language activists, some of whom are long-standing and of some stature. Will she indicate where that dispute, argument or discussion is and ensure that Foras na Gaeilge looks after and includes all people in the sector?

I note that the east Belfast Irish language centre has started work. I understand that a three-year tester class provided the impetus for that. Are there any plans for the Ulster-Scots Agency to take a similar approach because, clearly, the agencies can learn from each other?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. Just to reassure him, I also met some of the groups that were resistant to or had difficulties with the new funding arrangements, and I will continue to meet people in the sector. I met many people across the sector, and I want to ensure, as I have always stated, that core funding is not about big administrative costs or big offices but goes into the community. It is about protecting and enhancing the Irish language and for people who wish to learn it. There is still a role for those people through the core funding arrangements and, indeed, other funding arrangements through different bodies and different opportunities in the North. I am keen to make sure that they are enhanced and developed. There will be a change management process in Foras na Gaeilge. There should be an appointment this week — certainly next week at the latest — to help groups with the transition.

I welcome the Member's comments on the work with the East Belfast Mission. That happened through the Líofa initiative, not through any work of Foras na Gaeilge thus far. Foras na Gaeilge has given support, but it has not been one of its core functions. Although the Ulster-Scots Agency is not going for a Líofa-type initiative, it is certainly looking at aspects of heritage. I am looking forward not only to the work set out in its strategic objectives and key priorities but additional programmes that I can help to support. It is crucial for me and for us all to get behind the work of these agencies, bodies, groups and individuals, which, in a quiet way, are getting on with it. The Member is doing the right thing in not only supporting that work but looking for other opportunities. That is what we need to do.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for her statement. In the new corporate plan for 2014-16 is there any plan for collaboration between the Ulster-Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may not be as aware of this as others, but Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency have joint projects. I mentioned in the statement their equality scheme, which was presented to the Equality Commission. I believe that they have added to that. I certainly think that they have taken on board some of the evidence heard at the CAL Committee on child protection. They are in touch with people in the community and are taking on board anything that they can do to enhance joint working. That is one good example.

They have been working with the integrated sector. However, they have also gone to the maintained and Catholic sectors to talk collectively about their work and to enrich young people's views of cultural heritage. That joint work is important. As the Member and other Members have done, we need to support that work and encourage additional work. It is crucial that people have full respect for identity, cultural heritage and language because only then can we fully accept each other's cultural identities and backgrounds. We certainly need to get on with that.

Mr Irwin: Can the Minister give us more details on the development of an east-west heritage project with the Scottish Maritime Museum on the Ulster-Scots shipbuilders of Belfast or any other east-west initiatives?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Other than what is in the statement, I am happy to write to the Member. As the Member is aware, I was concerned that the east-west dimension was not fully reflected. I met his colleague the then Minister of Finance to look at ways in which we could develop that within the rules and regulations that we are governed by. In fairness to the Ulster-Scots Agency, it has risen to that challenge.

We are looking at connections, both North/South and east-west. We looked at Slí Cholmcille, the Colmcille trail, and we are now looking at Robert the Bruce and others. It is very important that the same respect and value is put on North/South and east-west connections and that we can learn from each other. It is only when we do that and do it continually that we can enrich the programmes that we have to offer and build on the need to develop future programmes for future corporate plans and business plans.

12.15 pm

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline for us the benefits of the Discover Ulster Scots initiative? Is it supported by any other Executive Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Discover Ulster Scots initiative is one example of work in which the Ulster-Scots Agency, through its partners, has tried to build on tourism aspects. This touches partly on the question that Mr Irwin asked. The initiative is primarily about maximising the positive impact of Ulster Scots on tourism. As the Member for East Antrim will be aware, tourism is one of the key building blocks of the Executive's Programme for Government.

The agency intends to support cultural tourism as one of the most important elements of Ireland's tourism product, which, as I said in a previous statement, is really important for the stimulation of job creation and economic regeneration. The Ulster-Scots Agency also intends to use this initiative as a vehicle for increasing the international appeal of Ulster Scots. The way in which it has done that has been beneficial. It is a good exemplar that we can use across not just this body but Foras na Gaeilge and other bodies. The Member will be delighted to know that this has all been done for a sum of £20,000.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat arís, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas fosta leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I gcomhthéacs an ráitis a d'eisigh Foras na Gaeilge Dé hAoine seo caite, d'fhág sé sin droch-bhlas i mbéal Gaeilgeoirí anseo sa Tuaisceart, nó níl oiread agus grúpa amháin as an chuid seo tire a bhfuil stádas mar cheann-eagraíocht aige. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad é a déarfadh sí leis na daoine sin san earnáil Ghaeilge anseo a cheapann go bhfuil breith an bháis tugtha ar eagraíochtaí ar nós Pobal, Iontaobhas Ultach, Altram agus eagraíochtaí eile nach iad; eagraíochtaí a bhfuil saineolas agus saintaithí acu agus a bhfuil fréamhacha acu i measc an phobail anseo.

Many people in the Irish-speaking community here in the North feel that the statement issued by Foras na Gaeilge last week has left an extremely sour taste on their tongue. I note that no group from the North has obtained the status of lead organisation. What would the Minister say to those in the Irish language sector here who say that this new system is a death sentence for long-standing organisations such as Pobal, Iontaobhas Ultach, Altram and others, which have accumulated vast expertise and experience and are deeply rooted in the community here?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. The Member will be aware — indeed, I said this in an answer to his colleague — that the funding is on an all-island basis. While the groups may have offices in Dublin and be based there, they all have an all-island complexion. I will ensure that, at the very least, one quarter of that work will be felt in the North and that staff will be based in the North representing language development and sitting on the partnership forums.

The new core funding arrangements have been in the making for some time. Indeed, as I said to his colleague, a change management process will be available to help groups who want to avail themselves of additional or other opportunities from Foras na Gaeilge or any other Departments.

I am totally committed to ensuring that the Irish language is funded, maintained and sustained. I have made that commitment even outside of the funding that is invested through Foras na Gaeilge. I will continue to meet not just the groups that the Member has mentioned, two of which I have met, but other stakeholders who want to ensure that there is better collaboration across the island and longer-term security to meet the future needs of people in the Irish language sector.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. An dtig leis an Aire a rá linn, le do thoil, cé hiad na scéimeanna agus na tograí atá maoinithe cheana féin ag Foras na Gaeilge nach dtagann faoin scéim bun-mhaoinithe? Will the Minister tell us which schemes and projects already funded by Foras na Gaeilge do not come under the new funding arrangements?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. There is a list of numerous schemes that meet the information requested by the Member. I am happy to provide her with a breakdown of those schemes in writing. In addition, in 2013, Foras na Gaeilge committed over £2 million to a variety of schemes and projects to promote the Irish language. The Member will be aware, because she has raised this with me before, that half of that was spent on supporting the language officers in the community scheme that works across the development of people to work in the community. Other schemes supported by Foras include festivals, drama, bilingual signage projects, the production of electronic and printed magazines and newspapers and, indeed, youth clubs and organisations. However, as I said, I am happy to provide the Member with a full breakdown of all the schemes.

Assembly Business

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. The next item of business on the Order Paper is a motion on non-farming rural dwellers —

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Yesterday, during Question Time with the Employment and Learning Minister, I inadvertently missed my slot for a topical question, and I apologise to the House for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK, I thank you for having the courtesy to come to the House and apologise in person, even though you interrupted me in the middle of my statement.

Private Members' Business

Rural Dwellers: Planning Policy

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

Mr McElduff: I beg to move

> *That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised legislation, which would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside.*

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé an-sásta an rún seo a mholadh. I am happy to propose the motion and pleased that the Minister of the Environment is attending the debate. The motivation for tabling the motion is really about meeting the needs of the rural community and helping young people, for example, from a rural background to live in the countryside where, very often, they were raised. It is about the need to maintain and encourage vibrant and sustainable rural communities. The motion's emphasis is on problems faced by the majority of people who live in rural areas — rural dwellers who are not directly involved in farming.

In some cases, at least, farming families have some possibilities when it comes to developing a house on their farm.

That is welcome — of course it is — and it is perhaps too restricted, but the emphasis in the debate is on all those people who live in country areas for whom there is even less scope and much less hope of building a single dwelling in the countryside to meet their residential requirements.

I and our party say that any assessment of needs criteria should not be limited to agricultural need alone. I am mindful of many young people who will be returning emigrants and who entertain some hope of living in the area where they were reared. Recently, a school from south Derry visited the Assembly at the invitation of my colleague Ian Milne. I asked the young people in a vox pop-style way how many of them lived beyond the development limits of a town or a village. At least 80% of those young people from the wider Magherafelt district put their hand up to show that they lived in a rural area beyond the settlement limits of a town or village. I suggest that, for those young people, the possibilities of building their own home in the country are extremely limited as the rules stand. I also want to provide for care and support arrangements for people's ageing relatives. That area is too restrictive as well.

Some people have said to me that the countryside is for living in as well as for looking at, and the current

opportunities for people who are not directly involved in farming are far too limited. I accept that we need to balance support for rural communities with the need to protect our countryside, but I will point out that I also accept that there is limited provision for non-farming rural dwellers. I am sure that the Minister will detail the areas of replacement dwellings, social and affordable housing schemes, clusters, ribbon developments and dispersed rural communities. The Department may say to people that there are possibilities for a dispersed rural community, but my understanding is that, in the likes of County Tyrone, for example, there might be as few as one dispersed rural community formally identified. So, it is all right saying that those things exist, but they are far too limited.

Our party is happy to absorb into our motion the amendment in the name of Mr Maginness and Mr Eastwood. That is because it perhaps gives the motion the maximum chance of achieving consensus or support in the Chamber today. It also helps in the sense that it refers specifically to the proposed single planning policy statement (PPS), which is inclusive of PPS 21. So, happy to absorb the amendment; no problem.

As a councillor between 2000 and 2010, like many others who represented people at local government level, I attended hundreds of site meetings, which were of huge importance to local people. The demand for dwellings came from families that have close ties to a given area, and people were always mindful that the traditional settlement pattern in Ireland, North and South, was largely rural. Some may have, but I and others never argued that every site was a good site. Not every site was the perfect site, but there is such a thing as a good site in the country where you can achieve integration, road safety, sight lines, sympathetic design etc. So, not every site is a good site, but there is such a thing as a good site in the country.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that he never argued that every site is a good site, and I totally accept that. Did he ever argue that a site was a bad site?

Mr McElduff: Believe it or not, on one occasion I did. It was in the Carrickmore area, and I reached an agreement with the applicant that I felt that he had been misled by, in that case, an agent to whom he had paid a fee. He applied for the sake of it, with no hope of success, and I told him that his best bet was to agree that it is a poor site and to re-enter a better site. So, I am very pleased that Tom Elliott extracted a positive from me there. I am very grateful, Tom.

12.30 pm

Let us go back to the recent history of all this. In 2006, we had Minister Rooker's attempt to impose a blanket ban on rural planning. We had draft PPS 14, which was, effectively, a green belt policy disallowing rural planning except in a very restrictive set of circumstances. There was a presumption against development in the countryside.

In September 2007, there was a review of rural planning policy, and then we had draft PPS 21, which was introduced more latterly in 2010. All the while, a group was set up to look at the needs of non-farming rural dwellers, which was a recognition by the Executive that there was a problem in this area. The SDLP amendment also acknowledges, by accepting the word "revised", that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. A review of all that was said to have concluded in June 2013, but it definitely did not succeed in meeting the needs of non-farming rural dwellers. That review was far from comprehensive.

There is a need to establish the principle of a single dwelling in the countryside and that there is a possibility of it being a good site if it achieves integration etc. I am not in favour of speculative building — of people building houses in the country and then trying to sell them on. We could live with occupancy or residency conditions for people who have a local tie, but the basic point —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr McElduff: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member accept that if this is designed to help rural dwellers, and if residency conditions are attached, only those who have cash or can get money from sources that do not require them to get loans are likely to be able to build a house? Increasingly, building societies and banks are saying that if there are restrictions such as residency conditions, they will not lend money.

Mr McElduff: There are difficulties, of course. I would like to see the introduction of a local clause, but seemingly that would run into difficulties with the European Commission and might result in infraction proceedings or whatever.

So, this is not without its difficulties, but I hope that the Department of the Environment will look more seriously at the needs of non-farming rural dwellers who, at this time, are practically written out of the script. They need some possibilities, some scope and some hope. There should be provision for well-sited, well-designed new dwellings within, for example, non-nucleated settlements. At this time, young people who are thinking about building a house in the countryside are not making those applications because they know that they are destined for failure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, 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 debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33 pm.

2.00 pm

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 12 has been withdrawn.

Waste Disposal

1. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of the Environment what actions he intends to take in light of the recent review of waste disposal at the Mobuoy site and the lessons learned from the future regulation of the waste industry in Northern Ireland by Christopher Mills. *(AQO 5336/11-15)*

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The independent report provided by Mr Chris Mills powerfully illustrates the problems that we have with waste management in Northern Ireland. Mr Mills confirmed that the scale of the illegal Campsie waste dump is large by UK standards, with an estimated total of 516,000 tons discovered at the site. He also found that it is not an isolated problem, with criminality being widespread in Northern Ireland's waste industry. He estimated that the cumulative lost revenue and cost of clean-up could run into hundreds of millions of pounds.

Mr Mills reported that there are a number of compliance failings across the waste sector. He also noted that that is a problem across the UK and Ireland and in other developed nations. He recommended a number of solutions, including potential legislative tightening of duty of care and fit-and-proper-person tests; more systematic and effective regulatory oversight by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA); better linking among NIEA, the Planning Service, the PSNI and other enforcement agencies; and better use of the "polluter pays" principle. Above all, Mr Mills called for a single and comprehensive strategy. The strategy should do two things: reduce the creation of waste in the first place; and create a much more robust and compliant waste system for the remaining waste that is created.

I released the Mills report to ensure that everyone has access to its recommendations. I am determined that the management and regulation of waste in Northern Ireland will be dramatically improved. That is critical to protecting our environment and supporting industry growth. As I stated, I have directed the NIEA chief executive to prepare proposals for implementing the report's recommendations. As soon as I have received and approved the proposals, I will announce the actions that will drive the changes needed to improve waste regulation in Northern Ireland.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. Mr Mills is highly critical of the regulatory authorities and stated that the planning office played a pivotal role in authorising developments that were ultimately used for illegal dumping. Will the Minister assure the House that every effort will be made to put in place a joined-up approach by all the relevant authorities, agencies and Departments that will help combat this organised crime and put the criminal gangs out of action across Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: The need for a joined-up approach was highlighted, as if it were needed, by Mr Mills in the report. Where gaps exist anywhere in legislation, regulation or enforcement, there are unscrupulous people out there willing to expose them for their personal and criminal profit and gain. Therefore, it is incumbent on all of us, especially on me as Minister of the Environment, to close the gaps that exist and ensure that there is a more joined-up approach between the Department and other agencies and within the Department among planning, NIEA, those charged with waste and those responsible for enforcement. I have every intention of doing so and look forward to bringing my action plan forward in the coming weeks.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Will the Minister clarify how much it will cost to fully clear and decontaminate the Mobuoy site?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist. NIEA is engaging top-class experts to advise on clean-up options at the Campsie site, including cost estimates. Mr Mills estimated that the cost could run into hundreds of millions of pounds. Obviously, we all hope that that does not materialise.

Clean-up decisions will be based on the expert advice that we are currently receiving. As that is happening, the NIEA has already received some high-risk waste, removed it, and increased its monitoring of the surrounding environment. Every legal effort is being used to recover those costs from the polluters. Obviously, there is a criminal investigation ongoing, and that should assist us in doing so. It is a high priority for enforcement action. If it is not fully successful, I will consider fully funding options at a later stage.

Mrs D Kelly: With respect to a joined-up approach with the PSNI and, indeed, an all-Ireland approach, what discussions has the Minister had, if any, in relation to tackling organised crime on an all-Ireland basis?

Mr Durkan: As outlined in my initial answer, this problem is not exclusive to the North. It is not exclusive to this island; it is a problem across developed nations. On an all-Ireland basis, it is an issue that I have discussed with my counterpart, Phil Hogan, at my last North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the environment sector. We realised that there is a lot of trans-frontier shipment of waste going on, a lot legally and, as the report highlights, a lot illegally. It is therefore vitally important that we work together. I spoke earlier of the importance of agencies here working closely together and in a joined-up manner. It is vitally important that that continues across the island. There is a good lot of work going on between my officials and their counterparts in the Republic.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. Will he confirm whether anyone has been convicted or charged with any offences in relation to the Mobuoy site?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Elliott for that question. There is a criminal investigation ongoing and I am not at liberty to disclose the details or progress of that.

Road Deaths

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the rise in road deaths in 2013. *(AQO 5337/11-15)*

11. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's strategy for reducing the number of road accidents in 2014. *(AQO 5346/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I propose to answers questions 2 and 11 together and would be grateful for additional time to do so. I know that this is an issue of huge importance and interest in the Chamber.

The provisional number of road deaths here in 2013 was 56, compared with 48 in 2012. My sincere sympathy is with all the families affected by these tragedies. That was a rise of 17% on the 2012 figure, but is 5% lower than the figure for 2011, when there were 59 deaths. It mirrors the position in Ireland, where there was also a 17% increase in fatalities last year. An increase in motorcyclist fatalities, from four deaths in 2012 to 10 in 2013, is a particular concern. Figures for serious injuries are not yet available, but indications towards the end of 2013 were that they appeared to have fallen.

It is impossible to be definitive about the reasons for the rise in deaths because of the range of different factors that can impact on road safety and on individual collisions. Further, there are no details at this time on the main causes of fatal and serious collisions in 2013. Those will not become clear until the police complete investigations and produce verified statistical reports. Indeed, those might not indicate any particular underlying issue. We might be, sadly, witnessing an effect of what are now, thankfully, statistically quite small numbers.

However, we do know that in 2012 the principal causes of collisions in which someone died or was seriously injured were speeding, inattention or attention diverted and drink- or drug- driving. I think I can say with some confidence that those causes will again feature prominently when data emerges for 2013.

The rise in fatalities in 2013 and at the start of this year is saddening. To date this year, eight people have died, compared with three last year and one the year before. We must not get disillusioned. The overall trend in road casualties in recent years has been down. Indeed, over the past five years the number of people killed on our roads in Northern Ireland has halved, but we must not allow ourselves to be complacent. We must work tirelessly to make 2014 a safer year on our roads.

I am committed to continue working in partnership with all stakeholders to deliver our road safety strategy, which contains over 200 action measures to reduce road casualties. To that end, and in response to the rise in road deaths at the beginning 2014, I last week convened an urgent meeting of the road safety forum. At the meeting, which was very well attended by stakeholders, the police presented an anonymised report on the fatal collisions, which was followed by a discussion on what more might be done.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is almost up.

Mr Durkan: The meeting agreed that we need to continue our efforts, take every opportunity to communicate road safety messages and take a number of immediate actions.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. The Minister, more than most in the House, knows that the loss of a life on a road is more than just a statistic. I echo his comments and pass my condolences to the families of all the people who are deceased.

Will the Minister outline to the House how his Department and its agencies work to support excellent community-led initiatives such as the Ulster GAA's Live to Play campaign, which aims to encourage road users, particularly young people, to be safe on our roads?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist. The dissemination of the DOE's road safety messages is very important and, over the years, has proved extremely successful. The principal focus is often seen to be our television campaigns, which have a great record. Statistics show that they work and strike a resonance with viewers. However, an equally important part of our information and education campaign is the work that we do with organisations such as the GAA and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster, both of which attended the urgent meeting that I convened last week.

It is vital that we use all avenues at our disposal to get the message out to road users, particularly young road users, who are sadly still over-represented in the figures for casualties and fatalities on our roads. Therefore, I refresh my appeal to Members to use the opportunities and any influence they have to get organisations such as their local club or school to reinforce road safety messages to their members.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers to date, and I follow on from the sentiment of my colleague Mr Flanagan. Will the Minister outline some of the outcomes that were agreed at the forum? Indeed, does he have any plans to engage with the Minister of Education, given the dangers, especially for young people, on this issue?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist arís. In my opinion, last week's meeting was very productive, and I was heartened by the turnout. Over 30 people from different organisations attended.

One of the agreed outcomes was that the PSNI gave a commitment to increase visible traffic policing, including the positioning of speed cameras, particularly in areas that might be susceptible to road traffic accidents. A Member has said in the House that he believes that such cameras should be located in areas where speeding is a real problem and danger rather than in areas where they might simply be perceived as a cash cow.

Last Monday in the Chamber, my ministerial colleague Danny Kennedy gave an undertaking, which was reinforced by a DRD official, who said that it was going to look at its gritting procedures. The very clubs that I mentioned — the GAA and the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster — undertook to get DOE information to their members. My Department will use its vehicle testing centres to hand out information and reinforce road safety messages, and I have given the go-ahead for a new television campaign and a print media campaign. There was an ad in the papers yesterday, which is an updated compilation of previous campaigns.

2.15 pm

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Obviously, I am mindful of those who have been affected by recent road deaths in Northern Ireland. Our thoughts

are with them at this time. Keeping with the theme of the television campaigns, is the Minister's Department monitoring the success or otherwise of the television campaigns and whether, in fact, there is a possibility of a turn-off factor associated with some of the more graphic campaigns?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Cameron for her question. Our road safety campaigns have played and will continue to play a significant part in our ambition to work towards zero road deaths in Northern Ireland. I recognise that it is difficult to measure the sole or unique contribution that any specific area of road safety, including advertising, makes towards reducing casualties. I think that there is a consensus that the huge reductions that we have seen over the years are due to a combination of improved education and information, improved engineering and, indeed, stronger enforcement. Research shows that DOE campaigns are very influential in improving driver attitudes and producing positive changes in behaviour.

A recent study by Oxford Economics isolated the role of DOE advertising. It calculated that, from 1995 to 2011, over 20,000 men, women and children in Northern Ireland have been saved from death and serious injury on our roads. Further analysis and surveys that have been carried out with road users show how high in their minds, when they are behind the wheel or on the road, our advertising campaigns are and how effective they are in reinforcing that message.

I take on board the Member's concerns that there might almost be a saturation or switch-off point. We will continue to monitor the situation. I, for one, do not want to put money in one direction to reduce casualties when it might be better spent in another.

Ms Lo: Poor visibility is a major factor in many accidents that involve pedestrians. In the Republic, for example, there are national campaigns to provide high-visibility wear to pedestrians and media campaigns to encourage people to put reflective strips on their clothing or children's school bags. Will the Minister consider doing something similar?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Chairperson of the Environment Committee for her supplementary question. It is important that we look at what happens elsewhere and good practice that we can follow. However, this is not revolutionary thinking. The measures that have been outlined by Ms Lo have previously, if my memory serves me correctly, been taken and highlighted here.

One area that I will focus on in coming months is a campaign to increase the awareness of all road users, not just drivers but cyclists and, of course, pedestrians, who are the most at-risk road users, and to reinforce the simple messages that, I am sure, all of us learned at school, such as wearing high-visibility clothing. A previous questioner asked whether I had had any dealings with the Minister of Education on the issue. I am certainly happy to talk to him and explore measures we could take through schools to perhaps give out high-visibility jackets or bands to improve safety for pedestrians.

Areas of Special Scientific Interest

3. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of the Environment why the designation programme for areas of special scientific interest has not been completed 28 years after the enabling legislation was passed. *(AQO 5338/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: The area of special scientific interest (ASSIs) programme remains one of my Department's key priorities. That is reflected in previous and current Programme for Government targets. Declaring an ASSI is a complex and resource-intensive activity that requires the efforts of many individuals. They include scientific surveyors, administrative staff, data-mapping specialists and liaison officers. Once they have been declared, ASSIs require management and monitoring. As the number of ASSIs increases, so do the resources that are required to undertake those essential activities. In addition, NIEA has European obligations to fulfil, such as the habitats and birds directives, and other competing priorities to deal with. As a result, the declaration programme has not yet been completed, but strong and targeted progress continues to be made.

Mr Wells: As the Minister knows, the relevant legislation here is the Nature Conservation and Amenity Lands (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. The equivalent legislation in GB is the 1981 Act. Since that was initiated in GB, 4,100 SSSIs — as they are called in England — have been designated. There have been 1,465 in Scotland and 1,019 in Wales. A total of 6,584 SSSIs have been designated. All the designation was completed 20 years ago. Here, where the latest figure is between 200 and 300 ASSIs, we are still, 28 years later, trying to explain why we cannot designate such a small number of areas. Is that not the case?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Wells for that supplementary statement. To date, NIEA has designated 360 areas of special scientific interest that cover 105,000 hectares, which represents approximately 7·5% of the total land mass of Northern Ireland. I have given assurances that work will be ongoing and is ongoing to ensure that the rest of our ASSIs are designated. The targets have been reduced, due to the intensity of resources and the tasks required to designate. Initially, the target to be designated each year was 25, and that has been reduced to 15. I might add that that was some years ago, prior to my predecessor taking up the post. I know that the Member has a special interest in this, which I share, and I am determined to see more done, and more done well.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister accept that an arbitrary figure of the number of ASSI designations each year is not the best way to decide on designations? Rather, it should be on site-specific and environmental aspects.

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. Yes, I agree that that is the best way. I do not think that we should go by figures. We have to go by quality rather than quantity. However, those targets have been set through the Programme for Government and, as a Department, we are obliged to meet them. I would be happy to beat those targets and go beyond what is required. However, it is vital that what is being done is done well.

Mr Allister: When an ASSI is designated on land that includes active farmland, it brings a great restraint and burden on the active farmer in terms of restraining some of his activities, yet there is no compensatory package for the fact that the farmer is denied the right to exercise rights that he previously had.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Allister: Will the Minister look at introducing compensation and recognise that that would make the introduction of ASSIs much more compatible with the

views of farmers and make them much more amenable to them?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Allister for his question. This could be a case where, possibly, the law is an ASSI. *[Laughter.]* The issue has been raised with me on a couple of occasions, and I discussed it with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development as recently as last week. It is incumbent on our Departments to work together to ensure environmental protection, but not at the expense of farmers trying to make a living. I do not think that the economy and the environment should be at loggerheads, nor do they need to be.

I am looking at a potential future land use strategy with officials, and that will involve some consultation with DARD and other bodies, notably the Ulster Farmers' Union. I think that it could be of advantage to all landowners, land users and environmentalists across the North.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Belfast metropolitan area plan. *(AQO 5339/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: The Department of the Environment adopts area development plans after all necessary statutory consultation processes and independent examinations of the issues raised have been completed. The Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) completed its independent public inquiry into the draft Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP) in May 2008 and sent its report in stages to DOE between January 2009 and January 2012.

My predecessor, Alex Attwood, published all the PAC reports on the draft plan in June 2012. My Department has now completed its scrutiny of those reports and all other material considerations and has finalised the draft plan for adoption and publication. My Department submitted BMAP to the Department for Regional Development for assessment of the plan against the regional development strategy 2035. I confirm that the plan was awarded a certificate of general conformity on 21 October last year.

I recognise the importance of the plan for the region's future development, as well as the need to ensure that it is adopted and published in its final form as soon as possible. I have sought agreement from my ministerial colleagues that my Department now adopts and publishes the plan.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has the Attorney General advised him that the Belfast metropolitan plan is a cross-cutting issue and requires Executive approval?

Mr Durkan: I am aware of the view that BMAP is a cross-cutting policy issue and, therefore, of the view that it needs Executive approval. In my initial answer, I outlined that I have sought approval from my ministerial colleagues to proceed with publication, particularly given the uncertainty that the delay in publication is causing outside among developers, businesses and so many others. So, I am aware of the issues. I recognise that point of view and have now brought the issue to the Executive for discussion.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers up to now. He is aware that, over a lengthy period, there have been concerns about the growing numbers of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) and the impact that that has on residential neighbourhoods. What consideration has he given to the policy framework governing approvals for HMOs?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist. HMOs, or the lack of control over them, is an issue that has, indeed, come to the fore in some parts of Belfast. Therefore, it is imperative that BMAP addresses those issues and gives more certainty and protections to residents in those areas. I am hopeful that, upon the publication of BMAP, the Member will be satisfied that those protections have been put in place.

Mr McKinney: What views have the business community expressed about the adoption of BMAP?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr McKinney for the question. I have received correspondence from various areas of the construction industry expressing grave concerns over the continued delay in the adoption of BMAP. Many house builders see the adoption of BMAP as critical to the recovery in their sector. Additions to the workforce can be sustained only by a continuous supply of planning approvals. A substantial number in the business community, including builders, have participated in the plan process since its initiation. It is no exaggeration to say that those participating in the public inquiry into BMAP have invested millions of pounds, engaging specialist consultants and legal advisers, undertaking specialist studies and submitting evidence to the inquiry to secure zoning of land for housing and employment.

2.30 pm

Whilst the release by my predecessor, Alex Attwood, of the report by the Planning Appeals Commission has provided some assurance to landowners, many builders who have been supported by their banks through the most severe recession in living memory are now under severe pressure from those banks to deliver on these sites to recover the significant sums invested in the BMAP process. We have a duty of care to those people, and that is why I am determined that BMAP should be published as soon as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of oral questions. We now move on to topical questions.

Tyres: Illegally Dumped

1. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what steps, if any, his Department has taken to trace the large number of waste tyres that have been dumped illegally in south Antrim in recent months. *(AQT 581/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: Waste tyres are a very big issue in some parts of the North and in some parts of the island more than others. My work and my Department's work in tackling the problems caused by waste tyres includes collaboration with our counterparts in the South. It is important that we promote better the ways in which tyres can be disposed of responsibly and the advantages to businesses and the wider economy of so doing. That would include highlighting further the potential reuse and recycling of tyres for very useful initiatives.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he provide assurances that his Department is progressing the more recent recommendations to better record and report used tyres?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Cameron for her supplementary. Yes, my Department has taken on board those recommendations and is fully committed to implementing them and carrying them out in practice.

DVA: Coleraine Jobs

2. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has had any further contact with Westminster in relation to the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) situation and whether he can give us an update on the current position, given that he will be aware of the continuing anxiety of those who are employed at DVA offices, and the very successful campaign, which he was involved in, to ensure that the jobs were retained in Coleraine, which has an impact in my North Antrim constituency and in other locations in Northern Ireland. *(AQT 582/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Storey for that question and the fact that he thinks that the campaign was successful. Unfortunately, as of yet, we are not aware of whether the campaign has been successful. It certainly was successful in uniting the House, and that is something that was and is appreciated very much by the DVA workers whose jobs are under threat.

Together with senior officials, I went to London on 6 November and met Mr Robert Goodwill, the Minister responsible for making this decision. I took the opportunity to emphasise to him the huge damage that the removal of these jobs from the North, particularly from Mr Storey's constituency, would have economically and socially. I also reiterated the lack of business sense in so doing, given the exemplary record of delivery that the central office in Coleraine has. He seemed familiar with the arguments, which gave me heart. He was well abreast of the situation. Subsequent to that, I provided an aide-memoire to the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who have engaged with the Prime Minister on the subject. It was intimated to me by Mr Goodwill that the final decision on the issue might well lie higher than his office. I believe that there is interest in this at the highest political level, and I am hopeful of a positive outcome for all involved.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer. With regard to ensuring that we do all in our power to retain jobs in Northern Ireland, does the Minister have any concern about the recent announcement on the discontinuation of the printing of the tax disc, which may or may not be indirectly linked to the long-term strategic plan regarding the retention of jobs in Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: I have been suspicious — some might say "paranoid" — about any development in vehicle licensing since taking this post. However, I have been assured by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) in London that there is no link between the two. At the moment, I would like to fight one battle at a time, and the one that we are fighting together is huge. I am hopeful that we will succeed.

Rose Energy

3. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on any appeals or alternative schemes being considered following his predecessor's decision on Rose Energy. *(AQT 583/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. Well, I do not really thank her for it; rather, I acknowledge her question. There was a judicial review, and it is awaiting a hearing. I have been contacted by the original objectors to the plant. I believe that they are seeking some contribution from the Department to their legal costs, given that their position, they believe, has been vindicated by the ruling of the Planning Appeals Commission.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his response. Considering that Moy Park is currently undertaking a programme of expansion and considering the fact that the agrifood report 'Going for Growth' suggested that the poultry sector had immediate potential for growth, what is the Minister doing through his planning policies to assist the wider sector to reach its full potential while meeting its obligations under the nitrates directive?

Mr Durkan: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency is represented on an intergovernmental group tasked with coordinating a response to the Going for Growth action plan. Agency staff have been working with Moy Park to facilitate solutions to those very issues in the agrifood sector. Our aim is to help the industry hit its growth targets but to do so with good environmental performance. As a competitive advantage, a team has been set up and officials designated to it with the particular mission of assisting with Moy Park's applications as and when they come in. I am aware that a lot will be coming, and we are hopeful of getting them dealt with quickly.

Fuel Laundering

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of the Environment to elaborate on what his Department is doing to tackle fuel laundering, given that the Minister will be aware, through the organised crime areas of his Department, of the damage that is caused to the environment by this practice. *(AQT 584/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Givan for his question. Fuel laundering continues to be a problem for my Department, the Department of Justice and the people of the North. Therefore, it is important that my Department, along with others and the PSNI, does all that it can to combat it. I met Ministers Ford and Kennedy recently, and this was one of the issues that reared its ugly head. I also raised fuel laundering with Leo Varadkar during the most recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting in transport format. He opines that they have made massive inroads into tackling fuel laundering over recent months due to the introduction of a new marker. That corroborates opinion that we are getting from London about a new marker that has been introduced there. We hope to see it introduced here in the North by this spring to make life more difficult for the criminals.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that and commend him for his efforts and wanting to make life more difficult for the criminals. To that end, what actions is he taking as Environment Minister to encourage his colleagues that it is time to support the National Crime Agency, which is responsible for seizing the assets of the very people who are engaged in fuel laundering and in causing huge damage to our environment?

Mr Durkan: We remain very focused on making life more difficult for criminals and doing all that we can to make sure that they are brought to justice. We are speaking about fuel laundering. If Mr Givan had been in the Chamber earlier he would have heard a similar discussion

about waste crime and the importance of all Departments and agencies working together with the PSNI and other enforcement and crime prevention agencies to ensure that this becomes a thing of the past.

Conservation: DOE Failure

5. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of the Environment whether the systematic failure in his Department has been identified and, if so, what is being done to address it, given that, in response to a recent question for written answer, the Minister outlined to me that 33 of 54 special areas of conservation were in unfavourable condition and not showing signs of recovery. *(AQT 585/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I am trying to remember which question for written answer that was; Mr Agnew sends me a few. It was not a systematic failure by my Department; it was a failure of resources. I suppose that that could be seen as systematic, as resources may not have been allocated in the manner that they should.

I aim to address the issue shortly. I have announced a restructuring of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, which I think will come as welcome news to everyone in the Chamber and outside it. It is important that the NIEA does its business better and quicker and ensures environmental protections. However, again, that should not be at the disproportionate expense of, for example, farmers as I said in answer to an earlier question from Mr Allister. It is possible to have a balance between a good environment and a good economy. That is what I strive for and what we should all strive for, and I look forward to working with the Member on that.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his many answers to my questions for written answer. I do not know whether it is a resource issue, but does the Minister accept that a review of mineral extraction has to be a key part of looking at the problems faced by special areas of conservation? If so, will he indicate when we will see such a review?

Mr Durkan: Mineral extraction is a theme that runs through Mr Agnew's questions for written answer and rightly so. It is a matter of great concern to Mr Agnew and many others. The number of mineral extraction applications that have to be dealt with retrospectively is a cause of great concern to me. They require a lot of time and resources, and they are difficult to assess and make decisions on. I have not yet determined whether a review of how mineral extraction is dealt with is required, but we are happy to speak to the Member and others about how they think it could be brought forward.

Road Safety Committees

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of the Environment how many local road safety committees remain active in the 26 district council areas. *(AQT 586/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. Unfortunately, I do not have that detail to hand. However, as a former member of a local road safety committee in the north-west, I am well aware of the value they had and the difficulties they faced under previous Ministers.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. Much good work is still being carried out by the committees that are active. Is there an opportunity to reactivate the system and provide the resource?

Mr Durkan: Earlier, in response to questions from Mr Flanagan and Mr Hazzard, I spoke about the importance of using every tool at our disposal to get road safety messages out.

Through various initiatives, the local committees were certainly a valuable tool, whether through public speaking competitions, quizzes, activities for schools or events for more senior drivers.

2.45 pm

I do not have with me the details to answer your main question as to how many committees are still active. I will get that information for you and, in so doing, will look again at how those committees might be reactivated. Through the committees, a lot of good people gave of their valuable time to do valuable work in the community.

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Michael Copeland is not in his place, so we will proceed to question 2. I advise Members that questions 6 and 8 have been withdrawn.

European Investment Bank

2. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any engagement he has had with the European Investment Bank in relation to using its financial resources. *(AQO 5351/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank the Member for her question. I am very keen for the European Investment Bank (EIB) to fund projects in Northern Ireland, and I intend to engage with senior officials from the bank in the coming months on the issue.

I met the European Investment Bank and the University of Ulster last year about the relocation of the Jordanstown campus to Belfast city centre. As the Member may be aware, the university has been in intensive negotiations with the European Investment Bank over recent months. I understand that those discussions are progressing positively.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he give us his assessment of the role that the European Investment Bank can play in local investment?

Mr Hamilton: There are huge opportunities for Northern Ireland to avail itself of funding from the European Investment Bank. As I said, the University of Ulster is in ongoing negotiations with the bank. I hope that, in the coming weeks, we will hear that the university has been successful. However, we should not rest on our laurels and take that as the full extent of what we can do with the EIB. The EIB offers projects of the size and scale of the university's relocation from Jordanstown to the centre of Belfast and the opportunity for funding over a longer period, sometimes at a significantly lower rate than projects could get elsewhere on the market. I am keen to explore other possibilities with the EIB and intend to meet its officials again in the next few weeks.

Without having any specific projects in mind, one area in which there could be huge opportunities is for our reformed local government to avail itself of some of those potential EIB borrowings. If we have bigger councils with more powers, such as the power to regenerate town and city centres, there are opportunities for those councils to work with the EIB, either on individual projects or in bundling projects together in order to avail themselves of cheaper finance and, importantly, to get projects and infrastructures on the ground that will improve the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I agree entirely with the Minister that there is huge potential. How does he propose to engender the same obvious enthusiasm that he has for the European Investment Bank with his colleagues in the Executive and other government bodies?

Mr Hamilton: As you can see from my January monitoring statement to the House this morning, there is a willingness, and I referred to the allocation of some £35 million in a two-year loan to the University of Ulster for moving into the Member's constituency. Although the work with the EIB was not contingent on getting that, it sends a clear marker to the EIB that the Executive are serious about working with it to fund potential projects in the future.

We have issues with using EIB funding to build central government capital projects such as roads, schools, and so forth. If we avail ourselves of the funding, it will come off our block grant, and even though it is a lower rate of interest, we would still have to pay the interest so we would be net worse off in the longer term. That is why I think that there is potential for colleges and universities such as the University of Ulster and Queen's University, which are at arm's length from government, and for local government, because such finance does not score on balance sheets in the same way. That is why I am keen to meet the EIB to scope out those potentials for Northern Ireland, of which there are many.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister clarify what the EIB could be used for? You just said that it could not be used for building schools. Are there other areas in education where we can use its funding to help schools?

Mr Hamilton: It could be used for schools, but there would be no benefit in that. We could access that money, but, because of Treasury rules, it would score against us, come off our balance sheet and we would have to pay interest. That is not advisable. This sort of work is in the very early stages. The EIB has been around for a while and is showing some interest in Northern Ireland as a place where it wants to invest. We are in a slightly better position with our capital budget than we were a couple of years ago, but finances are short and things are still tight. At a time when private sector infrastructure and construction work still languishes, it is important that we scope out all opportunities.

It is almost a case of central government issuing a challenge to local government, universities and others in the education sector, the health sector or whatever it may be that as long as they are outside government, we are happy to work with them and facilitate their bringing forward any projects and working with them and the EIB to make them a reality.

In some ways, I see the role of the Department of Finance, and of the Executive as a whole, as facilitators and enablers of projects so that we can reap the benefits from them, as we have, in a way, with the University of Ulster.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister expand a wee bit on how the new council structures could access that funding? Will he issue guidance or provide support on that?

Mr Hamilton: Local government reform is principally the responsibility of the Minister of the Environment, but I appreciate that this is not an area of work that the Department of the Environment focused on historically. I can understand why, at this stage, the Department of the Environment would be keen just to make sure that the RPA happens within the time frame set out for it. However, if the Executive wait until after reform and the 11 new councils are in place, an opportunity will have been lost at least to have a conversation to engage councils in the potential of the EIB and other ventures to bring in outside money to develop local infrastructure.

My understanding is that council borrowing powers are now less restricted as a result of the Local Government Finance Act a number of years ago. I think that the Member was still on the Committee at the time. Obviously, the new councils will have bigger rate bases and more power to spend that bigger rate income. There are huge opportunities, as can be seen, for example, in Scotland, where they have ramped up their infrastructure spend over the past number of years. By and large, that was done not by central government but by councils. Given the Treasury's treatment of that expenditure, I want us to work with local government to enable councils to get into a stronger position where they could work with the EIB, the private sector or others to get investment for infrastructure in their locality that would not only improve their area but have a beneficial impact for the whole of Northern Ireland.

Welfare Reform

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the withholding of block grant finance from HM Treasury contingent on the lack of Executive agreement on welfare reform. *(AQO 5352/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: I met the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 18 November, when he reinforced his intention to impose penalties should the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly not progress the Welfare Reform Bill by January 2014. The UK Government have not yet specified how this departmental expenditure limit budget reduction will be applied. However, as the Member will know from the January monitoring round statement earlier, I have had to make a provision of £15 million for penalties that we will incur this year. The Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill remains stalled at Consideration Stage. We now need to progress it as a matter of urgency to avoid any further fines.

Mr McNarry: I am indebted to the Minister for his answer. I heard what I thought was a meaningful warning about the rolling on of debts or call-ups by the Treasury, which could end up at £200 million if we do not do something about this. I think that it is about time that we did do something about it. However, since April 2007, prices have risen by 18% where the average —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question, please?

Mr McNarry: Pardon?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have a question, please?

Mr McNarry: Can I repeat, Deputy Speaker, where I was in the middle of a question?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could I have a question shortly, please, or we will move on?

Mr McNarry: I will tell you what, Deputy Speaker: I will sit down. I do not like the way you are doing this.

Mr Deputy Speaker: OK. We will move on, then. I call Mickey Brady.

Banks: Lending

4. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what engagement he has had with banks in relation to their lending practices to small and medium-sized businesses. *(AQO 5353/11-15)*

12. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what contact he and his departmental officials have had with local banks in the past six months. *(AQO 5361/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: I am not quite sure what happened there. With your permission, Deputy Speaker — I am not sure whether I will get it or not — I will answer questions 4 and 12 together.

I am in the process of meeting the local banks as part of the ongoing series of discussions that I am having with them, along with the Enterprise Minister. Earlier this month, I met separately Bank of Ireland, Barclays, Danske Bank, First Trust, HSBC and Santander. I am due to meet Ulster Bank next month. I discussed a broad range of issues with each of them, including trends in lending, their overall performance, restructuring, and the use of national lending initiatives.

The Enterprise Minister and I have also met bank representatives about the agrifood loan fund initiative. I have spoken to Ulster Bank management on a number of occasions about the interruptions to its service because of IT failures. Over the past six months, my officials and I have also regularly engaged with the senior management of the banks on specific issues at other times and events.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister is aware that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the key to economic growth in our local economy. Does he agree that there remains suspect dealings between the banks and SMEs? Has he any confidence that the banks will not engage in any such activities in 2014? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. We are sometimes very focused on attracting big-name companies into Northern Ireland to create jobs; that is very much part of our economic strategy. However, I agree with him entirely that it will be through the recovery of the small to medium-sized enterprises, which account for such a large section of our economy, that we will really start to see the recovery creeping back, with an increase in employment and economic growth.

You hear entirely different stories about whether the banks are doing a good job or a bad job depending on who you talk to, when you talk to them and what circumstances they are in. It depends very much on the particular circumstances of the customer who goes in and asks for services, and when they do that.

As the Member will be aware, we get some headline lending figures from the British Bankers' Association. From 2010, when we started getting the figures, that showed a downward trend in lending. However, it was interesting and positive that, in the first two quarters of 2013, there was an increase in new lending. That was reflected in an increase in the average loan value over the past three years.

In the engagements that we have with banks, they are repeating what two banks stated in evidence to the Westminster Select Committee a couple of weeks ago. They said that, for them, the issue is now much less about supply of funding and more about demand coming through the door. We could rehearse that there might be a responsibility on the part of the banks as to why people are not coming in and whether there is a fear about coming in. I am aware of some of the concerns that have been expressed by individual businesses about the treatment that they have had from banks. If anybody has any evidence of bad treatment and thinks that my office can help to assist with the banks in any way, I am more than happy to help.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. What discussions has he had locally with Ulster Bank and RBS and with the appropriate Treasury Minister to ascertain what can be done to prevent more companies from being forced out of business by the seizing of assets and calling in of loans?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her very good, timely and pertinent question. As Mr Brady alluded to, this issue has been rumbling on since the start of the crisis. There is evidence, albeit anecdotal, coming forward from various companies of what people might describe as the sharp practice of some banks that were seizing their assets and putting them out of business in order to repair their own balance sheets. I add that that is anecdotal. We get some of that evidence coming through the Department and it is hard for us to assess whether it is true or accurate because we do not have a full view of everything.

Lawrence Tomlinson, whom it so happens I am meeting tomorrow, carried out a review on behalf of the Business Secretary, Vince Cable. Since his report was published and before setting up that meeting, some people have raised concerns about the practice of the banks with them. I have passed that all on to the appropriate people. Of course, there are various inquiries going on following on from Lawrence Tomlinson's report, and I will engage him tomorrow in how we can feed any Northern Ireland evidence into that. As I said to Mr Brady, if individual Members or those outside have evidence of so-called sharp practice, I am more than happy to pass that on anonymously through the appropriate authorities.

3.00 pm

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí cuimsitheacha. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answers. Can he give the House an update on the key themes of any submission or engagement that he has had with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee's inquiry into banking in the North?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. I gave evidence to the inquiry just before Christmas. If the Member wants to listen to me talking for an hour and a

half, I am sure that it is available on the Internet. Maybe he just wants a potted history.

I very much welcome the inquiry that it has initiated. It is timely. In fact, it is probably overdue in many respects, and we will all probably agree that there has not been sufficient attention at a national government level on the particular banking problems in Northern Ireland. There has been a belief that the problems that affected banking and lending to small businesses in particular in Great Britain are exactly the same as the problems here, and the Member will be aware that our problems have been very different from those in mainland Britain. They are not entirely different but different in that it has been much more of an issue of risk caused by the property overhang. In that sense, we have, as I said in my evidence, more of an Irish problem than a British problem.

I welcome the engagement. There was a good discussion back and forward about some of the solutions, with some concentration, as you might expect, on RBS and some possible solutions to that situation and, indeed, banking in general. I welcome the fact that Westminster is focusing on this issue, and I look forward to the report. In fact, there is still more evidence, particularly from our local banks, to feed into that, and I hope that it will help, along with other work such as the joint ministerial task force that Arlene Foster and I are engaged on with Treasury Ministers, business Ministers and our Secretary of State. It adds up to a renewed focus on banking and the need to get lending out into the community, because I am sure that the Member will agree that, as we see signs of recovery creeping into the economy, we need our banks to start functioning properly again and getting much-needed lending out to businesses that are about to grow again and start to employ people so that we can get things moving.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the Minister's comments and commitment. The small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our local economy, and we know the difficulties that they have had in recent times. Despite all the good intentions of the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr McCarthy: Yes. The problem still exists. Has the Minister explored any possibility with the local credit unions in Northern Ireland to see whether a business credit union could be established to assist and to get over the hump that we are experiencing with banks at the moment?

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. The whole issue of credit unions came up in the evidence that I gave to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the back of a question from one of its members. Credit unions have traditionally played a very good role in Northern Ireland. They have a much better penetration into the market here than they do in Great Britain, and I can recall that, a couple of years ago, legislation was changed so that regulation of the credit unions rested not with the relevant Department here, which is DETI, but with the Financial Services Authority, which is now the Financial Conduct Authority. So, there is potential for credit unions to expand their scope, particularly on personal lending. I am not sure whether they want to get into business lending much beyond the small level on which they do it at the minute. I have not had any formal engagement, but I would certainly welcome engagement with them, as I would with anybody who wants to get into the Northern Ireland market to help, whether it be on the personal banking side, people who want to get mortgages, or business lending. I am willing to meet anybody who wants to get into our market, discuss the issues and encourage them to come into Northern Ireland, because one of the problems over the past couple of years is that there has not been competition in our banking sector in many ways. We are starting to see a bit more of that now, but we need to see new entrants at all different levels. So, I very much welcome any engagement with the credit union movement.

Household Income

5. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel why average household income is over £2,000 lower than in Britain. *(AQO 5354/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for her question. Average earnings in Northern Ireland are linked to the general performance and overall structure of the local economy, including factors such as labour productivity and the relative supply and demand of suitably qualified staff.

Although we have made some good progress in recent years, growth in output and employment has, historically, tended to be in relatively lower value-added areas, which typically pay lower wages. It is also important to recognise that the overall UK average is very much influenced by London and the south-east regions, where household incomes are significantly higher than in most other regions.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his response. How does he propose to address the challenges of income inequality?

Mr Hamilton: This is a problem that Northern Ireland has faced for a number of years. It is not going to be simply or easily resolved by me or by any Executive Minister. In her question, the Member asked about the imbalance between the rest of the United Kingdom, principally Great Britain, and Northern Ireland. That imbalance tends to happen in most economies. So, even if you look south of the border, you will see that disposable household incomes are higher in Dublin than they would be in the west of Ireland, Donegal or somewhere like that. Over the 2007-2011 period, the average disposable household income in Northern Ireland has increased year on year. The issue has been more that, over that period, even though we have been in the middle of a very difficult economic crisis, average disposable household income in London and the south-east has risen considerably. So, the gap that was already there has increased.

It is not easy to address that, but that is where the Executive's economic strategy comes into play. Although it is important for us to get jobs into our economy at a time when fewer jobs are available — I welcome the significant progress that the jobs fund has made, which the economy Minister announced yesterday — we need to continue to attract new businesses into Northern Ireland and to encourage existing businesses to grow through investment in skills and infrastructure. We need to encourage them to move into sectors where the average wage is higher than has traditionally been the case. That is why the Programme for Government targets are not just for new jobs but for new jobs that pay higher wages. That is only way in which we can close the gap. I am not sure that we would ever entirely close the gap, given the

natural distortions that there are in economies, but we can certainly attempt and do our best to bridge it.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Has a comparison ever been made between household incomes in Northern Ireland and those in the Republic?

Mr Hamilton: Sometimes it is hard to do direct comparisons between one economy and another. We have much easier comparability within the United Kingdom. As the initial question highlighted, there is a £2,000 a year differential between disposable incomes here and the UK average, which is distorted, as I said, by places such as London, which has an average disposable household income of £20,000. There is no direct read-across and methodology between our figures and anything that the Irish Government produce. However, Eurostat, which is the Europe-wide statistics agency, does an analysis of what it calls purchasing power standards, where it looks not only at wages but at living costs and currency to come up with a fictional currency by which it measures things. That shows that households in Northern Ireland have higher disposable incomes than households in the Republic of Ireland, which I think is interesting. Some of the statistics show that wages in the South are considerably higher than they are in Northern Ireland, but, because of taxation and the cost of living, when you break it down and compare it on a like-for-like basis, you see that people in Northern Ireland have a higher disposable income than their counterparts in the Irish Republic.

Capital Project Delivery

7. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his plans to improve the efficiency and timeliness of capital project delivery. *(AQO 5356/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: Capital projects are important in helping to support economic growth in Northern Ireland, and such projects must move forward quickly. If there is any indication that current commissioning and delivery systems are not efficient and timely, that causes me concern. However, it should be noted that, although individual projects can be delayed, none of the capital available for the Executive to spend has been returned to Her Majesty's Treasury during this Assembly mandate.

These issues were recently the subject of a strategic review of the commissioning and delivery system for major infrastructure projects in Northern Ireland undertaken by the Strategic Investment Board and my Department's Central Procurement Directorate. The report of that review has been presented to the procurement board, which I chair. The procurement board has set up a subgroup to address the issues raised by the review and to bring forward proposals aimed at improving infrastructure commissioning and delivery. I look forward to receiving the results of that work.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. What is being done to ensure that industry has confidence that there is a pipeline of future infrastructure projects?

Mr Hamilton: When I engage with the business community, aside from always being asked about rates, the second issue that always comes up is procurement in general terms. Were you to break down all the questions that I get, there is always concern that there is a lack of certainty about what is moving forward in terms of the capital projects that we, as a Government, and our Departments are commissioning. It is sometimes hard to do that with certainty because of funding, but we generally know what money we have and what projects we will earmark it for. From time to time, things fall through the cracks, such as the A5. Nobody foresaw that that was not going to happen. That then created a major issue because money was sitting there but could not be spent, so we had to reallocate it.

The investment strategy for Northern Ireland's delivery tracking system is already in place and is, I think, perfectly capable of addressing the problem of a lack of certainty on the part of the private sector about what we, as a Government, are commissioning. The problem is that the system has not been universally used by all Departments, and even those who have used it have not updated it as frequently as we would like. So, we have the system in place, and it is my job, working through the procurement board, to encourage all Departments to use that delivery tracking system and update it regularly. I hope that doing that will give the private sector the certainty that it needs to tool up as and when required to deliver the projects that we want them to.

Mrs Cochrane: Will the Minister outline the steps that can be taken to improve the nature and role of communication between Departments around business cases?

Mr Hamilton: I think that the traditional view has been that officials in my Department sit on business cases and do not progress them. I would not say that we are without blame in every case, but we are unfairly blamed in many cases for holding up business cases. Sometimes, incomplete business cases with important information missing arrive in the Department of Finance, and that would naturally slow things up. Some Departments will sometimes, I think, test the water a wee bit. They will put in something that they know is incomplete, so the Department of Finance will tell them, "These are the two or three areas that you need to give us a bit more detail on". The Departments then go away, and obviously the next iteration of the business case addresses those issues. In some ways, it is a bit of a cat-and-mouse game.

Some analysis was carried out independently, and we are processing business cases in what I consider to be a timely manner. However, I am always keen to improve performance. One of the things that the procurement board subgroup, which is looking at the delivery of infrastructure projects, will look at specifically is business cases. Even though the system is not too bad, I want the subgroup to come back with a series of recommendations, including how we could perhaps improve it in respect of business cases.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on the delivery of major capital projects, past and current?

Mr Hamilton: That is one of the Member's usual idiosyncratic, cryptic questions; I am not quite sure whether he is talking about a specific project. Certainly, my predecessor had significant discussions with the current Culture Minister and previous Ministers about the stadia projects, for example. The current Minister and I have had discussions about that as well, as have our officials. DCAL is not a centre of procurement expertise in itself

and tends to use the Central Procurement Directorate for that function. So, there is, probably more at the level of officials, continual contact between my Department and the Department of Culture on capital projects.

Mr Cree: Minister, bearing it in mind that capital projects have a long lead-in time, what is your opinion on working up to tender stage other projects, so that, if there is any slippage, there is a reserve pool of projects to fall back on?

Mr Hamilton: We need to look at this area, but we need to do so with our eyes open. I agree with the Member. In the A5 situation, we had to step back, have a discussion about what projects were ready to go and which were not. That meant that we were able to fund some exceptionally good projects with the money that was released from the A5 not moving forward. In better circumstances, you would have had a ready-made list of projects across all Departments that could have moved forward quite quickly and that fitted in with the strategic objectives that the Executive had for Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

There is an issue with progressing things too far. The Member mentioned going to tender stage: that stage is significantly down the line. You are basically ready to go. That incurs some cost and raises expectations in localities. If we take a hospital project or roads project through to that stage, people might expect it to happen very quickly, then the money might not arrive and it could be a further few years before it happens. We need to balance those things with sound and sensible management of a capital budget. Looking at how we can better prioritise as many projects as we can is something that I would like to see coming forward as part of the review.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of the time for oral questions to the Minister. We move on to topical questions.

Equal Pay: NIO/PSNI

1. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on progress on equal pay for NIO and PSNI staff, which, as he will recall, the Assembly debated last year. *(AQT 591/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will also recall that, early in my time in office, I expressed in the House a keenness to re-examine the issue, which I have done. I have received submissions from officials on the issue and pondered those over the last number of months. It has been characterised as an equal pay issue — indeed, the Member did so in his question — for ease, if not necessarily for accuracy. The judgement of the court in respect of the matter, back in March of last year, made it very clear that it was not an equal pay issue and that the members of staff employed in the NIO, the Police Service and so forth were not entitled to access the terms of the equal pay settlement for Northern Ireland Civil Service staff.

After considering the issue, I have come to the clear conclusion that there is no legal way to extend the terms of the equal pay settlement to those members of staff. However, as the Member will appreciate, I still have sympathy for those members of staff in the position that they have found themselves in. I have sympathy for the argument that is put by them, even if it does not have any actual legal standing. I am committed to continuing to explore ways in which the moral argument that they have been putting consistently could in some way be recognised.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. At the Justice Committee, we had briefings from departmental officials, and I think that it is accurate to say that that Department, led by its Minister, has been reluctant on this issue. However, after the Assembly debated the issue and passed a motion on it, the Justice Minister sent a letter to the —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Givan: Yes, it is coming. The Justice Minister has corresponded with the Finance Minister indicating that he wants to be helpful. Has the Finance Minister now had any discussions with the Justice Minister to find out if there is any progress that that Department can make in assisting?

Mr Hamilton: The Minister of Justice did indeed. He and my predecessor were in correspondence back and forward, and that carried on into my tenure in office. He corresponded with me in the autumn. At that time, I was still considering the issue and what could be done. I was still considering that advice and the issue generally. I have subsequently, in recent days, spoken to the Minister of Justice, and he has been quite helpful. He and I have agreed that officials from each of our Departments will commence work on identifying possible solutions to the issue that we can then in turn take to our Executive colleagues.

I made it clear in the autumn, when I first answered a question about this, that I do not want to unduly raise expectations of staff, but I hope that they can see the commitment that I made to look at and reopen the issue. It was an issue that had gone away. I reopened it and took a look at it again. I continue to look at ways in which we can find a satisfactory solution to it, while not unduly raising the expectations of the staff, who have gone through quite a lot over the last number of years that they have already endured.

Finance: Cross-border Mobility

2. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how focused his Department is on removing financial obstacles to cross-border mobility, and I am specifically thinking of a person who might live in County Tyrone, work in County Monaghan and have tax credit difficulties. *(AQT 592/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: The issues that the Member raises are characteristic right across different states in Europe — and beyond, I am sure. Members who represent constituencies that are closer to the border than mine will hear about this through their constituency offices a lot more frequently than I and some colleagues do. If people find themselves in the predicament of falling foul of the system in some way because of working in one jurisdiction and living in another and if there is anything that I or my Department can do, my doors are open to offer assistance to anybody who might require it.

Mr McElduff: I welcome what the Minister has said. I have one suggestion, on which I invite his comment: perhaps he can work closely with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on properly resourcing the independent advice network in areas such as Enniskillen, Strabane, Omagh and Newry, where there is a proliferation of such issues.

Mr Hamilton: In the first instance, given that it is the responsibility of my colleague the Enterprise Minister rather than me, I can commit to contacting the Minister, raising the issues that the Member has raised and ensuring that advice on the best way in which to handle some of the scenarios that the Member outlined is available to advisers, whether they be from Citizens Advice or another independent advice provider.

Education: Budget Allocation

3. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his statement this morning and the fact that, in education, we need more money per pupil and more money for maintenance and capital, whether the Education Minister is missing out by not taking up his end-year flexibility or efficiency savings plans and whether he is denying other Departments the benefits of more money. *(AQT 593/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his question. It is a conflation of two issues, which I will try to separate. I explicitly mentioned the end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme in my statement. That was started in 2011-12 after the broader EYF scheme that the Executive had disappeared. It started with an opening balance of some £56·7 million, and, under the terms of the scheme, the Department of Education bid for £20·5 million in June monitoring in 2011-12. That bid was agreed. In January of that year, the Department had a reduced requirement of £10·5 million, so the number has been coming down. This year, my information is that there were as many drawdowns from the scheme as there was money being put back into it. The system was put there to allow for sensible management. Anyone who has been on or is still on a board of governors will know that, as with the capital budget that central government operates, schools will sometimes want to commit to expenditure but cannot quite do so. It is a better way in which to manage some expenditure that they might make in their schools. Therefore, it is a good scheme that has worked, and we have not had any issues or problems with it.

The Member asked whether the Minister of Education is availing himself of it properly; it is more a matter of whether schools are availing themselves of it properly. Perhaps schools do not want to commit to certain types of expenditure because of other problems that they are having at the minute. It is perhaps worth some of my officials pursuing further whether the scheme needs to be tidied up or looked at.

On the Minister of Education's failure to participate in the savings delivery plan process, it is disappointing that that did not start at the beginning of this Budget period. I cannot speak — I certainly would not even dare to try — for the Minister of Education for a host of reasons.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is almost up.

Mr Hamilton: Whether he is administering his budget properly or not, his lack of participation fails to give the Member and other colleagues the proper insight into what he is spending his money on.

Mr Kinahan: If I may, I will stay with education. We have had announcements on shared education campuses. Is the money that is being planned from OFMDFM, or is this a solo run of funding from within the Education Department? Where do we sit on that?

Mr Hamilton: The Member may recall that, as part of the economic pact between the Executive and the Prime Minister in June of last year, we were allowed to draw down additional reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing of, I think, £100 million over the next two years, as long as that was specifically for shared education and shared housing projects. Only one has been able to go forward so far: the Lisanelly project. I understand that there are other projects being worked up, particularly in housing. What I understand — again, I would not wish to speak for him — is that the Minister of Education's call for schemes to come forward is in order to take up the funding that is available from Treasury, which we asked for. It would be unfortunate if we did not have schemes for that funding after having asked Treasury for it in the first place.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Raymond McCartney is not in his place.

Clinical Negligence: Cost

6. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he accepts that up to £20 million of the £30 million allocated to the Health Department this morning could go on clinical negligence, and, in the context of the £30 million, does the Minister accept that, rather than reducing pressures, clinical negligence is increasing pressure on front line services. *(AQT 596/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: Clinical negligence is an unfortunate reality. Over the past number of years, quite a number of cases have built up and developed. They are starting to crystallise because of actions being taken by the courts. That then puts pressure on the Health Minister's budget.

The money allocated to the Minister through the January monitoring round is principally for front line services, such as the stuff that I outlined to the Member this morning — in fact, he raised it with me — including pressures faced by A&E and those caused by winter and elective surgery. Indeed, they go right into the care side of the budget.

I will make the point that the Health Minister faces pressures regarding clinical negligence. They have been well outlined in the past, and he is having to mop up those problems as they crystallise. The point I will make to the Member, which, perhaps, he missed earlier, is that, if the Minister spends some of his allocation on clinical negligence, although this is not as desirable as it might be to bring forward additional care, support, operations or whatever it might be, and does not pay those sums and settle them this year, an opportunity cost will arise elsewhere in the system from not having done so. Therefore the effect is the same: it will still hit front line services whether he pays the money or not out of the allocation that he has received.

Mr McKinney: Given the vast sums involved, what will the Minister and the Health Department do together to tackle clinical negligence and its implications?

Mr Hamilton: Dealing with clinical negligence is principally a matter for the Health Minister. Much as I might like to interfere in the Department of the Environment's business, I am sure that the Member's party colleague the Environment Minister would object, and I cannot tell the Health Minister how he should deal with clinical negligence. I imagine that he does not want to see any clinical negligence cases and wants to ensure that the highest standards of health, care and support are given. I

am happy to work and have exhibited a willingness to work with my colleague in the Health Department to ensure that the pressures that materialise and impact negatively on his budget, from whatever source they come, are dealt with in-year as well as we can.

Economic Growth

7. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the impact on economic growth of static wage levels and rising household costs. *(AQT 597/11-15)*

Mr Hamilton: We are starting to see some positive movement in the economy. I think the Member would agree that, particularly over the past few months and even into the first few weeks of this year, with the odd exception, we have seen positive news on the economic front. I was pleasantly surprised to see the Danske Bank consumer confidence survey showing its highest levels on record. That is a positive sign that the economy is moving forward. I think that we will see uneven economic growth: we will see good news and bad news.

As I have expressed publicly, the last place we will start to experience recovery will be in people's confidence and in their pockets. One of the ways in which many businesses, in particular, and indeed even the public sector have tried to address the pressures that we have been under has been to look at wage levels and try to keep them under control. Obviously, we hope that they will rise as the economy improves. Indeed I noted that the Chancellor said last week that he is in favour of an above-inflation increase in the minimum wage. The Member might suggest that the minimum wage is too low anyway. However, at least it is heading in a positive direction. It will hopefully follow from economic growth that wages will rise. We all accept that there is continuing pressure from household overheads, and, again, we may not see a lot of positivity in that area even if the economy is growing.

3.30 pm

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. A recent report states that the average disposable income in households in Britain is approximately £168; in the North, it is £57. Does the Minister agree that the introduction of a living wage not only would help households to keep their heads above water but would add and inject stimulus into the local economy in areas such as retail?

Mr Hamilton: If the Low Pay Commission recommends to the Chancellor that the minimum wage should go up, it could go some way to address some of the issues that the Member raised.

Earlier, I answered a question from the Member's colleague on a similar topic. Everybody wants incomes to go up because that is a good thing, particularly when there are pressures elsewhere. However, we have to balance wanting the private sector to increase wages at the lower end with the fact that we are in the infancy of economic recovery. I do not want anything to be done that dissuades firms from employing people, because that is what we need most. We need people who have been out of work and have gone onto the unemployment register and those who are coming off welfare and onto the unemployment register to get back into work. If wages go up too high, that might be reason enough for many firms not to take on the people whom we want them to start employing again.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is the end of questions to Ministers today. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Weir: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am sorry to blindside you. During Question Time, an issue arose between the Deputy Speaker and Mr McNarry. There was an exchange of words when Mr McNarry was called to ask his supplementary question. It would be inappropriate for me to ask anything about that exchange of words. However, as a result, Mr McNarry did not ask his supplementary question. The Deputy Speaker then moved on to the next question. The original question had already been asked and answered so other Members were denied the opportunity to ask any supplementary questions on an important issue. I ask you to look at the issue and to give a ruling.

I understand that, in the past, when a Member asked a question at Question Time and did not ask a supplementary question, perhaps because he or she felt that the question had been adequately answered, opportunity was still given to Members of other parties to ask supplementary questions. I am asking you to rule on the issue of the denial of other Members in circumstances in which a Member does not ask a supplementary question.

Mr Speaker: I have not been following proceedings because I have been at meetings. Let me look at Hansard and come back to the Member or to the House.

Private Members' Business

Rural Dwellers: Planning Policy

Debate resumed on motion:

> *That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised legislation, which would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside. — [Mr McElduff.]*

Mr Eastwood: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "revised" and insert:

> *"planning policy as part of the single planning policy statement, inclusive of PPS 21, which would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers, applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside."*

I am glad to move the amendment. The SDLP wants vibrant and sustainable rural communities, with successive generations choosing and being able to live and work in the countryside. Alongside employment opportunities, good schools and access to local healthcare, planning policy — in particular, PPS 21 — has an important role to play in delivering a vibrant and sustainable rural community. The SDLP proposes this amendment because it takes account of the context and actions of previous responsible Ministers and of recent public announcements by the current Environment Minister, Mr Mark H Durkan. It presents a more realistic road map to achieving outcomes by addressing the needs of all rural dwellers, farmers and non-farmers alike. I welcome Sinn Féin's support for our amendment, and I hope that other parties will do the same.

The issue has been subject to much debate, controversy and change, from the highly restrictive PPS 14 imposed by direct rule Ministers to a ministerial subcommittee established under previous Minister Sammy Wilson in 2008, which led to draft PPS 21. The main difficulty yet to be resolved is the definition of a non-farming rural dweller or, to be more precise, finding a definition that will not lead to inconsistency in interpretation, application and enforcement and is not open to legal challenge under section 75.

That said, when it comes to planning policy, the SDLP has not been found wanting in trying to meet the needs of farming and non-farming rural dwellers. Last year, former Minister Alex Attwood undertook a review of the policy's operation in response to concerns that PPS 21 was not being applied consistently across area planning offices or was being applied more strictly than it should have been. As part of the review, he took expert opinion from those who previously formed the independent working group established by the then Minister, Sammy Wilson. The review, which Minister Attwood announced to the House in July last year, identified policy areas where additional flexibility was necessary in relation to, for example, dwellings on farms; replacement dwellings; the conversion and reuse of existing buildings; new dwellings in existing clusters; and development within gap sites. He then

instructed that action be taken to address those issues, including a comprehensive staff training programme, an ongoing peer review of how rural applications are being dealt with and the publication of a rural design guide.

Since that review, statistics have demonstrated that more flexibility is being applied, and approvals under PPS 21 are up. In the second quarter of 2013-14, there was an approval rate of 89·6% for single dwellings in the countryside. That is up from 87·1% for the same period in the previous year. In the same quarter of 2013-14, the approval rate for replacement dwellings was 95·9%, up from 93·9% in the equivalent period last year.

Since taking up office, Minister Durkan has made it clear from his words and his actions that he is determined to deliver an improved planning system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose. Earlier this month, he outlined a comprehensive and very well-received reform of the planning system, which will include a shorter and simplified policy. At present, there are 20 separate planning policy publications. They will be reduced to one single strategic planning policy statement (SPPS). Consultation on the issue should be released later this month. Also included will be intense pre-application discussions and widespread community involvement in discussions, thus ensuring that planning decisions can be taken much more quickly. There will also be prompt refusal of substandard planning applications. That will unclog much of the time spent on trying to upgrade such applications. Also, there will be action to ensure faster responses from consultees. That will include backlog blitzes to clear outstanding consultations in the NIEA. There will also be new arrangements for future consultations in the NIEA, such as a planning control team, a single point of contact for consultations, new protocols for processing applications and much greater access to planning case officers.

Where there are areas for improvement to create the right balance between communities, business and the environment, Minister Durkan has made it clear that he will not shy away from change. He assured the Environment Committee of that when he was before us recently, and he has been clear about his determination to bring forward not only a concise version of current planning policies as part of a single planning policy statement, but a more concise and much improved comprehensive planning policy. This is the most appropriate channel via which to review and, where needed, reform planning policy, including PPS 21. I urge Members across the House to respond to the Minister's call to respond to the consultation that is to be issued in the coming weeks.

Statistics show a high approval rate for new single dwellings and replacement dwellings in the countryside. However, there are individual cases — I know of many — where families feel let down by what they see as an inconsistent and/or overly restrictive application of PPS 21. The planning system needs to recognise that feeling. Policy must be devised and applied in a way that strikes the right balance between supporting and sustaining rural communities and avoiding excessive urban sprawl in the countryside. In the Environment Ministry, the SDLP has not been found wanting when it comes to that and, as our amendment shows, is committed to doing what it can to ensure that the right balance is struck and that we have a vibrant and sustainable rural community.

Mrs Cameron: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion as a member of the Environment Committee. I oppose the motion as proposed by Sinn Féin, but support the SDLP amendment. That is on the basis of the need to ensure that our countryside is protected and the fact that we already have an adequate policy in place. That was brought to the House in 2010 by previous Environment Minister Edwin Poots. I remind the House that PPS 21 was a result of much work and consultation, and it was agreed by the then Executive parties, which included Sinn Féin.

Prior to PPS 21, we had in place what can only be termed a fairly draconian policy, namely PPS 14. That policy was introduced under direct rule by the former NI Minister Lord Rooker. Members will be aware that that created difficulties for rural dwellers, particularly farmers and those who live off the land. Farmers were restricted in building homes, and that hampered their efforts to provide for younger family members, for whom the aim was to keep working and active in the rural community. In already tough times for farming, that was an additional pressure that, quite frankly, they could have done without. Furthermore, PPS 14 restricted the building not only of family homes but new barns or sheds. Again, that made life even more difficult for the farming community. Thankfully, PPS 21 fixed that problem and permitted farmers to build on former sites or sites deemed not to blight the landscape and character of the countryside. It was a local Minister who resolved those issues and brought fairness and common sense to the fore, ending a restrictive and careless direct rule policy. That should be remembered when people accuse local politics of failing to deliver.

PPS 21 sought and secured a balance, protecting the countryside and the welfare of farmers. I do not want to see a policy adopted that has the potential to undo those benefits and to take us back to the possibility of a free-for-all, as happened previously. PPS 21 also provides for rural dwellers who are not farmers by permitting development in existing small housing clusters, which, of course, could mean the development of social housing, for example, or, indeed, catering for those who work on farmlands. It also permits the development of houses on former non-residential sites, such as factories or other industrial buildings. Development is also permitted should there be a business need, such as the need to house occupants connected to non-agriculture business in the countryside.

I represent a largely rural constituency and I am convinced that it is our duty to protect the countryside from what has been termed bungalow blight. I fear that any relaxation of the current policy will open the door to adverse development, which will cause more harm than good.

I am aware that the previous Minister of the Environment, Alex Attwood, undertook a review and evaluation of the policy and its outworkings. Recently, the current Minister announced that planning policies are to be streamlined into a single strategic policy statement. I believe that that is good stewardship. It demonstrates a willingness to protect heritage, as well as a willingness to continue to look for ways to improve and develop rural landscapes.

In conclusion, I oppose the motion as it stands and support the amendment. The current policy offers a good balance. The work done by Ministers should be developed to ensure that opportunity is provided for those who add economic and social benefits to our rural communities, while

protecting the landscapes that are such a treasured part of our environment.

3.45 pm

Mr Elliott: I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate about the more flexible PPS 21. I hope that the spirit of what we are discussing and debating here today is a more flexible PPS 21, as opposed to opening up the countryside to building in every field and gap that we find. I speak in that vein. I am sure that those who wind up on the motion and the amendment will indicate that that is what we are debating today. I am very supportive of some more flexibility and practical allowances for people to build in the countryside, but I do not support a wide-ranging open policy. That is key.

I also have difficulties with the policy in PPS 21 around on-farm dwellings. There are huge difficulties around that. I heard Mr Wilson indicate in an intervention earlier that there were difficulties with the residential clause and problems with the banks lending. That is also the case with on-farm dwellings. Individuals must share lane ways with other dwellings. That also causes a problem. There are cases in which there are much better enclosed and integrated sites that may be 100 metres away from the farmyard, but they are not allowed to build there specifically because they must be clustered with the farmyard. Maybe they build beside a slurry tank or in the middle of a farmyard. A wee bit more practical common sense can be applied in most of those cases. Obviously, there would be a much better outcome not only for the Planning Service but for the entire community, as well as the developer.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does he agree that there is a lot of inconsistency in the Planning Service? People born and reared in the countryside who want to live there are being denied permission to build on a suitable site, and yet, recently, in my constituency, two applications for planning permission were granted on a plateau in an area of outstanding natural beauty overlooking Strangford lough. How can it be right that the person in the rural community cannot get planning permission and yet somebody comes along and gets two?

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Elliott has an added minute. I must say to Members who have the Floor and give the Floor that they should be very conscious that interventions should be very short. They should not be statements. I watch Members continually, especially Members who have the Floor, giving the Floor, and then Members abuse the time.

Mr Elliott: Thank you for that guidance, Mr Speaker. I try to be generous and allow people to intervene, but I would appreciate it if they would be much shorter and use brevity. Getting back to the issue, I am pleased, Mr McCarthy, that there are planners in your area who show some flexibility, but maybe in the wrong direction. I think that that is what you were trying to say.

Back to the issue of rural dwellers. There needs to be a level of flexibility, but where does it stop? We need to have a policy in place that is reasonable and will not be abused. That is one aspect that I see, particularly from some people who will just use the opportunity to get a building site for sale or to allow people with no connection with the area at all to come and live in the area. Again, whether we should be stopping those applications or not is a completely different argument. The debate here today is about whether we facilitate the rural dweller and people who want to live in the countryside, particularly, as I heard Mr McElduff say earlier, those people who were born and bred in the area and have a connection to it. Again, I assume that that would come under a rigorous close look from the European Union's courts when they assessed it. Again —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: OK.

Mr Wilson: At the very start of his contribution, the Member said that he wanted to see some more flexibility. So far, he has talked about flexibility with siting etc. Does his flexibility extend to the point that he would like a separate category for non-farm rural developments?

Mr Elliott: I was just coming to that, Mr Wilson. Yes, I would like to see a separate section, but it could not be widespread and open to abuse. Whatever it is, it must have very strict criteria. The key to it is that there is not a widespread free-for-all position that could be abused.

I know that in the current PPS 21 criteria you can, for example, build close to crossroads or to community centres. In some extreme circumstances, you can build if a medical condition means that you must live close to a family member. However, the number of approvals for those applications is very small. Mr Eastwood quoted some figures for the number of applications that have been approved in recent times. However, it is easy to approve if the vast number of applications have been withdrawn and you are left with only a small number that are easy to approve. So, I do not think that those figures tell the whole story, which is the number that have been approved altogether in each category. Clearly, I want to see some flexibility, but it must not be abused or open to abuse.

Ms Lo: As the Environment Committee has not looked into the issues on PPS 21, I will speak only as the Alliance spokesperson on the environment and not as the Chair of the Committee.

It is our belief that PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside provides opportunities for non-farming rural dwellers to build there. It provides for numerous aspects, such as replacement dwellings, the conversion and reuse of dwellings and non-residential buildings, and development in designated dispersed rural communities.

PPS 14 was introduced in March 2006 in response to years of overdevelopment of the countryside. PPS 21 replaced that policy to allow greater flexibility, and the motion calls for an even further relaxation of the policy. It is worth referencing the previous Environment Minister's written ministerial statement to the House in July last year that dealt with his review into the operation of PPS 21. In it, he suggested that the policy was not only working effectively but that it allowed continued flexibility in meeting the needs of non-farming rural dwellers.

In answer to a question for written answer dated 25 October 2013, Minister Durkan provided other figures. I know that Mr Eastwood mentioned some of those figures, but I will repeat what I have in full. He said that, in the first quarter of 2013-14, the approval rate for new single dwellings in the countryside was 90·1%, which was an increase from 88·8% in the first quarter of the previous year. He said that the approval rate for replacement dwellings was 93·3%, which was up from 92% in the

previous year. I take what Mr Elliott said into account, but that is still a very high approval percentage.

Looking at the figures, I do not think that anyone could really say that planning approvals are not forthcoming. Furthermore, there is an appeals mechanism to challenge any planning decisions if applicants believe that planning policies have not been followed.

According to the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), the level of development that has taken place in the countryside is not sustainable and the development pressure in the countryside remains high. We must not use the current economic climate to justify inappropriate development. PPS 21 is in place to provide measures to avoid that, and I fear that any further relaxation of that policy will be detrimental.

Overdevelopment of the countryside has a significantly negative impact on our environment. As legislators, it is our responsibility to ensure that the environment and local communities' capacity to absorb the impacts of the development need should be a prime factor in determining planning permissions.

In environmental concerns, overdevelopment in the open countryside leads to the loss and fragmentation of agricultural land and wildlife habitat. It lessens the resilience of biodiversity and agriculture. That poses a significant risk as climate change impacts increase. Socially, the continuation of development in the countryside often has a negative impact on towns as hubs of social functioning. With increasing fuel prices, transport costs will increase for rural residents, and the expenditure in delivering social services to isolated dwellings can be a concern as funding for those services decreases.

Dwellings built in the countryside are frequently not connected to adequate waste treatment facilities. A report from the CNCC has estimated that 60% of septic tank discharges reach surface water and that 14% of phosphate pollution in Lough Neagh comes from septic tanks, so overdeveloped areas of countryside may now require waste treatment facilities to meet the requirements of EU legislation.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Wilson: As one who lives in a very beautiful part of the countryside, and who enjoys the scenery and the value of the countryside, I am very concerned about this debate. We have already seen the destruction of large parts of our countryside by the relentless march of the towering steel triffids that people call windmills and which are supported by the last Member who spoke, who seems to be so concerned about the destruction of the countryside by homes. To add to that, a further liberalisation of the policy —

Ms Lo: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way, yes.

Ms Lo: Certainly, I have not made any decision on wind farms. In fact, the Committee is carrying out an inquiry, at my instigation, into wind farms in our countryside.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Wilson: And I have heard the Member waxing eloquent about renewable energy in these Chambers, and, indeed, she is great friends with the wee Green man who normally sits in the corner, and you cannot — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Flanagan: Was that an adjective or a noun?

Mr Speaker: Order. In the past, I have said to the House that Members should be called by their proper names.

A Member: The wee Green man from North Down.

Mr Wilson: The wee Green man from North Down, yes. *[Laughter.]* You cannot have renewable energy without these towering steel structures across the countryside. This motion would add further to the destruction. If we are going to have a balanced policy about development in the countryside, we have to be very careful.

I want to make two points about this. The first is that I do not believe that a policy that explicitly deals with "non-farming rural dwellers" is workable, and, indeed, the review group made that quite clear. When it reported, it said:

> *"The Group therefore considered that perhaps the focus on 'non-farming' as a starting point is a false one and using this as the basis for any new policy is open to inconsistency of interpretation, approach, application and enforcement. The result would be an unworkable policy context in terms of an ambiguous planning policy."*

When the group talked about revision, it really said that, if we are going to have additional places in the countryside, they ought to be around non-nucleated settlements rather than simply a policy that says that, if you happen to live in the countryside and you are a non-farm dweller and you have a bit of land around your house, which is what the proposer was suggesting, stick a few restrictions on to it. As I pointed out, that would probably would mean that only rich people could have a house, because banks will not lend if there are restrictions on the planning permission. That is not a workable policy.

4.00 pm

The second point that I want to make is this: it is not a necessary policy. If one looks at what we have under PPS 21 already, with provision for replacement dwellings, conversions, dwellings within existing ribbons, social and affordable housing schemes, dispersed rural communities and dwellings to meet compelling domestic circumstances, one sees that there are already vast opportunities for people from a non-farming background to live in the countryside.

Mr McElduff: I thank the Member for giving way. I invite him to enumerate how many dispersed rural communities exist in, for example, a county such as Tyrone. Is it merely one? I further ask the Member whether he is not really at heart a city slicker who has gone to live in the country as a lifestyle option? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Wilson: I have been called many a thing but I have never been called a city slicker. I am as rustic and rural as the Member who just intervened.

Let us look at it, and let us not concentrate on just dispersed rural settlements. Mr Elliott asked an important question about the numbers of applications that have been allowed. Let us look not at the percentage that were permitted but at the numbers. If we take single dwellings, conversions, replacement dwellings and others such as

dispersed rural settlements, we see that, in 2010, in rural areas, 3,335 permissions were granted.

Do not forget that the vast majority of people live in urban areas. How many successful applications were there for properties in urban areas in that year? There were 2,980. There were more permissions for properties to be built in the countryside than in urban areas. That was not a one-off. In 2011-12, there were 3,299 successful applications in rural areas and 1,825 in urban areas.

When it comes to whether building opportunities are being afforded to people who wish to live in rural areas, given the number of successful applications, of course sites are being made available.

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

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will bring my remarks to a close, Mr Speaker. For those two reasons, this is not a policy that the Assembly ought to be pursuing if we want to protect the countryside while at the same time giving people the opportunity to live there.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this subject. The introduction of PPS 21 has greatly hindered non-farming rural dwellers' potential to build on their own land. Being from a rural area and having attended numerous planning meetings, I have heard at first hand the difficulties and frustrations that this has caused. Although I accept that there must be some form of regulation to prevent overdevelopment and protect our countryside, there needs to be a degree of flexibility built into the current provision. That is essential if we are to maintain our vibrant rural communities.

The introduction of the single policy statement presents an opportunity to take a fresh look at this long-running issue and explore the possible options to accommodate the non-farming rural dweller; for example, extending the policy to include the redevelopment of rural brownfield sites with a single dwelling. At present, policy CTY 4 allows for the conversion of suitable buildings. However, historical buildings also lend themselves easily to conversion.

The redevelopment of brownfield sites, including historically developed sites that currently have no buildings, could provide a great opportunity for old sites to be brought back into use to meet modern needs. There could also be increased flexibility around the footprint and curtilage of a site where walls of existing buildings remain to allow what could be a replacement building to have real potential. Another possibility could be to remove the criteria-based approach to the clustering policy CTY 2(a) and allow greater opportunity for planners to consolidate and round off existing clusters of development. I am aware of a number of applications that complied with the broad purpose of the policy but failed to be granted permission owing to the prescription of the criteria.

PPS 21 as it stands is simply too restrictive. Even in the provision for farm families — I take Tom Elliott's point — it creates unnecessary difficulties, particularly around the visual linkage test that is applied to farm dwellings. In my constituency, that has led to unsuitable sites being presented as the only option open to an applicant. It includes sites that are unsuitable because a mortgage cannot be obtained owing to the site's proximity to the farm dwelling, which is not always realised until the building has begun, and that are unsuitable as they would limit the expansion of the farm cluster.

No one wants a bungalow blight in our countryside or the speculative development that we saw in the past. However, we have to find a balance between the old and the new for farming and non-farming rural dwellers if we are to retain a strong and vibrant rural community. Provision needs to be made to allow realistic opportunities for those who live in the countryside to be able to remain there.

Mr I McCrea: This issue is always topical. The Member who spoke previously represents the same constituency as I do. I am well aware of the difficulties that exist there with the various planning applications, given that two thirds of the constituency is rural.

The matter presents me with some difficulty because, on the one hand, I would like to see a bit more of a relaxation take place, but, on the other, I understand the difficulties that that may bring, including for infrastructure such as sewerage, water, electricity and rural broadband, which is a bugbear of Mr McElduff's. Sometimes the negatives outweigh the positives.

Back in 2006, Mr McGlone and I attended planning meetings at Cookstown District Council and were informed that draft PPS 14 was to be introduced. No doubt he, like me, had been contacted by many constituents. Unfortunately, all the planning applications had to be in by 16 March. He, like me, was involved in many of those and in many of the difficulties and legal challenges that arose from them. From living in and representing a rural constituency, I know full well the difficulties that that policy brought. Around that time, I got the support of my colleagues who held the Minister of the Environment portfolio when they were looking at new and improved policies. Although the policies give people more opportunities to get planning approval, there are still difficulties. I can think of rural businesses that are in contact with me on many occasions about trying to get planning permission.

There is always an onus on the agents and architects of the people who are applying. Although many of them are true and honest and tell people when they apply that it will be very difficult to get planning approval, there are others who will submit a planning application regardless of the likely outcome, because they know that they are getting paid anyway. Some architects still have to get grips with that and be honest with their clients when the plans are presented to them.

I accept the amendment. It makes more sense to give the Minister a bit of scope to bring forward some changes to the proposal. It is a difficult issue that I am well aware of in my constituency, but we cannot go to an open-ended policy of providing houses anywhere where people want them. We have to find some mechanism for ensuring that people can live in the countryside while ensuring that the countryside is safeguarded.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an chomhalta a mhol an rún seo. I welcome the motion and commend the proposers.

I am delighted to speak here as a Fermanagh-based MLA who was a member of Fermanagh District Council for about 18 months. During that time, not too many planning applications were made, because people knew

that they were not going to be successful and so did not bother wasting £651 putting in a planning application that would be turned down causing a failed application to remain on the site, potentially jeopardising future planning applications.

So I did not deal with a whole pile of rural-based planning applications because people were pragmatic enough to know that they would not be successful. However, a few came in, some based on very good sites and some based on terrible sites, and, all the while, councillors such as, I presume, Mr McCrea, would back all their constituents to the hilt whether they were on good sites or not. I am sure that he will argue about PPS 21 and how bad it is in Cookstown in about three weeks time; that is the responsibility of all of us as councillors.

In everything that I have read, there is unanimous agreement that PPS 14 was an absolute failure and failed to meet the needs of rural dwellers. It demonstrates one of the deeply negative impacts of British-based Ministers who flew in here for a day or two at a time and left again. They did not understand the unique needs of the people here, and that is why there was so much hope when Sammy Wilson took over as Environment Minister that he would bring in a policy that would be much better suited to meet the needs of the people here. When draft PPS 21 was brought forward by a DUP Environment Minister, there was broad welcome for it. Some people said that it did not go far enough, and some thought that it was a good job to sort out PPS 14 in any way and then go back and have another thrashing out of PPS 21. Six years later, we are still trying to deal with the issue of rural-based non-farmers.

The policy of many people, particularly those in the British establishment — and I am disappointed to see some people in here labour the same position — is to move everyone into the town or city centre. Bog everybody into the town and that will solve all our problems. If everybody lived in the town, there would be no problems with lifting bins, with broadband or with footpaths, and you could move everybody into a town and then designate the whole rural area as a national park in one place —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: You could wreck the whole other part of the country with fracking and just leave the rest of it for people to tramp through day and night. I will give way to the Green man in the corner. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Agnew: I appreciate the Member giving way. Does he not accept that there is somewhere between the unfettered planning in rural areas at the minute and the moving-everyone-into-the-town attitude that he caricatures? With planned zoning of rural areas, we could have a regulated and constructive system without it going as far as he has just outlined.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have short interventions. I also say to the Member, as I said to Mr Wilson: let us call Members by their proper name.

Mr Flanagan: Mr Speaker, I was referring to him using a noun, not an adjective. I want to put that on the record.

If Mr Agnew talks about rural planning being unfettered, he does not understand the reality of the situation in rural areas, and I am very disappointed at that. I would be delighted to take him through some of the problems that we face in rural communities.

The policy of moving everybody into the town will not sort it out. There was agreement to bring forward a revised policy under the guise of PPS 21, and it failed to take account of the needs of rural-based non-farming families. That is still accepted. Mr Wilson says that we cannot have a policy that deals solely with one section of the community, and that is fine, but they have not been dealt with in any of the planning policies to date, and that needs to be sorted out. I agree with some Members that —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will, yes. Go on ahead.

4.15 pm

Mr Wilson: I will give the Member the figures. There have been over 3,000 successful applications for single dwellings in the countryside in each of the past two years. Surely that gives opportunities, because some of those sites will be sold to people who wish to live in the countryside to take the opportunity to live there.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an added minute.

Mr Flanagan: It is interesting that Mr Wilson raises that point because those houses are not being bought by the sons and daughters of the people who owned land nearby. I do not know whether they have been built speculatively, but the speculators are not coming to me to look for support for planning applications, so I know nothing about those things. It is the people who were born and bred on the land who cannot get planning permission, and that is where the problem lies. It is not about facilitating people who want to buy a site to build a house and then sell it on at a huge profit. That is not what this is about.

There is a huge difficulty in rural communities in supporting members of rural-based community organisations or people who are employed in the locality to get people to live in the local area. We need to sort the problem out. Were this policy to be addressed so that there could be greater opportunities for rural-based construction, it would have a significant impact on the construction industry, which has been devastated in rural communities such as Fermanagh and Tyrone and is on its knees, as we have all heard about 45 times, because of the collapse of the construction industry. There is not a young person left in Fermanagh because they have all emigrated. If we sort the problem out, it could help to get some of them back.

The review of PPS 21 was inadequate. In my final 15 seconds, I want to make the point that people born and bred in the country cannot get a house built, but there is a planning application on the books for somebody to build 15 holiday homes and a private airstrip in Letterbreen —

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

Mr Flanagan: — but somebody else cannot build a single bungalow. Where is the fairness?

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus mo bhuíochas le moltóirí an rúin seo chomh maith. I thank the proposer of the motion.

Like many Members with a particular interest in the debate, I am from, live in and represent a rural constituency. I know the difficulties faced by farming and non-farming rural

dwellers when seeking planning permission and, indeed, in obtaining planning permission to build in the countryside.

I want to put on record my appreciation of those planning officers who genuinely look for solutions in the midst of policy. Many of them genuinely seek solutions; I have dealt with them in offices such as in Ballymena, Omagh and Belfast.

I have supported many constituents — Mr McCrea mentioned it earlier — in their attempts to secure planning permission in the face of what they see as a tangle of bureaucratic red tape and rigid and uncompromising restrictions on where and what they can build. I am talking about people with an attachment to the land, who are from the area and usually from the farm or property for which they are trying to get planning permission.

I welcome the motion and the debate on what the Minister of the Environment can do to improve the situation and adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of rural dwellers.

I listened very carefully as Mr Wilson gave the figures for development in the countryside as opposed to that in some of our urban areas. For many rural dwellers — again, I am talking about genuine people from and of the land who wish to build on land on which their families may have lived for generations — this is the rural option for an affordable home. They do not have to pay the £20,000, £30,000 or £40,000 — it used to be over £100,000 — in site costs that others who are lucky to have the money can avail themselves of.

As our amendment makes clear, I disagree with the motion in that it calls for revised legislation, which is unnecessary. A revised planning policy as part of a single planning policy statement inclusive of PPS 21 would be sufficient to address the problem. Such an approach would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers who apply for planning permission in the countryside and would enable those rural dwellers to obtain planning permission for rural sites.

For many people, the current PPS, which refers to the need for a farm dwelling to be visually linked to existing farm buildings, is not enough.

The astute and learned planners to my right will know that we need to look at the location, site and design aspects so that, as Mr Elliott said, a much better site can be located on the farm, not in proximity to slurry, as one person described it. That really is an issue that has to be addressed.

On the issue of farm dwellings, I know from dealing with planners that two Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) decisions, which were made in, I think, November or December last year, defined "farm activity" and "farm business" in a much more rigid fashion. That, in itself, is making the existing PPS 21 much more difficult to interpret, and, consequently, it is much more difficult for genuine farm dwellers and people from farming stock to get planning permission.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes.

Mr Allister: On that point of "active farmer", we all know that, in many cases, the DARD box is ticked if you have a single farm payment number, whether or not you have animals — a person may be retired. However, given the change coming under CAP reform, with its more vigorous definition of "active farming", does the Member agree that that, of necessity, will end up being reflected in the planning policy definition of "active farmer"? Will that not make a significant difference?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McGlone: Thank you, and I thank the Member for his intervention. That, along with the PAC decisions, will make it very restrictive for people with a genuine cause and genuine concern to get planning permission. In fact, that has been raised with me already by one of my party's councillors in Magherafelt.

A balance has to be found between the need to sustain rural communities, farming and non-farming, and having an unfettered free-for-all in the countryside. Planning policy is where that balance is struck. It is important that, in setting that balance, the Minister is conscious of the vital and unique resource that is our countryside. I take on board entirely Mr Wilson's point: I have stood on sites where planning permission had been refused for a small bungalow on a hill, yet planning permission is granted to wind farms. A proposal for one in my constituency is due to come up shortly. These massive metal structures are put on the ridge of an area of outstanding natural beauty. There, too, a balance has to be struck between environmental tourism and other economic concerns. That definitely must be looked at. Rural communities are the caretakers of an exceptional and distinctive —

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

Mr McGlone: — mix of the natural and built environment, and I ask the Minister to take into account the need for social and economic development to sustain such rural communities —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr McGlone: — with new development and through employment opportunities.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Few in the House and even fewer living or wishing to live in our countryside would dare say that PPS 21 was not an improvement on the previous draft PPS 14. That policy came in for heavy criticism, and rightly so. It could have been written only by a direct rule Minister, and I hope that no one in the Assembly would ever have dared to put their name to it. It was, quite simply, an overindulgence in restrictions and paid little heed to economic or local community factors, so I was glad when it was unceremoniously scrapped.

Nevertheless, when it was announced that it was being withdrawn and replaced by PPS 21, the then Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, claimed that the new planning policy statement offered a range of opportunities for development in the countryside that had not existed under its predecessor. Almost all those opportunities, it was claimed, would, importantly, benefit non-farming rural dwellers as well as farmers. However, unfortunately, there were still problems, none more so than for the people who might have grown up in the countryside but did not come from a direct farming background.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that there is no restriction on how sites are used, does she

accept that the number of successful applications, whether or not the people involved were farm dwellers, allowed sites to become available for people to purchase if they wished to live in the countryside?

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member for his intervention. He has somewhat floored me: I was waiting for an attack. *[Laughter.]* People who were raised in a rural area often find themselves with no choice but to look towards our towns and villages when establishing a new home for themselves. It is now virtually impossible for those people to get planning permission for a new dwelling in the countryside, except for a few small exceptions. Although I am vehemently opposed to any notion of a building free-for-all, we need a sensible balance.

Restrictions on non-farming dwellers may well keep more of our countryside looking green, but they also mean that schools, churches and local communities are often starved of what they need most — new, often younger families in the area. Indeed, a slowly ageing population will spell crisis for the fragile vitality of our rural communities. Schools in those rural areas, whether literally surrounded by green fields or located in the middle of their local village, face a distinct disadvantage as planning policies, as well as the provision of services and jobs, become increasingly centred around areas of population. A five-minute look at the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statistics on the proximity of services will prove my point. Mr Wilson was very good on the statistics earlier.

The area planning process across our schools estate should have provided an opportunity for rural schools to consider how best to move forward in the coming years. Instead, it has spread fear and apprehension in the rural community. I hold the Department of Education squarely responsible for that. That is why my party has called for major strategic changes.

The damaging impact on school enrolments is just one example of what happens when planning policies that are in need of reform are counterproductively enforced without the required flexibility. As I have said, our countryside must be protected, not least for the generations to come, but it should not be considered as entirely beyond reach for non-farming dwellers. Indeed, the Executive, through the rural White Paper action plan, have an obligation to put in place a fair yet effective rural planning process. Although that paper is too narrow in ambition, I at least credit it for recognising the obligations that the Assembly and Executive have to provide for strong and resilient communities. That must include accommodating non-farming dwellers.

The current preparation of a single strategic planning policy statement, as the amendment states, presents us with an opportunity to rectify many of the problems currently facing the planning system in Northern Ireland. We do not need a free-for-all planning system; we need one that protects the countryside and allows flexibility for non-farming dwellers.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I begin by thanking the proposer of the motion. I am grateful to Members for their contributions to the debate. I am also grateful to my colleague Colum Eastwood for the tabled amendment, which, I believe, sets out a more realistic road map for addressing the needs of all rural dwellers — farmers and non-farm dwellers alike.

As Members will be aware, the issue of how non-farming rural dwellers are considered in rural planning policy is a long-standing area of interest and debate. In fact, the issue was raised as far back as October 2007, when my Department assumed responsibility for rural planning from the Department for Regional Development. We remember — many Members referred to it today — PPS 14, which was an overly restrictive rural planning policy imposed by direct rule Ministers. Everyone has agreed that it was failing rural communities and needed to be revised. A ministerial subcommittee was established to do just that.

The outcome of the subcommittee's review was draft PPS 21, which was published for public consultation on 25 November 2008. The draft policy represented a significant relaxation of the unnecessarily restrictive PPS 14. Following the publication of draft PPS 21, the then Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, established an independent working group to explore policy options for non-farming rural dwellers, with a particular focus on kinship as a way of providing such a policy. The group considered a wide range of statistical and other information, including the planning policy context in other jurisdictions in the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

4.30 pm

The group took the view that a fundamental question arose about how to distinguish between the farming community and the non-farming community. At that time, the group concluded that it was difficult to define exactly what a non-farming rural dweller was. It considered that adopting the term as the basis for a new policy would be open to inconsistency of interpretation, approach, application and enforcement. In short, it concluded that planning applications for single houses should not be determined on the basis of rural kinship, connection or occupation. Those tasked with applying such a policy would be open to the ongoing challenge of definition and assessment, resulting in appeal and/or judicial review. Furthermore, the Department considered that policies that rely on kinship or residency were unlikely to constitute the proper discharge of its equality or good relations obligations under section 75. This is because they would favour people of the race, religion or political opinion most prevalent in an area and significantly disadvantage others. In light of the difficulties identified by the working group, the finalised policy, published in June 2010 and endorsed by the then Executive, did not include a policy based on the category of non-farming rural dweller.

Because of the decision not to include a specific policy on non-farming rural dwellers, the Executive subcommittee made every effort to ensure that the range of PPS 21 policies provided sufficient opportunities for all sections of the rural community, not just those from a farming background. With this objective in mind, PPS 21 sets out a range of policies that provide many development opportunities for non-farming rural dwellers: new dwellings within an existing cluster or ribbon of development; social and affordable housing developments; the conversion and reuse of non-residential buildings as dwellings; development within designated dispersed rural communities; replacement dwellings; and a dwelling to meet personal and domestic circumstances. Any farm dwelling approved under policy CTY 10 may be occupied by non-farmers and may be sold off without restriction.

I believe that, taken together, these policy provisions already provide significant opportunities for people from a non-farming background to continue to live in the countryside so that rural communities can be sustained and can thrive. In fact, Members should note that, in the period from the publication of the final policy in June 2010 until September 2013, the Department approved a total of 7,082 planning applications for new single dwellings in the countryside. It is important to remember that these opportunities are in addition to replacement dwellings and to the significant existing housing stock across rural Northern Ireland, which is available to meet the housing needs of people from rural areas. Fundamentally, PPS 21 strikes a fine balance between allowing necessary rural development to sustain rural communities and avoiding excessive urban sprawl in the countryside.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. He mentioned that 7,082 new single dwellings had been approved: can he give a figure for how many applications have been received, so that we can get a sense of proportion?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the intervention. That is a useful and interesting question. I have not got the detail at hand, but I will certainly get back to the Member in writing on that question.

Mr Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Will he accept that the percentage of applications that are successful is very high, at well over 80%?

Mr Durkan: Yes, statistics on percentages of success were given earlier by my colleague Colum Eastwood and by Ms Lo, Chair of the Committee. I have not got a percentage for those three years, but we heard percentages for last year and the first two quarters of this year, all of which were over 80%.

It is important that we avoid excessive — any — urban sprawl in the countryside. The way that PPS 21 achieves that is through focusing development on existing clusters of rural development, such as existing farm groups. I believe that, broadly speaking, the policy has done a fair enough job of balancing the competing priorities. I am not saying that it is perfect or that it has been problem-free; obviously, it has not. However, where concerns have been raised about aspects of its operation, the Department has sought to look into and address them. I hope that Members can recognise that. My predecessor's rolling review of the operation of the policy is a good example. The review took place in response to valid concerns that the policy was being applied inconsistently across area planning offices or, in some cases, was being applied more strictly than it should have been. The review identified policy areas where additional flexibility was necessary, such as for dwellings on farms, replacement dwellings, conversion and reuse of existing buildings, new dwellings in existing clusters and developments in gap sites. To address those issues, a number of actions were taken through the review. They included a comprehensive staff training programme, an ongoing peer review of the way that rural applications are dealt with and the publication of a rural design guide.

The report of the review concluded that PPS 21 was working much more effectively and enjoyed widespread support and that the need for a fundamental review of the policy did not arise. I am satisfied that, as a result of the review and the measures that have been taken, the policy continues to be applied with greater consistency and more appropriate flexibility to ensure that it meets all rural dwellers' needs. The most recently published statistics support that view.

Members will be aware that I have instructed officials to prepare a draft strategic planning policy statement that will consolidate the provisions of the existing suite of PPSs, including PPS 21, into a single policy document that is simpler, shorter and more strategic in focus. My intention is that the draft SPPS should be published for public consultation later this month. I propose to use that consultation as a further opportunity to listen to and to take into account the views of Members and the public on the full range of issues associated with rural planning policy.

I will turn to some other issues that Members raised today. I will not get to them all, but I will certainly respond to Members in writing on those that I do not address. Mr McElduff raised the issue of a lack of dispersed rural communities. When planning powers transfer to councils as part of the reform of local government in 2015, councils will be required to prepare local development plans that will designate dispersed local communities where appropriate. Mr McElduff also raised the question of greater flexibility in non-nucleated settlements. PPS 21 already allows a degree of flexibility by allowing dwellings in non-nucleated clusters, such as crossroads. The need for flexibility in the application of the policy was highlighted and emphasised in the recent operational review. Nevertheless, the issue can be examined further through the consultation on the SPPS.

Mr Elliott and Mr Wilson raised the problem of banks refusing to lend because of an occupancy condition. My predecessor liaised with the Council of Mortgage Lenders on that matter. He sought to address lenders' concerns by making it clear that, in the event of a repossession and following an application by a lender to discharge the condition, it would be removed, thereby allowing the lender to dispose of the property. That has provided the certainty that lenders sought, and I am not aware that it continues to be that much of a problem. However, if any Member has evidence that it continues to be an issue, I will certainly look closely at it. I have written to specific lenders on a case-by-case basis on the issue and have resolved matters satisfactorily.

Mr Wilson also told us that he enjoys the countryside. I thought that I had successfully erased that image from my memory. Mr Elliott asked about withdrawn applications. I do not have that detail with me. However, under the suite of improvements to the planning system that I announced a couple of weeks ago, we will see enhanced pre-application discussions, much better access to planners and, therefore, better applications and fewer withdrawals or less need for people to withdraw.

The motion calls on me to

> *"bring forward revised legislation that would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission*

and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside."

I hope that I have demonstrated today that the current policy is not failing to meet the needs of rural dwellers and that non-farming rural dwellers are, in fact, catered for through the policy. I therefore oppose the unamended motion. I am open to the views of Members and the public on the matter —

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Flanagan: Does the Minister not agree with his party colleagues who, immediately before the last Assembly elections, said that PPS 21 needed to be changed to facilitate non-farming rural families?

Mr Durkan: I outlined the rolling review of PPS 21 commissioned and ordered by my predecessor and the enhanced flexibilities that have been applied to the policy since. That is evidenced in statistics that have been used today. Many Members in the Chamber have been in to see me with constituents on specific issues. They know that I will explore options in a positive manner and, where possible and practicable, find solutions for applicants.

As I have indicated, I will use the consultation on the SPPS to facilitate any improvements to the policy. Therefore, I support the amendment, which calls for the published SPPS to adequately meet the needs of farming and non-farming rural dwellers. I commend the amendment to the Chamber.

Mr A Maginness: I thank everybody who indicated their support for the amendment, and I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. It was a good-humoured debate and exceptionally constructive, and there was a commonality throughout.

Mr McElduff started proceedings by proposing the motion and indicated that he was concerned about the needs of the rural community and the need for young people, in particular, to be accommodated. Indeed, that was reflected throughout all the contributions. The SDLP's view is that there is a need to ensure that the countryside is sustainable and vibrant and that there is an acknowledgement of the need for a fit-for-purpose planning policy for non-farming rural dwellers. The policy must also address and prevent any adverse environmental impact — a point emphasised by Ms Lo — and it must allow for economic development in rural areas. Therefore, I think that there was commonality throughout.

4.45 pm

What I noted from the various contributions was a marginal degree of difference. Mr Elliott, for example, said that there must not be a free-for-all. Those views were reflected by other colleagues in the Chamber. The one word that came across was "balance", the need for balance in planning policy for rural areas. Of course, during the nightmare of pre-devolution direct rule, Lord Rooker insisted on bringing in PPS 14, which really paralysed development in the countryside. That was rejected by everyone. Nobody really contributed to that point, except, to some extent — maybe from a sedentary position — Mr Agnew. He regards PPS 21 as something rather calamitous for the countryside. I think that, in the main, people regard PPS 21 as an advance. It provides a degree of flexibility and balance that is necessary in dealing with the countryside.

Like Mrs Cameron, I hold the view that we must protect our countryside. It is very important that we do that and are rigorous in so doing. We cannot allow a free-for-all, and I think that the Minister, as he said in his conclusion, is of that view. He feels that PPS 21 has done a fair enough job hitherto but is not perfect. Concerns have been expressed, and he and the Department have taken those on board. There are areas where inconsistency is a problem, but it is now working much better. There will be no fundamental review, but the Minister plans to develop a sense of flexibility in planning policy. He believes that the strategic plan that will be developed should provide a solution to the problems that Mr McElduff quite properly brought to the attention of the House.

I am grateful to Mr McElduff and his colleagues in Sinn Féin and to colleagues in the DUP for indicating their support for the amendment. I think that Ulster Unionist Party colleagues will act in a similar vein. I encourage our friends in the Alliance Party to do likewise, because I think that the Minister's approach is moderate, balanced and proper. I hope that you can support it and will not divide the House on the issue. I think that there is enough consensus to make this work well.

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

Mr A Maginness: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt ar son an rúin seo agus an leasaithe. I speak in favour of the motion and the amendment. I thank those who contributed to the debate for their informed contributions and thoughts. I want to read this into the record before commenting on some Members' comments.

Development in our countryside has long been a somewhat thorny issue. In this debate, there has been a wide range of often competing notions and opinions on where and how the appropriate balance should be struck between, on the one hand, the obvious and implicit need to protect our countryside from inappropriate development and, on the other hand, the equally important need to provide adequate development opportunities in order to sustain our rural communities.

As a society, we derive much benefit from our rural spaces. It goes without saying that we as a people have a responsibility to manage that space in a fashion that preserves its integrity for the benefit of our wildlife and environment and for the enjoyment and use of our future generations.

On that basis, it is not only proper but essential that there are constraints in place to control avoidable or unnecessary development in the countryside.

Although farming interests account for a good portion of our rural communities, it is important not to underestimate the degree to which those communities also comprise non-farming rural dwellers. A great many families who live in the open countryside are not connected to the farming industry, and that has thrown up something of a difficulty for our current planning policy. As it stands, the criteria regulating development in PPS 21 are largely in practice extremely difficult for the majority of non-farming rural dwellers to make use of. Opportunities under the current policy to develop on small landholdings to facilitate the

creation of a new home are rare. Although mechanisms such as replacement dwellings, the reuse of existing buildings, gap sites and new buildings in cluster sites provide opportunities, I do not agree with the assessment made by the former Minister that provisions under PPS 21 provide significant and sufficient opportunity for non-farming rural dwellers to live in the countryside. I hear regularly of the difficulties faced by young families when trying to establish a property foothold in rural areas.

Awareness and responsibility are key themes that will and must always underpin our planning regime. Future development in the countryside must be managed in a manner that respects and protects that environment but that is also sympathetic to the needs and requirements of our rural communities. In particular, there is an onus on policymakers to ensure that our planning policy provides sufficient and suitable mechanisms through which those needs and requirements can be facilitated, where necessary.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Wilson: On the question of sufficiency, given that the figures show that, last year, the approvals for dwellings in rural areas were almost twice as high as approvals for dwellings in urban areas, how many successful applications have there got to be? How loose must the policy be to meet the Member's demand for sufficiency? What does he mean by sufficiency?

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for the intervention. I was going to pick up on the points that you raise. Mr Wilson, it is grand that, as you expressed, over 3,300 houses have been allowed. They have been passed under certain criteria. Therefore, if it is a case of us needing need to look at the criteria again, as you are saying — *[Interruption.]* If you are saying that there are too many, what I am saying, and why we brought the motion to the House today, is that there is still a gap in the policy. I will go on with my comments, and I will perhaps make my comments on what you brought up more clear later.

Mr Speaker: Let us have remarks through the Chair.

Mr Boylan: I want to put this on record, Mr Speaker, and then I will return to doing so: I understand the point that you are trying to make, Mr Wilson.

A great number of our population live in the countryside and have a strong affinity with it. For many, their rural surroundings encapsulate their sense of identity. That sense of identity has, over countless generations, created a very strong sense of community and belonging in many of our rural hinterlands. The strength, diversity and vibrancy of those communities are of great benefit to the region and a constituent part of our identity on the island. It is vital that those communities be allowed to survive and flourish. The current policy is having a detrimental effect on the sustainability of many of our rural communities. Children who have grown up in townlands and parishes, and who have a close affinity with and sense of belonging to those areas and communities, are struggling under the current policy to obtain the necessary permission to set up homes there.

I will pick up on some of the points that have been raised. I commend my colleague Barry McElduff because he set the tone for the debate. In opening the debate, he mentioned two things: meeting the needs of the rural community and maintaining rural communities. That is what the motion is about. This has been going on since day one, even in Mr Wilson's time as Minister. This has been going on for six or seven years, and there is still a gap. I will pick up on Mr Wilson's point specifically, because he argues the number of houses. I will put it this way: the question on what we are concerned about has to be asked. Are we concerned about a bungalow in every field? Is that the question? If that is the question that needs to be asked, I say this: although the majority of people who live in the countryside are from a non-farming background, the majority of the land owned is in the agricultural sector. As the policy sits at the minute, for farming, it is one newbuild house every 10 years. That is the reality.

Mr Wilson talked about the number of buildings. If there are sufficient criteria to meet the needs of the non-farming community — and I take it that if I gave percentages, it would be the bigger percentage — why would we be so concerned about only a narrow group of people not being there? You can argue it both ways; that is what I am saying. There is a narrow group of people with smallholdings who can apply. Mr Flanagan brought it up in his contribution; he said that there was no facility for those people to apply. He also told me about the actual numbers that have been passed due to personal and domestic circumstances. How many? I go back to your original question. I take your point about there being so many newbuilds, but I have to ask about the criteria for the newbuilds. There are a lot of replacements that should have been used long ago. The policy, for some reason or other, focused on abandonment, but now we have brought the replacement element in. I agree with all that. I am trying to make a case for the people who are still coming to us and saying that there is a slight gap in the policy. I ask the Minister to look at that.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mr Wilson: Regardless of who those newbuild permissions are given to, does the Member accept that the policy, because of the flexibility contained in it now, allows every one of those permissions, if the owners so desire, to go on to the market? That means that anyone who wishes to live in the countryside will have an opportunity to purchase a site to build a house.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member. The purpose of this request to the Minister is not to go back to selling sites. That is not what this is about. It is about creating another criterion. We have tried the issue of occupancy. You got the issue answered about mortgage lenders. We want the issue of kinship, connection, or whatever it may take, to be explored again. Those people should be given an opportunity. That is why we have brought the motion.

We can go on the stats that the Minister has brought, but my experience, and what I hear from people in smallholdings who cannot apply, is that they do not have a building, or anything else on the land, that they can replace. They do not have a small shed to reuse, nor are they in the areas mentioned by the Minister for clustering or to be a focal point and all that.

I ask for support for our motion. I ask the Minister to take on board the suggestions that we have brought forward, including the suggestion from my colleague Ian Milne

about brownfield sites. I ask the Minister to reconsider it. The review was not carried out correctly.

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

Mr Boylan: I will now, Mr Speaker.

The review was not correct. It left out non-farming rural dwellers who have not applied, so it cannot be a full test of what is going on in the countryside. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised planning policy as part of the single planning policy statement, inclusive of PPS 21, which would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers, applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside.*

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Addiction Treatment Unit: Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, Omagh

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately up to five minutes.

Mr Hussey: I begin by paying tribute to the staff who work in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh. I suppose that I should declare an interest: my late father was a psychiatric nurse there. The hospital has a well-earned reputation for the service it delivers to patients from Tyrone, Fermanagh and County Londonderry.

5.00 pm

Health issues are one of the common denominators in politics. It is a leveller, and one thing that West Tyrone MLAs can agree on without dissent — I hope. I am sure that some of my colleagues will also touch on the fact that, when it comes to cuts in the health service, Omagh always seems to be the place where the axe falls. Diverting slightly from the subject, when the Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals came into the spotlight, I had to bite my lip. We went through that same feeling of abandonment when our hospital, the Tyrone County Hospital, was downgraded. Despite our well-organised and coordinated campaign, our pleas fell on deaf ears. Let us hope that today's debate has a different outcome.

On 17 October, I asked the Minister for his assessment of the future of the addiction treatment unit (ATU) at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh. Naturally, the Minister did not provide an answer at the time other than to refer me to the:

> *"consultation on Inpatient Based Addiction Treatment Services, which outlines proposals for a re-configuration of all the Tier 4 addiction services currently delivered by the ... Trusts".*

He also stated:

> *"The Consultation highlights that the present service configuration is characterised by variation in structure, role and function. It therefore sets out proposals for a more standardised, and evidence-based, regional model."*

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I intend to submit the Hansard record of this debate to the consultation, which has been extended until this Friday, 24 January.

I have concerns that someone, somewhere has looked at the issue and, for purely financial reasons, has decided that the simple solution is to centralise. It is as if they have said, "Let us find the hospital that can provide the service and centralise the service there". The proposals suggest that the tier 4 service should be provided at Holywell Hospital in Antrim, which has 10 beds, and the Downshire Hospital, which has 14 beds — a total of 24 beds. I really feel that that is insufficient and that, by following those

suggestions, we will end up with a very poor service that cannot reflect the needs of our society.

The consultation document suggests that we in the Western Trust area do not have access to tier 4 beds and that future patients will be referred to Holywell Hospital. In the document, we read:

> *"Alcohol and Drug misuse are major public health issues that impact on society at a variety of levels. It is estimated that approximately £680 million is spent annually in Northern Ireland to address alcohol misuse, including costs to healthcare, policing, probation and prison services, social services and as a result of work absenteeism ...*
>
> *Drug Misuse also impacts upon society and although overall usage is low in comparison to alcohol misuse, the need to reduce drug related harm is also a key public health priority. The advent of so called 'legal highs' and the increasing sale of prescribed medication over the internet also present real challenges to society."*

I will go slightly off script to mention legal highs. My colleagues will be well aware of the problems that we have with those in Omagh and of the shop in Old Market Place that sells them despite the consequences. I have raised the issue with the Justice and Health Ministers, and we must keep the pressure on to stop the scourge growing any further. In many cases, their use is the beginning of a drug habit. Our local press covered the demonstrations that were held outside the shop that sells products such as Magic Dragon and highlighted the concerns of parents and local residents.

I now return to the matter at hand. In the consultation document, we are advised:

> *"Three-quarters of the adult population drink alcohol ... the proportion classified as problem drinkers [is] 1 in 10 and those drinking at harmful levels [is] 1 in 20; the latter equating to 47,000 individuals."*

It also advises:

> *"There were 252 alcohol related deaths in 2011".*

In relation to drug misuse, the consultation document states:

> *"surveys show that over a quarter of the population (16-64yrs) has used drugs."*

It also states:

> *"The rate of referral for drug treatment trebled between 2001-2012."*

It further suggests that, over the past five years, the number of drug-related deaths was around 30. I believe that the figures illustrate a need for the retention of addiction treatment units in all parts of Northern Ireland.

If Mr McElduff does not raise the issue of rural proofing during his contribution to the debate, I will be more than surprised. Tyrone and Fermanagh are rural counties, and any indices or surveys that are conducted will indicate the availability of transport for people in those counties. People need to be able to get to facilities, and I am afraid that the Antrim and Downpatrick suggestions do not offer any positive support for people in my constituency of West Tyrone.

Do you mind if I sit down, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Not at all. Please do.

Mr Hussey: Drug abuse is a common factor throughout the United Kingdom, and we would be foolish in the extreme to believe that it will reduce in the coming years. For that reason, I firmly believe that we need to retain and strengthen the provision of treatment centres in the Province and in the rural west.

I mentioned the work of the local press, and again I refer to the 'Tyrone Constitution' and the 'Ulster Herald'. The headline in the 'Tyrone Constitution' ran:

> *"'Please don't close the doors ... it's our lifeline' urges Omagh addiction and treatment service user."*

On the same day, Thursday 9 January 2014, the headline in the 'Ulster Herald' was:

> *"Addiction Treatment Unit saved my life."*

I will quote from the articles to demonstrate the depth of feeling on the issue. A service user of the addiction treatment unit in Omagh said that it had saved her life. I will not name the individual, but she was willing to be named in the local press. She said that she had hit "rock bottom" when she first attended the unit in 1999. Having witnessed the positive impact that the ATU has had on so many lives over its 40-year existence, she said that there would be "devastating consequences" if it were allowed to close. She said:

> *"I hit my rock bottom and went to my first AA meeting in July 1999. Within a week, I was in the ATU undergoing a six-week programme. I had to go into the unit to get better. The ATU saved my life and has had such a positive impact on countless people and their families over the years. I still regularly attend the weekly meetings, which are really well attended. It is a great support network for so many and will be really badly missed if it is allowed to go".*

I will go slightly off script for a moment to pay tribute to Ramona House, which provides a great service to those with drink-related problems. I and many of my colleagues have been encouraged to visit the facility and meet the residents. I can only congratulate the staff and residents on what they do and how they and former residents help to hold a lot of people together during very trying times. I am sure that many of my colleagues in all constituencies will concur that we regularly have to help individuals and families with drink-related problems.

In the 'Tyrone Constitution,' we read the following comment:

> *"My opinion is that instead of closing addiction and treatment services we should be expanding them because there is a great influx of teenagers coming into addiction services and we need to be ready for them."*

I repeat:

> *"there is a great influx of teenagers coming into addiction services and we need to be ready for them."*

That chilling comment should be enough for us all to sit up, pay attention and take action. I continue the quotation:

> *"Right at this moment as you're reading this some parent is holding a baby that might just need the addiction treatment unit in years to come".*

If that does not send a chill down your spine, nothing will. We have to have a reality check and accept that the scourge of drug taking and addiction to alcohol will not go away. We have to ensure that, should it become an epidemic, we as a society can cope and provide support.

The staff at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh are professionals. Their ability to deliver a service is outstanding. We in West Tyrone have become cynics because it appears that, should a service need to be downgraded or removed, Omagh always appears on the radar. We have had promises and assurances, but we have seen all those possibilities crumble to dust. The threat to remove other mental health services still hangs over Omagh, the suggestion being that they be removed to the new South West Acute Hospital. That is despite promises and assurances given by many Health Ministers. We now have a situation in which, in planning for the future, we can ensure that there is a service in the west and that it is based in Omagh. That is my hope for the future of the addictions treatment unit.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Buchanan, and the Member has up to five minutes.

Mr Buchanan: I hope that the Speaker will be a wee bit lenient —

Mr Speaker: Order. As Members know, I do not set the time limits for debates in the House; they are set by the Business Committee. The Member knows that I give some leniency to Members.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Let me say, first, that the House is no stranger to debates on health-related matters in the Omagh and Fermanagh area.

The people of Omagh and Fermanagh are bitterly disappointed that, yet again, the consultation on inpatient-based addiction treatment services proposes to remove vital health services from Omagh, leaving not only the Omagh district but the entire western region bereft of inpatient addiction treatment services. This runs contrary to the very ethos of Transforming Your Care (TYC) and its predecessor, Developing Better Services, both of which advocate local patient-centred services. Over the past five years, admissions to the addiction treatment unit in Omagh have been significantly higher than admissions to the Northlands Centre. Omagh admissions range from 54 to 63 a year compared with 30 to 41 patients a year at Northlands.

When we look at the geographical spread of patients who used such services in the past five years, we see that the majority came from the Omagh District Council area, followed by patients from the Fermanagh and Strabane districts. Those statistics prove that the service must be retained in a central location such as Omagh. Asking patients to travel from rural parts of County Fermanagh and County Tyrone to avail themselves of inpatient treatments at Antrim or Downpatrick or, indeed, rehabilitation in Londonderry simply will not work and will have an adverse impact on people from the rural south-west, rather than providing a better service, as is suggested in the consultation document.

The recommendation that tier 4 inpatient services should be located at only Antrim and Downpatrick, with rehabilitation at Northlands, Londonderry, and Carlisle House in Belfast, because that will provide equal access to services across all trust areas is utter folly and will cause additional stress and anxiety to patients and their families. Although tier 3 is to be enhanced and further developed in the community, that cannot happen at the expense of tier 4 inpatient services. Many service users have testified that removal from their home environment to a secure facility was the only way that they were able to deal with their addiction problems.

Alcohol addiction is prevalent in rural areas, and it is especially difficult to get rural people, first, to accept that they have a problem and, secondly, to ask for help. Whether that is because of pride or embarrassment, those difficulties will be further exacerbated if people have to consider availing themselves of services that are not locally based, causing isolation from their family support network.

The correlation between substance abuse and mental health problems cannot be overemphasised, and they cannot be taken in isolation. That is why the inpatient addiction treatment service in Omagh should not be considered in isolation from inpatient acute mental health services, which is a matter still awaiting a decision. I make it clear that the Western Health and Social Care Trust, the local council and other health-related agencies are strongly of the opinion that Omagh is the correct location for the acute mental health facility, as part of the second phase of the new enhanced hospital. Indeed, that was a promise and a commitment given to the people of Omagh by direct rule Minister Mr Shaun Woodward. There is no doubt that the facility would be further enhanced by the development of a full 24/7 addiction treatment service for the entire west of Northern Ireland, centrally located in the Western Trust area.

The current detoxification and rehabilitation service at Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital is delivered by a skilled and experienced consultant-led team. That model of care can be developed and built on in the second phase of the acute mental health facility in Omagh. Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital has been a stalwart NHS facility for well over 100 years in delivering services. It can and will continue to deliver the services required by the people of the area and beyond if it is properly resourced. That would also help to remove the stigma of this being the Cinderella service in the Department of Health. Minister, I urge you to give serious consideration to the retention and further development of the addiction treatment unit at Omagh and to the second phase of the new hospital being the acute mental health facility.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I commend the Minister for being here to listen to the debate. I thank Ross Hussey for securing the debate. I tabled a similar request, but, understandably, at that time, the Minister was not available to come to the House. It is appropriate that we discuss the issue when the Minister is available.

As previous contributors have said, we are dealing with a consultation on a very specialist service. It is my

understanding that there are two main elements to this. The first is all about detoxification and stabilisation, for which there is currently no specific provision in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. The proposal is for two regional centres, with 12 beds each. People from the Western Health and Social Care Trust area would have to go to Holywell Hospital in County Antrim for that service.

With others, I attended the public meeting on Wednesday 13 November in the Tyrone County Hospital postgraduate centre. People who were present were alarmed at the fact that the consultation document was so prescriptive in making specific reference to Holywell in that instance. It did not appear like a consultation document; it appeared like something that was done and dusted.

5.15 pm

People have said to me that there are dangers in this, because detox can be a very serious medical condition and life-threatening if not handled properly. People emphasise the difficulty of getting an ambulance to Holywell from an area west of the Bann where ambulance cover is scant.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Member for giving way and apologise to the Member who brought the topic to the House for not being here at the beginning of the debate.

Does the Member agree with me that for those attending the addictions treatment unit in Omagh, particularly those with complex needs who come from the rural areas that we represent, like Killen, Ardstraw, Aghyaran and Killeter, and are heavily dependent on transport and, in particular, community transport — we do not have the public transport infrastructure there — the stress that this causes to their families, having to avail themselves of services outside the locality, outside the Omagh area, further compounds the situation and impacts on those using the service? The further away the service, the less likely an individual is to use it and benefit from it.

Mr Speaker: Order. I said to the House much earlier that interventions should be very short and should not be statements. It eats into the time of the Member who has given the Floor very graciously. We need to be careful. You are almost at the point of making a statement. The Member has an added minute.

Mr McElduff: I support Michaela Boyle in the point that she made. I will not now make my point about the public transport deficit. Michaela made it adequately, and I am happy that she did so.

Only two inpatient treatment units are proposed for the whole region: one in Derry and one in Carlisle House. These services are to be delivered by the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector has its role to play, of course. Places like Northlands have excellent reputations and have helped very many people. I was glad to hear Mr Hussey praise the work of Ramona House in Omagh. However, one thing that is absolutely crucial in any treatment programme is the support and input of family members. Input of family members may involve night-time meetings; that is where you get the good outcomes and results. Families will not be able to make inputs to the treatment programmes if they are so distant from them.

A lot of the points have already been made by Ross and Tom. I will not duplicate those points, but I will say this: we do not want the diminution of services in any community, but we believe that the rurality of Tyrone and Fermanagh speaks for itself and amounts to a special case. Yes, we are dubious about health decisions, because, very often, they work against us on grounds of population. However, I point to the fact that, even 30 years ago, there was a campaign seeking the upgrade of the unit in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital under the banner of combating the disease of alcoholism. I was reading about that in the 'Ulster Herald' this week. At that time, it was direct rule Minister of Health Chris Patten who was being lobbied. He played along with it and upgraded the service, and his career went even better after that. So, I say to the Minister that his career could take another upward trajectory if he behaves like Chris Patten on the matter.

Mr Eastwood: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I take this opportunity to apologise to you, the House and Mrs Cameron for leaving after I proposed the amendment in the previous debate? I was diving to try to get to chair an all-party group and was not thinking. I have been reminded of my responsibilities. I now have to dive to get up the stairs so I have one other question: do the same rules apply now and mean I have to wait after making a point of order?

Mr Speaker: First of all, I must say I appreciate the Member's coming to the House and apologising. It is very important that Members, especially when moving an amendment to a motion, stay in the House at least to hear another two contributions. I know that Members can be busy — I understand that — but we all have to be careful that we are not seen to treat the House and other Members with contempt. I want to say, however, that I congratulate the Member for coming to the House and apologising.

Mr Byrne: I commend Mr Hussey for securing the debate, and I thank the Minister for being here.

I welcome the opportunity to once again support the fight for the retention of health services in the Omagh area. The area has historically witnessed the disintegration of maternity services, elective surgery, acute medical services, gynaecology and a tier 1 accident and emergency department, all of which are vital veins of localised healthcare provision and, therefore, a concern in our part of the world. The counties of Tyrone and Fermanagh have a hospital in the west — the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital — which provides tier 4 residential care treatment for addiction. That service supplies the three counties of Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh and has developed into a widely respected service that has been greatly appreciated by those who have used it. A high level of expertise has been built up over many years.

I am aware of and, indeed, accept the need for reform of our health service. However, we in this party believe that the 'Transforming Your Care' document is not the format for this type of change. The proposed closure of the addictions unit in Omagh is a fitting example of the inconsistencies that the implementation of the TYC document can produce. The Health and Social Care Board's (HSCB) proposals could result in the closures of the ATUs in Omagh and Armagh in favour of two centralised services in north Antrim and Downpatrick. That effectively means that any person from Tyrone or Fermanagh who is caught up in the grip of addiction will need to travel to Holywell in Antrim to receive treatment.

Issues such as travel and the removal of the service affect local people, and they are concerned about them. The geographical barrier is significant, and I struggle to comprehend how having two services in the east and the removal of all Health and Social Care (HSC) addiction services from the west is strategically sound. Moreover, I wonder whether that model will properly care for those who are suffering in the west. The closure of the ATU in Omagh would also mean the cessation of over 30 years of local expertise and good practice in a specialist inpatient setting. The assertion made by the Health and Social Care Board is that most care for people with addictions can be provided by tier 3 services, those that the community and voluntary sectors provide. The levels of proficiency that the ATU in Omagh has succeeded in producing, however, cannot seamlessly be reproduced in a community setting. Many patients need an intensive therapy treatment course in an in-bed facility, often during a seven-to-nine-day residential stay. My fear is that distorted financial undercurrents are underpinning the proposal to discontinue the ATU in Omagh.

As the House is aware, the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh is scheduled for completion at the end of 2015. As Mr Buchanan said, phase 2 of that project has plans for a new centre for mental health on site that will house an addictions unit. The question becomes whether a new regional model for addictions treatment will jeopardise the centre, a development site that this and previous Ministers have promised the people of Omagh.

In summary, the people of Omagh and, indeed, of my constituency of West Tyrone must not be deprived once more by financially predicated decisions taken by the Minister or the board. The decision, although convenient for those east of the Bann, will end a long tradition of quality addiction treatment in Omagh and, sadly, will become the latest in the long list of healthcare injustices experienced in our constituency. Let us not remove from Omagh an ATU service that has proven itself as a specialist facility with a very good reputation over many years. I ask the Minister to give sensitive treatment and understanding to the plight of the people who need this type of service and to remember that professionals have made a lot of effort over the years to build up a specialist care service.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh. I welcome the Adjournment debate this afternoon and congratulate Mr Hussey on bringing it to the Floor. I particularly want to welcome the fact that the consultation period has been extended to 24 January. It had originally been scheduled to close on 10 January. Indeed, I anticipate that the Hansard report of today's debate will form part of that consultation exercise.

I want to reiterate some of the comments made today, particularly around the rurality of Tyrone and Fermanagh. As one who sits on the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I am acutely aware of the rurality of both counties and the importance of having services near to hand. Having the service in Antrim would be very prohibitive, particularly if we want families to be involved in the treatment process. There are very strong feelings in both counties about the matter.

I do not want to see any cuts to alcohol services because that would impact across the health service. In conclusion, I say to the Minister that, if he is of a mind not only to retain the unit but to look at the possibility of expanding it, there is physical accommodation on site in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital for that and that may not be the case at other potential sites.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Mr Hussey for securing this important debate. The matter is critical to very many people in Fermanagh and Tyrone. Most people put Tyrone first, but I will put Femanagh first, if you do not mind.

We are here to talk about the addiction treatment unit in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital or the T&F, as most of us in Fermanagh and Tyrone call it. That is the name by which we all know it. The ATU provides inpatient hospital treatment for those with alcohol and drug problems. First, I would like to commend the staff and service users and their families for all the positive messages that they have sent to us, as local representatives, about the importance of retaining the service into the future. I commend all those involved in the campaign and the staff for their continuing good work. It is important that the service is retained, and it is good to see that we have cross-party support for retaining it in Omagh.

The unit treats between 50 and 60 service users every year, many of whom say that the inpatient service was essential to their treatment. The residential facility is vital, as it enables users to remove themselves from their usual environment, where alcohol is freely available and drugs may also be accessible. The unit is also used several nights a week for wider community benefit through the provision of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and other support groups, which are often chaired by the addiction nurse specialist based in the unit. If the unit were to be relocated to Antrim, as is proposed, many people who currently benefit from those meetings will not make the trip. That will have a very detrimental impact on people who are trying to recover from alcohol and drug addiction but do not need the inpatient facility. Also, it will have a very detrimental impact on inpatients, as visitors will be discouraged from attending because access will be much more difficult if they have to travel from somewhere in Fermanagh or Tyrone to the far regions of Antrim or Down.

The unit comprises a consultant-led team with on-site medical support. It has served the community very well for over 30 years. I have spoken to former staff members and service users and their families who are very committed to retaining the service. They speak very highly of it, and, as Mr Hussey outlined, they say that it has made a huge difference in their lives. It is very important that the service is retained. The service is very well established, it works and it enjoys the overwhelming support of the local community, which trusts the staff and the service.

Finally, I encourage the Minister and the Health and Social Care Board to support rural dwellers and to retain this much-needed service where it is needed and not force people to travel outside their local area to obtain much-needed help at a difficult time in their life. I also encourage local people who may be affected by the proposed change to respond to the consultation and let policymakers know their views on it.

Mr McKinney: I, too, thank Mr Hussey for bringing the issue to the Floor and the Minister for being here to hear the issues raised. It is important, as Mr Flanagan said, to

recognise that there is cross-party support for what Mr Hussey is proposing and focusing on.

In line with the Transforming Your Care strategy, the board has proposed that tier 3 services take precedence over tier 4 services. It has also proposed that the detoxification stabilisation phase of tier 4 care should be undertaken in the HSC sector and that rehabilitation provision should be located mainly in the private sector.

5.30 pm

We need to look at the practicalities of such a strategic decision, not just for Omagh but for the whole of the North. First, it is important that we look at the backdrop. The fact is that the number of people who suffer from alcohol or drugs misuse has increased significantly in the past 10 or more years. It is estimated that just under 50,000 people here are drinking at harmful levels and the rate of referral for drug treatment has trebled in the past more than a decade. For alcohol misuse alone, the average number of hospital admissions each year stands at 12,000.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes.

Mr Hussey: Does the Member agree with me that, based on such figures and on the increasing availability of drugs, it seems common sense that the unit will be needed more and not less? Therefore, the need for this unit in Omagh is actually extended because of that.

Mr McKinney: Yes, and that is the very point. I mean what we are —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the intervention. What we are looking at here is not a diminishing problem with specialised services in one area; we are dealing with an increased problem, and not increased in one centre of population but increased right across the North. The figures that I talked about underscore that.

Against that picture, the current provision for detox and stabilisation is 42 HSC beds for patients who require such treatment. The board's proposal to discontinue the services in Omagh and at St Luke's Hospital and centralise them, as we have been discussing, will see the reduction in beds to 24 — little more than half. So, we are getting the bed provision halved and the problem increasing exponentially. It is not unreasonable to suggest that if the numbers of individuals who misuse drugs and alcohol are rising, the decision to reduce the number of beds available to just over half is at least inconsistent with the facts.

The SDLP believes that the public should have access to localised, quality healthcare that is free at the point of delivery. The board may feel that the location of those centralised tier 4 services will deliver greater consistency of addiction treatment, but the closure of Omagh will also have another effect; it will end a level of expertise and inpatient proficiency that has been fostered for over 30 years. It is a matter of succession planning. Can the board guarantee that the unique tier 4 inpatient services in Omagh, whereby highly trained staff and consultants work in tandem, will be replicated locally through the work of the private and voluntary sectors? We do not think so, and the message that, I think, I am getting from across the Benches is that other parties agree.

Furthermore, financial restrictions due to hefty budget cuts will certainly not ease any transition of addiction services into the community. At the moment, alcohol misuse costs hundreds of millions of pounds; in fact, I think that its net effect costs £680 million. Surely, the logic is that money follows need. If the Department wants addiction services to transfer into the community, funding should follow. The Department's paltry less than £1 million to aid the transfer certainly does not convince us any more.

Will the decision to remove a confident, competent addiction treatment unit from Omagh erode the level of care available? I will let that question hang. We think that that will be the case if we end an effective service and put extensive pressure on underfunded, less experienced, community-based services.

The board's consultation document on the future of tier 4 rehabilitation services states that it is the intention that those services should be primarily undertaken within the private sector. One of the proposed functions of the regional restructuring of addiction services is that money saved in the closure of the two ATUs can be reinvested in tier 3, which is the community treatment. Is it not reasonable that we should know the exact financial impact of all rehabilitative care being carried out privately? How much money will be left for community care once the rehabilitation function goes elsewhere?

Another consideration that my colleague Mr Byrne and other Members have touched on is the planned phase 2 of the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh. Phase 1 is due for completion late in 2015, and phase 2 is a new mental health centre, within which an addiction unit is planned. It is of considerable concern that that development is not mentioned in the consultation document on the new regional framework for addiction treatment.

In conclusion, the proposals outlined in the consultation document lack a certain strategic depth. The removal of services from Omagh would spell an end to a unique and effective service and leave the west with no tier 4 services at all.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank Members for the opportunity to speak on this today, for raising an important issue and, hopefully, for helping to raise awareness of the harm caused by substance misuse and the support that is available for people across Northern Ireland.

Many Members who spoke highlighted the tragic consequences of substance misuse. Recent reports of potentially drug-related deaths bring home the tragic fact that around 100 people die each year from drug misuse. Alcohol is even more harmful, with 300 people dying from alcohol-related illness. It will therefore be no surprise to anyone in the Chamber that substance misuse is one of the main public health challenges that we face. It not only impacts on families, children, business and communities but it costs us around £1 billion a year.

My Department leads on the cross-departmental strategy, known as the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, to prevent and address the harm substance misuse causes. The strategy was updated in 2012, and our primary approach is to prevent misuse and harm. However,

the strategy also recognises that some people will require additional support, and it therefore puts in place a range of early intervention and treatment services.

Before getting into that detail, I want to recognise the good work carried out by treatment services across Northern Ireland. They make a positive impact on the lives of some of our most vulnerable people. It is a difficult job, which takes expertise, skill and compassion, and it does not get much reward or recognition, so I put on record my appreciation of the work undertaken by staff in all areas.

Locally, addiction services are structured on a four-tier service model, from tier 1, which is the provision of information and advice, screening and referral, to tier 4, which is the provision of specialist inpatient or residential treatment. Today's discussion is primarily focused on tier 4; however, it is important that we consider the entire system. Tier 4 should be for only the most complex and difficult cases. The majority of patients can and should be supported in the local community at tier 3. We therefore need to ensure that the appropriate level of resources and capacity is available at tier 3 to support that work. It is central to the "shift left" agenda under Transforming Your Care.

There is no variation in current tier 4 provision. Some units operate on a four-day model while others do so on a seven-day model. Some focus on detoxification while others centre on rehabilitation. Indeed, some trusts have very limited access to specialist tier 4 beds. I do not believe that where you live should determine the service that you receive. Therefore, the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs committed the Heath and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency to developing a regional commissioning framework for alcohol and drug services. The consultation on tier 4 services, which was launched in October 2013, is part of that overarching commissioning framework. Given the variation that exists, the board concluded that the current regional position for tier 4 does not fully reflect National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance and, therefore, does not provide the best outcomes.

There are around 700 admissions a year to trust-based tier 4 treatment beds. However, it is likely that a significant proportion of those cases could be managed more effectively within community-based tier 3 settings. There are 42 beds across HSC. However, as two of the units operate only four nights a week, current provision, taking into account occupancy rates, is equivalent to 28 beds across the sector. Of those 28 beds, 18 are for detoxification and 10 are for rehabilitation. In addition, some trusts have contracts in place with independent sector providers for rehabilitation services.

Taking account of NICE guidance, best practice, input from services, and so on, the consultation on tier 4 proposes that, in the future, the HSCB will commission 24 dedicated beds in the HSC. The majority of those will be used for detoxification, with the capacity to use two beds for rehabilitation for those most vulnerable. The provision of 24 beds will provide capacity for around 500 admissions a year.

The consultation sets out three options for how those beds could be provided: a single regional unit with a 24-bed facility that would be sited at a central location; two subregional units with facilities with 12 beds each, or variants such as 10 beds and 14 beds; or a local trust model, with the provision of 24 beds across three, four or five sites. Appraising the options for quality and safety, environment, accessibility, implementation, strategic fit and value for money, the consultation recommends putting in place two subregional units.

The deadline for responding to the consultation has been extended to 24 January. During the consultation, a number of local events have been held, including in Tyrone County Hospital, to inform the process. Following the consultation's close, it will be for the HSCB to analyse the responses and make final proposals.

It should be noted that the consultation is on the service model and not on the future location of services. However, based on initial discussions with the trusts, the consultation sets out a potential reconfiguration of services based on a network arrangement with 10 beds in Holywell Hospital and 14 beds in the Downshire Hospital. The main benefit of this regional arrangement would be that the wider population would have access to dedicated tier 4 detoxification beds. This could mean the discontinuation of services in the Western Trust unit, which is at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, and at the Southern Trust unit, which is at St Luke's Hospital. However, as I stated, the consultation is not on the location of services and no decision has been taken on this issue. If there is agreement, following the consultation, that the two-unit model is the best way forward, the HSCB will formally ask all trusts whether they wish to provide these services. It will be for all trusts to consider their capability and capacity to deliver these services in a safe and effective way and to put forward bids as appropriate. Ultimately, the HSCB will need to consider the location of any future services to ensure that they are accessible.

The consultation focuses on the services provided by the trusts. However, it also proposes that, in the future, the majority of tier 4 rehabilitation care would be undertaken in the independent sector, although HSC would retain some capacity to provide inpatient rehabilitation care for the very complex cases. HSCB has stated that it will monitor demand for tier 4 rehabilitation care and will work with the independent sector to increase provision as required. The board is also proposing to establish a regional network with the community and voluntary sector to oversee the development, implementation and monitoring of tier 4 services regionally. I believe that this partnership approach is to be welcomed.

As I stated at the outset, these services are a vital part of our approach to preventing and addressing the harm caused by substance misuse. However, we need to re-orientate services to ensure that we improve capacity at tiers 1 to 3. This will help to prevent some people from getting to the crisis point where they require inpatient services. Although the proposed reforms seek to improve the consistency and effectiveness of tier 4 services, they also seek to build capacity. Although I acknowledge concerns about local services, this is not about taking money from addictions services. The board has committed that any savings from service redesigns will be reinvested in addiction services and particularly into tier 3. This is in line with Transforming Your Care and is about providing patients with the right service at the right time as close to home as possible. It is also about ensuring that we have effective services in place for the people who have the

highest level of need. It is also in line with the approach undertaken in other specialist services, such as cancer treatment and paediatrics, where we have moved from a local model to a highly specialised service that achieves much better outcomes for patients.

I finish by reaffirming that this is not a done deal. Everyone with a view still has a chance to respond to the consultation, which closes on Friday. I encourage them to do so.

Adjourned at 5.44 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 27 January 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I want to put on record my concerns about an exchange that took place between a Member and a Deputy Speaker during Question Time last Tuesday. I have to say that the Hansard report of the exchange is not good reading. Not long ago, I reminded the House that the authority of the Chair is always the same regardless of who presides over business in the Chamber. Members who think that, because I am not in the Chair, they can be discourteous to Deputy Speakers and challenge their rulings need to think again. Members know that, if they stray from the normal rules, they can expect whoever is in the Chair to intervene. When the Chair gives a direction, it should be respected and not be challenged at any time. I will certainly keep a very close eye on the issue and hope that I will not have to return to it.

I know that some latitude is given to Members when they are coming to their question, especially at Question Time. From time to time, Members want to give a brief explanation before they come to their question and deliberate on what they want to say in developing their question. However, that is where it ends. On three occasions, the Member was asked by the Deputy Speaker to come to his question. It did not happen. Regardless of whether it is I or a Deputy Speaker in the Chair, if Members are asked to come to their question, they must do so. That is where it ends. It is not a matter of having statements from Members before they come to their question.

It is also unfair on Ministers when Members give a long preamble before coming to a question. On occasion, Ministers have to ask whether there is a question in the Member's statement at all. I warn the House that the authority of the Chair, irrespective of who is in the Chair, is final.

I ask Members to call Members by their proper name, please. That is vital and has been a ruling in the House for some time — it is a clear convention. Therefore, let us call Members and parties by their proper name.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

> *That Mrs Judith Cochrane replace Mr Trevor Lunn as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. — [Mr Dickson.]*

Ministerial Statement

Fisheries Council: December 2013

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I wish to make a statement on the outcome of the negotiations that the Fisheries Council held in Brussels on 16 and 17 December, which determined fishing opportunities for 2014. In the annex to my statement, Members will find a map of fishing areas; a summary of the main total allowable catches (TACs) and quotas of interest to the local fleet; and a provisional summary of the landings made into County Down ports by the fleet in 2013.

Other fisheries Ministers — George Eustice, Richard Lochhead and Alun Davies — and I agreed our first order negotiating priorities ahead of Council. They were minimising the cut to the nephrops TAC for area VII; ensuring that the freeze on fishing effort — the number of days at sea that can be fished — secured for 2013 was carried forward into 2014; easing restrictions on fully documented fisheries and extending possibilities to include haddock, whiting, saithe and plaice in such schemes in North Sea mixed fisheries; reducing the proposed cuts in the TACs for cod and haddock in the Celtic Sea; and ensuring that decisions on TACs for data-limited stocks were taken on a case-by-case basis and informed by all available evidence and stock trends. In setting those priorities, our aim was to secure a fair and balanced package that set limits to ensure the long-term sustainability of fisheries and to be consistent with the reformed common fisheries policy that came into force on 1 January 2014. Our priorities were guided by three key principles: the need to follow the best science available; achieving maximum sustainable yield in fisheries by 2015 wherever possible; and the need to reduce the discarding of fish.

The Council followed a familiar pattern. Commissioner Damanaki introduced the Commission's proposals at a plenary meeting on the Monday morning. Member states responded, and that was followed by a round of trilateral negotiations between some member states, the presidency and the Commission. There were several meetings with others to explore areas of common interest. My officials and I had meetings with our counterparts from the South about Irish Sea interests and, in particular, the proposals for the nephrops TAC. A compromise proposal from the presidency was put forward on the Tuesday morning, and there were further trilateral negotiations before a final package of proposals was presented late on Tuesday afternoon.

What was unusual about this meeting of the Council was that agreement on the TAC and the quota package was reached shortly after 6.00 pm on the second day. Members will be aware that Fisheries Councils are notorious for late finishes in the early hours of the morning. I think that the reason for an early finish this year was that there were fewer big issues for many member states: for example, North Sea TACs and quotas could not be agreed until negotiations with Norway were concluded in January. The first compromise also went further than many countries had anticipated. That put considerable pressure on countries still engaged in negotiations on the second day to reach an early deal.

Ministers from Britain and I had been concerned that effort control would again dominate the agenda and allow less time for negotiation on other key issues. In the event, the Commission gave an early indication at trilateral discussions that it would be flexible and not resist calls to maintain the fishing effort at 2013 levels for 2014, and that was very welcome. Effort control has a significant impact on vessels fishing for white fish species.

The Assembly may recall that, prior to the 2011 Council meeting, I made a commitment, with the support of the local industry, that our prawn fleet would fish with highly selective gears so that they could be exempt from the effort restrictions imposed by the cod recovery plan. In 2012, the fleet trialled a number of gear options, but the Commission's scientific advisers could not conclude whether the low cod catches exhibited by the nets were the result of their technical properties or because of a low abundance of cod in the fishing grounds when the trials took place. Further trials under scientific observation took place from February to April 2013. The results, which were written up by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), were presented to the Commission. In November, the Commission's scientific advisers concluded that three types of gear had selectivity properties that would allow exemption from effort controls.

That was a significant achievement, and I pay tribute to the scientists in AFBI and the local industry for the work done to achieve that outcome. Indeed, it was gratifying to hear Commissioner Damanaki acknowledge those achievements in her opening plenary address at Council. We have delivered as promised. Although the acknowledgement is welcome, the Commission needs to reflect this by taking a more positive and flexible approach in its proposals for future Irish Sea TACs.

The gear developments are extremely important in the context of the new CFP, which will seek to do away with the wasteful practice of discarding fish. Of course, the best way to reduce discards is to avoid catching what is not wanted in the first place, and that is where highly selective gears come in. Although our prawn fleet has made huge progress in reducing cod catches through improvements to fishing gears, there are still challenges ahead to further reduce catches of small haddock, whiting and plaice. That will be a key focus during 2014, as we work with industry on a continuous improvement programme for gear technology.

This year, my top priority was again to secure a good deal on the TAC for nephrops, or prawns, which is the single most important species in the Irish Sea. That was also a top priority for my Southern colleague, Simon Coveney TD. Again, it was frustrating that the Commission proposed a high cut to the TAC. That has been the Commission's practice, year on year. It proposes a cut to reduce the TAC to equate with scientific advice, ignoring the fact that the fishing patterns of member states with an interest in that stock have changed over time. France, in particular, takes up around half its 24% share of the TAC. Prior to Council, we, along with the South, put forward a joint paper arguing against that approach. As pointed out in the paper and by me at the trilateral negotiations, the proposed cut by the Commission was totally unjustified. The TAC has historically been set at a level above that of the scientific advice, but fishing patterns demonstrate that the landings by fleets exploiting the stock are and have been in line with the scientific advice for some years. Although the scientific catch advice will fluctuate up and down each year, all stock indicators suggest that exploitation of the stock is sustainable.

The Commission's initial proposal for a 24% cut was reduced to 14% in its first compromise. That was still unacceptable, and the Commission was pressed to move further. In subsequent discussions, the Commission indicated that it could move to 12%, but it was not until the final plenary discussions that further movement was secured. The final package that was agreed saw the TAC cut by 9%. I think that was a reasonable outcome. Last year, we were able to secure an increase of 6% because of a comparable improvement in the scientific catch advice. This year, the scientific advice was to reduce catches by some 8·4%, which is broadly in line with the final outcome.

Members will appreciate that I cannot go with the science one year and ignore it the next. The prawn fishery in the Irish Sea is crucial to the well-being of the local industry, our fish processors and the communities that depend on fishing. We must bear that in mind and ensure that the fishery is not over-exploited. However, we also must take an approach that ensures that the fishery is sustainably fished but not under-exploited. The latter would have happened, to the detriment of our industry, had the Commission's initial proposal prevailed.

The annex to my statement details the TAC movements to other fish stocks landed by the local fleet, but those are of much less importance than nephrops. Despite our arguments that cuts to the cod quota would make no difference to conservation measures, the Commission followed the cod plan, which provides for a 20% reduction. There were further cuts of minus 25% to plaice and minus 18% to sole, which are a reflection of the concerns expressed in the scientific advice. There were welcome increases of plus 15% in monkfish, plus 18% in hake and plus 5% in herring, again reflecting the scientific advice.

I am grateful for this opportunity to inform Members about the outcome of the 2013 fisheries negotiations as far as they affect our fleet. It was a tough Council, and I am relieved that the outcome was a reduction in the prawn TAC, which is broadly in line with the scientific advice, but it could have been very different. With fewer unresolved big issues, there were enough member states prepared to accept the overall fishing opportunities package to allow the presidency to conclude a deal. Thankfully we got the Commission to move further before that happened. I put on record my thanks to my colleagues George Eustice in DEFRA, Richard Lochhead in the Scottish Government, Alun Davies in the Welsh Assembly and Simon Coveney

in the South for their strong support throughout the negotiations.

12.15 pm

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement on this very important issue. Given that we have had a prawn quota cut of up to 9%, how can the Minister say that this is a reasonable outcome? Given that the scientific evidence was sitting at 8·4%, would it not have been better to get a deal at 8% or less, given the scientific evidence and the proof to back that up?

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

Has the Minister met the local industry to discuss that cut and how to manage it? I understand that although she must go with the scientific evidence, there is a gap between the scientific evidence and the local knowledge of the fishing industry that needs to be bridged. What efforts are the Minister and the Department making to bridge those gaps and to try to get clear evidence and the local knowledge of the fishing fleet into her negotiated plans?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I will pick up on the first point around the cut. Obviously, we would have preferred to have come back having seen no cut to the industry. You will be aware that, in last year's negotiations, we went out, we had strong science and we were able to get to a 6% increase, based on the science. So, I suppose it is unreasonable to expect that we would be able to argue against the argument we deployed the year before. That said, we made the case very strongly, and it was useful to have a joint argument with the South of Ireland, because we were able to deploy the same arguments. The general principle of the argument is this: there are other member states that do not use their full quota. If you look at it in that bigger picture, we argue that we do not believe that we justify a cut. That said, we made the argument, and, initially, we took it from minus 24%, so it was a very tough starting point. To go out with a minus 24% on the table, and the scientific evidence not backing it up, it was a tough start to the negotiations. That said, we got it down to 9%. Did we want more? Yes, absolutely, of course, but that was the outcome of the long negotiation.

Obviously, I engage with the industry before I go to Brussels, so we agree the industry priorities. Obviously, nephrops are the mainstay of the local industry, so that is the area that we focus on. We engaged with them before we went out. One of the areas that we discussed was how we, as the Department, would work with the industry more closely in the future. One of the things that I believe worked in the past, before my time, was a fisheries forum. I am not saying that we need to have an exact replica of that in the future, but now is a good time. I had said to the industry that we would engage again at the early part of this year. On the back of the outcome of the December Council, I think it is an ample time to discuss how we work together, looking at the challenges that are there, obviously, and the opportunities brought about by the common fisheries policy changes, as well as the fact that we are going to have the new European and maritime fisheries fund (EMFF) funding streams. There are a lot of areas that we need to be discussing, and I am happy to do that with the industry.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that Committee Chairs are given some latitude when asking questions to the Minister on a statement. I ask for your cooperation so that all Members who wish to do so will get to ask a question.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. What progress is being made on the highly selective gears?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my statement, the commitment that I made two years ago, with the cooperation of the industry, has helped to save the industry from having technical measures imposed on it — things that were not necessarily suitable for our fleet. As I said in the statement, we now have more acceptable gear types that are capable of reducing cod catches to below the 1·5% that the Commission expects us to be able to deliver on. It also allows vessels to become completely exempt from the days-at-sea restrictions. Our commitment remains the same. Even without exemption, all our prawn vessels must use highly selective gears within the cod recovery zone.

As I said in the statement, I was delighted that the scientific advisers in Europe approved three highly selective gears for our industry. They approved those last November, and, over the next wee while, we are expecting to possibly have another method that will also be acceptable to the Commission. So, we have made a lot of progress. It is also important to point out that we still have funding available under the European fisheries fund (EFF) to be used to help to finance the scientific work to improve the selective gear that we use, to contribute to the adoption of those types of gears, and to get it approved by the European scientists.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the statement from the Minister. Obviously, the fact that the prawns have been cut by 9% is concerning. Will the Minister outline how Scotland and the Republic fared, given that, last year, Scotland got a 24% increase and we got only a 6% increase?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the breakdown of the other areas and how they fared. However, suffice it to say that they all have different priorities. In a lot of ways, we are fighting one general argument on the need for more flexibility. That is what we hope to have as a result of the common fisheries policy. For example, monkfish is of big importance to Scotland. However, that is not our priority: our priority is nephrops. So, we work together where we can, and we also deploy our own arguments where necessary.

I do not have the figures with me, but I am happy to provide them in writing, because they are in the public domain.

Mrs Dobson: I also thank the Minister for her statement. I know that a lot of pressure was brought to bear on the EU in support of our local industry, not least by my party colleague Jim Nicholson MEP, who secured a visit by Bernhard Friess to Northern Ireland. However, the outcome will herald financial losses —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mrs Dobson: — and job losses. Minister, what are you doing to give our fishermen confidence following this slap in the face from Brussels?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that, every year, we go out to Brussels in December and go round the merry dance of how we engage with the Commission.

Unfortunately, this year, the science was not in our favour, but we made the case strongly. We took it from -24% to -9%, so that was positive.

As I said in answer to the Chair of the Committee, I have set out my plans for engaging with the industry. Now is the opportune time to do that, given that we have CFP reform and are looking at the new EMFF. So, now is the time to engage with industry on our next steps and on where we go from here. I think that I already outlined that clearly in the answer to the Chair of the Committee.

Mr McCarthy: Two or three years ago, as a member of the Agriculture Committee, I went to Brussels, where we met the commissioner. At that time, we talked about the discarding of fish. I see that you are still talking about the discarding of fish. When will we see that problem sorted for the fishermen's benefit?

Mrs O'Neill: Dealing with fish discards is a major European issue. It is an issue that we are all trying to deal with. Our industry has been very progressive. When I talk about highly selective gears, we are talking about making sure that we do not fish the fish that we are not trying to catch. Our industry has been very progressive, and I think that it has been to the forefront. Commissioner Damanaki, in her opening address to the plenary in Europe, commended the fishermen from the North of Ireland fleet on the work that they have done on highly selective gears. We are to the fore in tackling the discard issue, so our industry should be commended for that. We have a way to go, surely, but we will continue to work with the industry. As I said, there are opportunities financially to support the selective gears for people to allow adaptions to their boats. As I said, we are in a good position. Other areas from right across Europe will look to our industry to see how progressive we have been.

Miss M McIlveen: The Minister referred to the importance of nephrops. She said that she regarded it as her top priority, which I welcome. Moving forward, DEFRA's round 2 marine conservation zone proposals will include two important areas in the Irish Sea for our prawn fishermen. What is the Minister's position on those proposals, and what are her thoughts on DOE's consultation on inshore marine protected areas around Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: That is not an issue that is relevant to the statement. We will talk to the Committee about those issues. I have spoken about this with the Environment Minister. I have also spoken to the new DEFRA Minister, George Eustice, in the run-up to the December Council on these issues.

To me, it is important that we get a balance. We do not want something in place that will damage the local fishermen's livelihoods. That is something that we need to deal with. I have always made it clear that, going forward, any of these proposals need to be done in conjunction and with proper full consultation with the local fishing industry. Unless that is done, I will obviously not support anything that will cause harm to an industry that is very important for people who live in coastal areas.

Mr Irwin: I understand that discussions are being held between the fishing industry and fisheries administrations in other parts of the United Kingdom about the EU's control regulation. What is happening here in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, that is not a question that is relevant to the statement, but I am happy to provide the Member with a very detailed response in writing on the breakdown of where that is at. As I said in a couple of other answers, engaging with the industry is key for all these things. In moving forward and in looking at any sort of developments, we need to engage with the industry. The group that I want to establish will be a key forum for all those things to be discussed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I encourage Members to connect their question to the statement.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her statement. Prawn fleets, particularly those operating out of ports such as Kilkeel, are likely to see an increased effort from displaced vessels, with major cuts in white fish quotas. Added to that, we are talking about a drop in prawns of around 600,000 tons. What are you doing to give more support to our prawn fishermen?

Mrs O'Neill: I have answered that in responding to earlier questions. The outcome of December Council is a position that we come to every January, but now that we have the CFP reform, which came into effect from 1 January, and, from 2015, the new EMFF — the funding for fishing communities — we need to look at opportunities and the barriers to growth. That comes back to the wider Going for Growth strategy and how we support local industries in being able to grow.

As I said, I want to establish a forum where fishermen can come together with the Department to have a frank discussion about the future and look at all the issues. There are plenty of issues that we need to look at, particularly given the cuts that we see from Europe. We do not just leave the issues at the December Council and park them there but continue to press them with Europe right throughout the year. Obviously, the December Council is what leads to the quota allocations, but there are many other issues that we engage with Europe on all year around, and I will continue to do that. However, I believe that the forum, whatever title it takes, will be a really big help in looking at the needs of the industry and at how we can work more collectively and effectively.

Mr Buchanan: Minister, given the concern that fishermen have had for some time around the sustainability of the industry, do you believe that the key priorities in your statement go far enough to ensure its long-term sustainability?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that those priorities are identified with the industry. They are not my priorities but industry priorities. In the run-up to December Council, I engaged with quite a number of people in the industry. They were all here in November. We agreed the priorities, and the industry was content with them. It is not a case of me imposing these priorities; rather, they are industry priorities.

Ms Lo: Sustainable fishing is very important, but it is also important that we have the right gear to reduce the waste of fish that we do not want. How much investment or research and development funding is the Department focusing on to help our fishing industry?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the exact breakdown of figures, but I am happy to provide them to the Member. Funding is key, because, as I said, our industry has been so progressive. Through the European Fisheries Fund, we

have been able to fund a lot of the work around the science involved. Our scientists in the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute have been very proactive with the fishing industry. AFBI is focusing on that and is working with the industry to gather the science. When we go to Europe, we want to make sure that our science is something that we can stand over. There has been significant investment.

Mr Allister: The Minister thinks that a 9% cut in our nephrops quota is a reasonable outcome. It follows, then, that she must think that the £2 million cut in income is reasonable, whereas it patently is not, particularly for an industry that for the past two years has jumped through every hoop that Brussels has set —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Allister: The industry has jumped through every hoop concerning gear changes, only to get this slap in the face. If the Minister thinks that a 9% cut is a reasonable outcome, did she really fight for the industry at all, or did she roll over like Mr Coveney did by indicating that a cut would be acceptable?

Mrs O'Neill: I think that I have made it very clear that I agreed my priorities with the industry, that the priorities were set with the industry and that I went out to Europe and made it very clear that those were my priorities.

It is a reasonable outcome when you put it in context. You can pick out wee words to use, but, to put this in context, we were going out there with a 24% cut. The science did not back up the argument. Last year, when we were happy to take the 6% increase, we did so because we had the science to back us up. Surely you cannot turn your argument year on year.

Is there a bigger picture, particularly around the fact that other member states do not use their entire quota? Absolutely. Is that something that Brussels needs to look at? Absolutely. France, for example, did not take 25% of its allocated quota. Our industry would be happy to take that on board if that were the case. As I said in answer to a previous question, I continue to argue the case not just in December but all year round.

12.30 pm

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that her relationship with the Irish Minister was far too cosy? It was easy for him to accept a 9% cut, given that he had a 34% increase last year while we had only a 6% increase. Why was she not batting for the fishermen of this part of the United Kingdom in Northern Ireland rather than snuggling up to the Minister from the Irish Republic?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, I went to Europe with priorities that were identified by the industry. The industry here wants me to discuss the issue with Simon Coveney, and the industry here talks to its industry counterparts in the Twenty-six Counties. *[Interruption.]* The industry here wants me to engage with Simon Coveney — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mrs O'Neill: — and make a joint case. The Member may have his personal political views, but the industry was very happy for me to work with Simon Coveney to argue the case for the Irish Sea and our quota in the prawn negotiations. The Member's views are political views and not those of the industry.

Executive Committee Business

Public Service Pensions Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There are two groups of amendments, and we will debate the amendments in each group in turn.

The first debate will be on amendment Nos 1, 2, 13 to 15 and 19, which deal with pension board representation, revaluation, local government schemes and police pensions. The second debate will be on amendment Nos 3 to 12, 16 to 18 and 20, which deal with the pension age of scheme members.

Once the debate on each group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Clause 5 (Pension board)

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the first group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2, 13 to 15, and 19. Members should note that amendment No 14 is consequential to amendment No 13 and that amendment No 19 is consequential to amendment No 15.

I call Mr Alex Attwood to move amendment No 1 and address the other amendments in the group.

Mr Attwood: I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 3, line 43, at end insert

", and must include representation from any trade union recognised by the employer".

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 9, page 6, line 11, leave out "5" and insert "7".— *[Mr Attwood.]*

No 13: In clause 18, page 11, leave out lines 32 to 34 and insert "31 March 2015".— *[Mr Attwood.]*

No 14: In clause 28, page 16, line 19, leave out "2014" and insert "2015".— *[Mr Attwood.]*

No 15: After clause 29 insert

"Police pensions

29A.—*(1) Regulations C9 and C9A of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Pension Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 (S.R. 1988 No. 374), as substituted by Schedule 1 to the Police Service of Northern Ireland Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, (S.R. 2006 No. 152) (widow's, etc. pension or gratuity to terminate on re-marriage or other event) shall cease to have effect as from the reinstatement date.*

(2) Where any person's entitlement to receive payment on account of a pension or a gratuity under the Regulations of 1988 was terminated by virtue of regulation C9 or C9A, the pension or gratuity shall be reinstated and become payable as from the reinstatement date.

(3) Nothing in this section authorises or requires any payment on account of a pension in respect of any period before the reinstatement date.

(4) For the purposes of this section the reinstatement date is 1 July 2014.".— [Mr Allister.]

No 19: In clause 36, page 21, line 13, at end insert

"( ) section 29A;".— [Mr Allister.]

Mr Attwood: I will speak to the other amendments in the group and touch on the amendments tabled by Mr Allister.

I acknowledge that the Speaker's Office accepted the amendments and, indeed, virtually all the amendments that were tabled at Further Consideration Stage. That is good practice. As has been said in the Chamber before, the Bill is arguably the most significant legislation to come before the Chamber thus far in this mandate. It is important, therefore, that, at the last stage at which amendments can be tabled, we try to reconfigure the Bill as best we can in the interests of the 230,000 people who will be affected by the Bill on the far side of Royal Assent.

I took some time to read through the Hansard report of the Bill's Consideration Stage. The Minister may be surprised to know that I am one of a small group of people who read Hansard; I think that it is very revealing. I was struck by many of the Finance Minister's comments, and I will rely on those as I go through the amendments. I was particularly struck by his comment that the Bill was:

"designed to last for a generation at least" — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p345, col 1.]

That reflects the scale and character of the pensions legislation and the scale and character of the amendments tabled by us and others at Further Consideration Stage.

I venture to say that the reason why the amendments are before the House today and why we argue for all of them to be accepted is reflected by today's coverage in the London newspapers of yet another pensions Bill that will shortly come before the House of Commons. As I understand it, that Bill — this is relevant to the amendments — will give people the opportunity to top up their state pension, if, of course, they have the savings to do so. It is curious that it will enable people with savings to top up only over an 18-month period. I do not know, but some would suggest that this is curiously timed, given the forthcoming Westminster election. It goes further. Although that might be the most public aspect of the new pensions legislation, it also begins, as we understand it, to outline a European model of pension scheme known as a collective defined contributions scheme.

All that reveals to me that the House needs to be very vigilant about this pensions legislation because the Treasury, George Osborne and his team are not finished with this yet. The fact that further legislation will be proposed indicates that they are not finished yet when it comes to the scale of their ambition to rework the pensions regime that has existed for so many years in the image of something different. Given that the Minister has said that this Bill was:

"designed to last for a generation at least"

what thoughtless folly it was that anyone could conceive of a legislative consent motion (LCM) —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Yes, I will come straight to the amendments, Mr Deputy Speaker.

What thoughtless folly it was that anybody could think that legislation:

"designed to last for a generation at least"

could somehow be addressed by way of an LCM. Let us never repeat that error at the Executive table with any future pensions legislation.

Amendment No 1 is an attempt, appropriate at Further Consideration Stage, to go back to the issue of trade union representation on pension boards. As we know, the Bill, as drafted, states that there will be representatives of the employees on the boards but is now silent on representation from a recognised trade union. The reason why we have decided to go back to the issue is that little was said by the Minister at Consideration Stage when this matter was interrogated. There was little in what he said that gave reassurance to us or, I suspect, to many people listening on trade union membership of pension structures. Frankly, given what is in Hansard, far from being reassured, we are alarmed. That is why we would like the Minister to accept the amendment, which does no violence to any particular interest, in order to build certainty, confidence and reassurance among those who are listening, especially the trade union movement, which, after all, represents 56% of the members of public sector pension schemes. The Hansard report of Consideration Stage records what the Minister said.

I see that we have been joined by the previous Minister of Finance, Mr Wilson. Maybe he is in a position to confirm whether the advice that he received from the then private ministerial secretary, Simon Hamilton, was consistent with his advice to the Executive that the pensions legislation should be dealt with by an LCM. There was silence on that matter at Consideration Stage. Maybe you will want to use your good authority and voice to confirm or deny what the advice may have been from your colleague at that stage. While you contemplate that matter, I will go back to what the current Minister said at Consideration Stage:

"As I have stated, the thrust of the Bill ... is to enhance good governance for public service pension schemes. That certainly does not mean promoting the role of the trade unions, which is what amendment Nos 3 and 4 would result in." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p345, col 1.]

I repeat the quotation:

"certainly does not mean promoting the role of the trade unions".

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. Will the Member recognise that a pension fund is made up of contributions from employees and, therefore, the best people to look after the interests of employees are them-

selves? They will approach this with a view to ensuring that the highest possible return is achieved on the pension fund so that their pensions are safeguarded, whereas trade unions are likely to bring in not only those interests but other interests that trade unions may well have. For that reason, the emphasis ought to be on the role of employees in supervising and monitoring a pension fund.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his intervention. First, 56% of people in the public sector choose voluntarily because of the nature of the legislation, which in my view is correct, to go into trade unions.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. Under current trade union and employer management arrangements, that gives a trade union the responsibility to negotiate for and represent its members. Therefore, if 56% of people make contributions to a trade union, join a trade union and rely on a trade union to make their case in respect of pensions and other matters, the most consistent and principled position is to recognise that, when it comes to involvement in pension structures, trade unions should have a particular place of recognition.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. I will give way to everybody, so you do not have to be anxious about that, Mr Wilson.

The second thing is that those comments from the former Minister of Finance betray a hint, if not more than that, of an anti-union approach, which is the concern of many of the comments that I will come to in respect of the Finance Minister's contribution at Consideration Stage. I give way.

Mr Wilson: Does the Minister recognise that nearly half the workforce choose not to be part of a trade union? Therefore, for him to say that trade unions can represent those who have invested money in a pension fund is incorrect. Does he also recognise that there will be occasions when there could be a conflict? People usually join trade unions for the representation they give in the workplace, but, when it comes to the investment of funds, there will be occasions when trade unions may well have a conflict of interest. For example, they may not wish to see money invested in certain funds because of political differences or views, even though those funds may give a better return to the pension contributors.

Mr Attwood: The Member is moving ground. He is now raising an issue of people on pension structures that may take, to borrow the phrase, an ethical approach to pension investment —

Mr Wilson: It could be political.

Mr Attwood: Or a political approach, but let us take the narrow one of ethical investment. I would like to think that, when it comes to pension structures, there will be people, including unions, who will take an ethical approach to investment schemes when it comes to their pension funds, rather than saying, "Let's follow the money. Let's follow the place of maximum profit. Let's disregard any issue about ethics or values when it comes to members' contributions and investments in pension schemes".

12.45 pm

I would like to think that people who come into pension schemes do not sit and occupy places in the pension structures simply to maximise the return. If the argument is that pension structures should maximise return, just hand it over to some private investment company to maximise return. I suggest that the point of members being involved, I suggest, is to ensure that all views are heard, that proper values inform pension schemes, and so on and so forth.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mr Attwood: I will give way.

At Consideration Stage, our amendment that the employee representatives should be trade unions was defeated. To be fair, some good arguments were made in denying that amendment. However, if you go and speak to trade unions, as Mr Wilson will have done as Finance and Personnel Minister, they will confirm to you that it is part of their code and integrity that, when they speak and negotiate on behalf of union representatives, they are also mindful of their responsibilities not to do prejudice and, indeed, to best represent those who are not in the same place as them when it comes to union membership.

I will give way to the Member.

Mr Wilson: First, the Member has not addressed the point that nearly half the workforce decides not to be represented by the trade unions. It is interesting to note that the whole thrust of his argument is that trade union representation in the pension scheme would enable decisions to be made other than decisions that seek to maximise the return for members. He has dealt with the ethical ones, but there are, of course, political reasons why trade unions may well decide that they do not want money invested in certain funds or whatever.

Most people listening to this debate who have put their money in a pension scheme will want that money to give the maximum return so that their pensions can be safeguarded. The Member argues against his own amendment when he indicates that the reason for trade union involvement might be to ensure that the decision to go for the lesser return should be taken, even though there is a better return to be made.

Mr Attwood: I have to say to the Member that —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

I have to say to the Member that it seems to me an incongruous and unhappy argument that, when it comes to pension funds, we should abandon any sense of value in informing how those funds are invested save one of profit and maximising return.

I remember how, at Queen's University — both he and I are graduates of that place — an argument was made through the senate 30 years ago to have a stream of ethical investments of university funds, including pension funds. Why? It was to recognise that there are obligations around pensions, given the scale of pension funds in the Consolidated Fund or in the private sector, where you can do no harm — you can do some good — through ethical-based investments, and you can do some harm by having investments in certain practices that, in our view and, I think, in the view of citizens generally, would do violence to

core values that represent the society and state in which we live.

In any case, Mr Wilson, our amendment says that, when it comes to the employee representatives, given that over half of them are members of trade unions, that should be recognised in the law in order to respect the principle of industrial relations that trade unions have a particular responsibility and statutory role under trade union legislation to make representations on behalf of their scheme members. However, even if you put all that away, I suggest, as I said earlier, that when a Minister came to the House and says that this legislation:

> *"certainly does not mean promoting the role of the trade unions". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p345, col 1.]*

— it is reasonable to ask whether there is something going on here that is not about promoting the role of the trade union but actually about diminishing the role of the trade union.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. This comes back to Mr Wilson's point that unions are not empowered because they represent only 56% of the workers. However, given that he is in the minority party in the Assembly that is represented by significantly less than 56% of the voters, what empowers him and his party to bring forward this pensions Bill? Surely the trade unions are the best supported body of workers that can represent workers, given that no one exceeds 56% endorsement.

Mr Attwood: I will take an intervention from Mr Wilson if he wants to reply to that point from the Green Party, which I agree with.

Let me develop the point for the benefit of Mr Wilson and others. As can be seen from the Hansard report and from other comments from the Finance Minister, our concern is confirmed that the trade union movement is not being properly and fully recognised in the Bill when it comes to its membership being represented in pension structures. During Consideration Stage, the Finance Minister, referring to the amendments being tabled by Mr Rogers and Mr Bradley from the SDLP, said that those amendments were:

> *"short-sighted and restrictive approach, which some Members have allowed themselves to become lobbyists for".— [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p324, col 2.]*

I ask the Minister to confirm that, in making those comments, he is not suggesting in any shape or form that the trade unions that made representations to various Members, including, no doubt, the Finance Minister, did not take a "short-sighted and restrictive approach" and that he is not suggesting that any of those amendments or that those who argued for them, including the trade union movement, were somehow "short-sighted and restrictive" in their approach. If he does not confirm that, you can understand why an amendment that the SDLP tabled explicitly says that there should be:

> *"representation from any trade union recognised by the employer".*

There is a sense, from some of the comments made in Consideration Stage and even in Further Consideration Stage this afternoon, that the unions are somehow being restrictive and short-sighted in their approach, given that they lobbied for amendments to the pension scheme.

I will go further and confirm the anxiety that some of us have about the Bill. At another point during Consideration Stage, the Finance Minister said:

> *"Trade unions are not employees." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p324, col 2.]*

That is true, but he should have then said that trade unions are organisations of employees. That is also true, and it gives the proper legal and wider recognition to trade unions' role and function.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way.

Mr Wilson: What makes trade unions, which are organisations representing employees, better custodians of the employees' pension fund than the employees themselves, who are the people who make the contributions? This is not excluding those who have paid in from having some say in what happens to their funding. The Member seems to be suggesting that having that representation through a third party is superior to having the representation from the employees themselves.

Mr Attwood: The amendment does not take away from the area of employee input in the Bill. It aims to add to that to ensure that it includes representation from any trade union. Why do we make that argument? Mr Wilson reminds me of that scene in 'Life of Brian' when the rebellion is gathered in some house in Jerusalem or some part of the Holy Land, and they ask the question:

> *"what have the Romans ever done for us?"*

Let me tell Mr Wilson what the trade unions have done for us over the past 30 or 40 years. I choose that time frame deliberately so that it will be within the life of every single Member of the Assembly. What have the trade unions done? They were responsible for legislation on employment rights in 1996; on health and safety at work in 1974; on working-time regulations and the minimum wage in 1998; legislation on employment agency law in 1973; and on transfer of undertakings in 2006. That is the body of legislation of which the trade union movement was the architect and for which it was the lobbyist — to use the phrase that was used in a rather dismissive way — over the past 30 or 40 years.

When Mr Wilson asks why the trade unions should be recognised by the employer explicitly in the Bill and as part of the pensions structures, it is because every employee in this Building, whether MLA or staff member, and every other employee outside this Building, and because of the contribution of the union membership, a situation has been brought about whereby pay and conditions of work are different from what they were even 30 or 40 years ago. Given the particular role and contribution of the trade unions in defending workers and ensuring that the workplace is one that is better than one that is worse, is it too much to say to the Minister that, when it comes to the management of pension funds, their contribution should be explicitly recognised in the Bill through what is quite a moderate amendment?

Mr Wilson: Before the Member gets carried away with his historical rhetoric, let us come closer to home and look at

the record of NIPSA in representing employees in pensions negotiations. Does he agree that there are many members of NIPSA who are still mad at the way in which the union, when it came to whether equal pay should be extended right across the Civil Service, handled the matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should return to the amendments being debated.

Mr Wilson: All that I am saying is this: there are plenty of occasions when employees know that trade unions, for political reasons, do not get the best deal for their members, because they take short-term political considerations into account. When it comes to pensions, the best people to look after them are those who made the contributions and not those who may have a political agenda.

Mr Attwood: I will make one point about NIPSA. When I was Minister for Social Development, in the run-down to the 2011 election, I turned up at my office on the Andersonstown Road to be greeted by a small number of people waving NIPSA flags, not in celebration of my turning up at the office but to protest against what I, as a member of the Executive, had decided. I think that I might even have dissented from what had been decided, but, nonetheless, they were protesting, in the eye of an election, about what the Executive — the Government in Northern Ireland — were doing.

I could have been unhappy at that circumstance, but I invited them in for a cup of tea. Although they were protesting against what the Executive had done, their right to protest had to be defended. The contribution of NIPSA, as one of the main employee unions in Northern Ireland, and its right to organise, protest and make representations is something that, even when I do not agree with it — there have been occasions when I have not agreed with it — I am precious about. NIPSA, like many others, has made enormous contributions to the improvement of worker conditions and pay in this part of the world.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member should return to the amendments.

Mr Attwood: To emphasise the point, if it were not for the unions and their work on the situation facing the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) in Coleraine — I cannot recall whether NIPSA is involved in that, but I think that it is — that office's doors would have been closed two or three years ago. However, the unions, along with other people at Executive level — Mr Wilson knows full well about this — fought that fight, and perhaps in the next number of days that battle will also prevail.

1.00 pm

I will come back to the amendments now. The purpose of amendment No 1 is not to create prescriptive requirements about trade union input into the pension structures. It is to give the trade unions their proper place, which, under industrial relations frameworks, they should have and are entitled to, given the scale of their membership and the maturity and wisdom of their input, not in every case but in many cases.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the trade unions have built up quite a large degree of expertise on pensions? They have the resources to provide their members with very sound advice on pensions, so it is important that those resources and that advice are available. One way to help to ensure that is by naming the trade unions in the Bill.

Mr Attwood: I very much agree with that. As the Member was speaking, confirmation of that point came into my head. I speak from the little authority that I had as a previous Minister, when I had to appoint people to the Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committe (NILGOSC) scheme from a trade union background. As I recall it, under the law, unions are guaranteed a place on the NILGOSC scheme, representing 48,000 people, which is 20% of all those in public sector employment in the North. I am subject to correction on that, and I know that the Finance Minister will check with officials whether I am right or wrong. Given that the DOE and NILGOSC have that requirement, it seems to us that that requirement should also be honoured with wider pension structures.

In conclusion on amendment No 1, the amendment is to create certainty and avoid doubt, to ensure that the current industrial relations framework prevails and to reduce the risk that dogma — there has been a bit of that today —

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): You are too hard on yourself.

Mr Attwood: Yes, I await your replies with interest because some of your comments from the Consideration Stage debate require further comment. For those reasons, I urge the House to support amendment No 1.

I turn to amendment No 2. At the Consideration Stage debate, there was a proposal to move the five-year threshold to 10 years. That proposal was denied by the House, so we are going back to the issue today to move the five-year threshold to seven years for people who may want to take time out of work. During the Consideration Stage debate, the Minister said that he was not inclined — I think that he said that he was absolutely opposed — to move to 10 years because the five-year threshold was:

> *"reasonable, adequate and generous" [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p325, col 2.]*

On the face of it, I think that there is a tension between something that is reasonable and adequate, and generous. If it is generous, it suggests that people are going a bit too far. In any case, the argument that we make for seven years is simply that the nature of the workplace is changing and employees' lives are changing.

A number of years ago, very few people took a five-year career break. That is still the case, but, given the changing nature of the workplace and, hopefully, greater recognition of the requirements of family life and the work/life balance, particularly the requirements of parents, male or female, who want to rear children, and so on, it does not seem to us to be ungenerous to now move from five years to seven years. That is a moderate adjustment for a very small number of people who may wish to take a career break and come back to work afterwards. That is small recognition of the small number of people who may so be inclined — there will be very few. Given the nature of the economy that will exist after the recession and that the option of taking five years out of work will not be attractive to that many people, we think that a moderate amendment of that nature should earn the support of the House.

The third amendment concerns the current NILGOSC scheme. I declare a bit of an interest because, as Mr Wilson might be inclined to tell me, I made arguments around the Executive table about it. The local government scheme is fully funded, unlike any of the other schemes captured by this legislation, which are funded out of the Consolidated Fund. So I declare an interest because I was involved in an earlier stage of the NILGOSC scheme process. As I said earlier, the scheme involves about 50,000 people, extending beyond local government employees to include library board employees and others. That is a significant number: it is 20% of all those who might be affected by the Bill. Therefore, it is a significant sector, and, in practice, and, in any case, on a point of principle, we need to work through very carefully what the consequences will be for the proposed cut-off date in the Bill of March 2014.

I made the argument at the Executive table that, given that the NILGOSC scheme was fully funded and, therefore, different in character from all the other pension schemes that will be affected by the proposed changes in the Bill, it should be treated differently. Local government employers, employees and management, not just here in Northern Ireland but in England and Wales, were all trying to deal with the issues around the local government scheme in a way that would see changes, including those related to Hutton, being in place by 1 April 2014. I thought that it showed great authority by the trade union side, the employees and employers that, given the different character of that pension scheme, to try to gather in one place, by the end of March 2014, all that was required to be done for the scheme's management and the implementation of the relevant Hutton recommendations. However, that will not be the case.

I will give five quick reasons why we should now remove from the Bill the cut-off date of the end of March 2014. As with the other schemes under the legislation, the effective date for the new pension arrangements should be the end of March 2015. First, if you speak to NILGOSC and all its membership, they will confirm that, given the scale and complexity of what is being proposed and the number of people who will be impacted, it was likely that they would have a parallel process and learn heavily from the English and Welsh local government scheme and the negotiations around all of that. The intention was that we would be able to learn in significant ways from England and Wales, but they did not move as quickly as they might have, and I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that. Even in June 2013, when they went out to consult on various regulations regarding what the local government scheme might look like post-Hutton, it was devoid of much detail, and, therefore, there was a lack of certainty. The delay in making progress on the local government scheme in England and Wales meant that there was a parallel lack of certainty in making progress on the Northern Ireland scheme. If we rush in now, we will regret that at our leisure.

Secondly, even in England, some of the transitional arrangements for the local government scheme have not yet been reduced to regulation. Therefore, for reasons beyond the control of the Government in London, even the relevant transitional arrangements are in a place of some uncertainty. Therefore, there is a particular reason, given the time frames that we are talking about, for an absence of regulations in Britain that would outline the issue in respect of transitional arrangements. We should take some time out to get it right here.

Thirdly, as the Environment Minister will have confirmed, draft legislation on the local government scheme's design, administration and transitional arrangements went out to consultation here only in December last year. Even then, at some risk, which is the nature of consultations, the period for consultation was shortened. The consequence is that the consultation, short though it is, closes on 7 February. So, the consultation on the legislation for the scheme design and related matters has not even closed and will not close for another week. That is despite there being a requirement in the Bill to have regulations in place by the end of March. Therefore, it seems to us that, if we are going to honour the principle of consultation — even a shorter consultation than might have been desirable — that needs to be reflected now by taking some time out so that the date of March 2014 does not apply.

In any case, even if, on the far side of the consultation, we went down the road of the Minister tabling regulations and so on and so forth, it would create a very short window of two or three weeks for NILGOSC to make adjustments to payroll and computer systems. A commonsensical approach would be to not visit that upon NILGOSC in such a short time frame.

Why should we do all that? For the fifth reason. There are 48,000 members, and, if I remember correctly, compared with other schemes, a disproportionate number are women and are on lower-paid incomes. If we do all this in a rush, 48,000 people will be living with the consequences. Those consequences may impact most on women and part-time workers. If you do this in a hurry, you will be correcting it retrospectively. You will have a situation in which some will not get all the pension that they are entitled to and others will have to pay back pensions that have been overpaid. That will create confusion, and it will result in the interests of the employees, unionised or not, being compromised.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. I make the argument that there are administrative, individual, legal and financial reasons for adjusting the date of the end of March so that it is consistent with all other schemes. I give way.

Mr Wilson: I will not go into all the detail behind the reason why the date of 2014 was allowed in the first place. However, the Member will be aware that certain concessions were made to allow 2014 to be the date. Does he not accept that, given the history of what has happened here, if the date were moved to 2015, exactly the same problems could arise again? People might say, "There is plenty of time. We have time to make the adjustments, and we have bought ourselves another year." There would be no pressure to get the changes made. 2015 would come and go — maybe that is what he is after — and the changes would still not have been made.

Mr Attwood: First, I dispute the use of the word "concessions" because I was seeking, at Executive level, concessions in respect of this. The Member, who was then the Minister of Finance and Personnel, was one of the people who resisted that. If it is his understanding that the Executive eventually agreed that there should be concessions in respect of the local government scheme, I welcome that, because I made that argument time out of

number, and, time out of number, the Executive said no. If they were actually saying yes, I welcome that.

If you speak to NILGOSC, which I had the good fortune to do when I was Minister — the employers, the employees and the trade union side — the one thing that you will conclude is that they were not seeking to buy time.

They were actually seeking to speed up, because, given the different character of the fund, they thought that they could do that work and do it well in a shorter time frame than in respect of the other pension categories named under clause 1l. It was not to delay and create doubt; it was actually to do it quicker and create certainty.

1.15 pm

Despite their best intentions — I am utterly convinced of NILGOSC's best intentions for employer, employee and trade union — for the four or five reasons that I have outlined, they are not in a place for this to be mature enough for all of it to get done by the end of March. Given that the law will require that various processes need to be completed in respect of all of the other categories of pension named in clause 1 by the end of March 2015, why not say that it should be done in respect of the local government scheme as well? As I understand it, that should be satisfactory to Treasury, because the NILGOSC scheme will still be captured by the intention of the legislation to have the end of March 2015 as the final deadline in respect of relevant matters for the pension schemes under clause 1.

In case the argument is presented, as it may be, that penalties would be attracted if the NILGOSC scheme was deferred in that way for a year, it is my understanding that penalties apply to the unfunded pay-as-you-go schemes rather than the fully funded local government scheme, which is one of the essential differences of character. For those reasons, I urge people to accept amendment Nos 13 and 14. I look forward to hearing the Minister's view in that regard.

I turn, finally, to the last amendment in the group, which was tabled by Mr Allister, in respect of the RUC widows' pensions. It is a very well drafted amendment. I recognise that this is such a big piece of legislation that, if it was not for the work of the staff in the Bill Office, it might not be beyond Mr Allister but it would certainly be beyond the competence of other Members, including me. The Bill Office worked to get the best drafting possible to frame the best outcomes possible, even in very tight time frames in the middle of last week. I acknowledge the staff in the Bill Office for all of that work.

The amendment tabled by Jim Allister is well drafted —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: — but, more important than that, the intention is well made. I will give way.

Mr Wilson: Does the Member share my disappointment that, of course, that could have been done by regulation, had the Justice Minister decided to do so? For some reason or other he has proved intransigent on the issue, and it therefore had to come in the discussion on the main Bill.

Mr Attwood: That is a matter that you will have to take up with the Minister of Justice. I am not that familiar with the details of that particular row, but I would be interested to hear the Justice Minister reply to it in due course.

Is the point of the amendment tabled by Mr Allister not that we should ensure that, in primary legislation, we legislate for as many categories of employee or pension member as we can? Whether it has come in in the way that Mr Wilson suggests or not, we should seek in the Bill to maximise flexibilities, but not in a reckless way in terms of financial consequences. I trust that, if some of the amendments that we have proposed are accepted or Mr Allister's amendment is accepted, in group 1, the same principle of flexibility will be accepted when it comes to amendments in group 2.

Mr Girvan: I have come to speak on the first group of amendments. In doing so, I appreciate that it seems to be something of a regurgitation of the debate we had a couple of weeks ago in relation to amendment No 1 and the necessity to try to force in the unions as the people who represent everyone, even though it appears that only 56% of the employees are represented by unions, so, therefore, 44% are left outside the door.

When the unions came forward at Committee Stage to give evidence, I witnessed some of the good work that they do. I also experienced some of the worst evidence presented, in that there seemed to be some intransigence, as I mentioned previously, in their way of working with people. We have to achieve a balancing of the books some way, but they seem to have their own ideas about how those books should or should not be balanced. They also placed great emphasis on how taxation is the way to deal with everything and that those who are possibly trying to use legal approaches to avoid tax should be pursued and made to pay. That is one way.

It is clear that amendment No 1 is just another attempt to put the unions at the top of the tree in negotiations. I think that the members' representatives on those bodies and the pension boards are the people who should make the case on behalf of their members, who are ultimately the people who contribute.

Amendment No 2 deals with breaks in the scheme. Mr Attwood alluded to the fact that it is a generous scheme. The way that private firms deal with this is an issue that is always raised. I do not know too many private firms that would offer the same conditions as are offered in the public sector, where a career break of up to five years will not affect pension entitlement. As a consequence of that, I feel that we have set a fair balance — I will use that term — for the way forward. I appreciate that 10 years sets the bar somewhat high. We will debate other amendments in which the SDLP will attempt to cover all the bases, but that is further on in the debate.

As far as breaks in service are concerned, I deem the seven-year scheme, which the public purse would have to fund for the time that no contributions are received from said scheme member, to be pushing the boat too far. The balance has been set fairly at five years.

I appreciate that we were to look at other amendments. Where amendment Nos 13 and 14 are concerned, my colleague has probably shot my bolt. However, I am not going to die in a ditch over the matter. It is important that those who control the likes of the NILGOSC scheme, which I am referring to, are aware and put measures in place. That is because there is a real fear that, by giving them another year's grace, they will take that year and then come back to renegotiate. I think that that is part of the

scheme. Is it renegotiation or is it agreement? Whatever way they want to put it, it is consultation. It is not always about renegotiation; it is about consultation. That is what the point is.

That moves us on to an amendment that, by and large, every Member around the Chamber should see a bit of common sense in. Amendment No 15 calls for a new clause and makes reference to widows of police officers who have lost their life. It would mean that those who fell outside the scope of the 2008 change could avail themselves of that. The way in which the 2008 changes do not allow the widow of someone killed in the line of duty before that to remarry without losing her pension entitlement could be deemed unfair. In the light of that, the amendment makes total sense.

There is also the fear that those who remarried in the late 1980s and the 1990s will have lost the pension that they would otherwise have received. I do not know exactly how that would work under the amendment or whether it could be looked at retrospectively. I appreciate that not all legislation seems to work retrospectively. That is one area that the new clause could open up. The numbers involved are very small. It is important that we do not have one piece of legislation that discriminates against another. The 2008 changes to the scheme made provision for a widow to remarry and not lose her pension entitlement. It is vital that others can do the same.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way?

Mr Girvan: Yes.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I draw the Member's attention to a particular point. The reference is to former RUC members who were killed in action. I am certain that the Member is not approaching this from the point of view of excluding anybody. I think that, without that reference, it is clear that the amendment, in fact, incorporates all widows of former RUC officers.

Mr Girvan: I would not wish to exclude widows of former RUC officers. I am glad to be assured that that is included. I speak in favour of amendment No 15.

Amendment No 19 is consequential to amendment No 15. It follows on from it and includes it in the Bill.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. In his reference to amendment No 1, the Member's actual words were, I think, that it was an attempt to put trade unions at the "top of the tree". Having read the amendment several times, I see nothing in it that creates a hierarchy of representation. It merely ensures that trade unions are named as representatives of their members in the Bill.

Mr Girvan: I am happy to enter into debate on the matter. Inclusion of the word "must" means that nothing can be negotiated or discussed unless the unions are there. That is the point. I do not have an issue with working with unions in many other areas, but saying that representation from trade unions "must" be included says to me that nothing can be discussed unless they are present.

I support amendment Nos 15 and 19, reserve judgement on amendment Nos 13 and 14 and am against amendment Nos 1 and 2.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the majority of the amendments. Amendments in both groups demonstrate the benefits of having a Further Consideration Stage. Some of them clearly reflect the debate and, indeed, division at Consideration Stage.

Amendment No 1 is a case in point. I feel that it fits in better than the amendment from the previous stage. It reflects a common-sense approach. It states that, if an employer recognises a trade union, there should be representation from that union. That should address some of the concerns that other parties had previously about "member representatives" referring to trade union representatives exclusively. It is a common-sense approach that we will support.

1.30 pm

We shall also support amendment No 2. The gap in pensionable service was raised at Committee Stage, and it is important to recognise the potentially greater impact that that will have on female employees who have been out of the workplace for a longer period because they have been involved in raising their children. In that context, therefore, seven years is a reasonable period.

I am also happy to support amendment Nos 13 and 14 and the change from "2014" to "2015". As Members have said, it affects a large number of employees, and we need to ensure that that work is carried out correctly. It is not a big ask to support both amendments.

Amendment Nos 15 and 19 from the TUV affect only a small number of people. From what I have heard since I read the notification of the amendments, some people who want to remarry are not remarrying solely because of this, so it seems rather punitive.

I will keep my comments short. As Mr Attwood said, we should express our gratitude to the Bill Office, given the considerable demand that has been put on its services during the past week.

We will support the majority of the amendments in group 1.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to speak at Further Consideration Stage. As one Member has said, we seem to have covered most of the ground at the previous stage.

Amendment No 1 insists on mandatory trade union representation. I cannot support that view. I believe that it is covered very well in clause 5(7). It is up to representatives to choose people to represent them, and I do not see anything to prevent them choosing trade union members, should they so decide. However, I am certainly opposed to mandatory representation by someone who is not a member of the pension scheme. Similarly, amendment No 2 would extend the gap in a person's pensionable service from five years to seven years. That is also unreasonable. A lot of money would have to be found to cover that during the intervening period. Most of the private sector does not have anything like that gap in pensionable service.

Amendment No 13 attempts to extend the closing date for existing schemes to 2015, and amendment No 14 follows on from that. On behalf of the Ulster Unionists, I support those amendments as they are reasonable.

A new issue has been brought in by amendment No 15, which seeks to correct an unfair situation in police pension regulations. Again, people have referred to that fairly accurately. Under the 1988 rules, a widow would lose her

pension should she remarry. It is hard to believe that that sort of thing still exists. That was changed by the 2009 regulations but not retrospectively. It is right that it should be addressed. I have sympathy with the amendment, which the Ulster Unionist Party will support. Amendment No 19 follows on, and I will support both amendments on behalf of my party.

Mrs Cochrane: At the outset, I declare an interest as a member of the Civil Service pension scheme.

At the earlier stages of the Bill, I spoke on the policy intent behind the legislation and stated that perhaps we would not enact it if it were entirely up to us. However, today's debate is obviously not about the merits of the Bill as a whole but instead is focused on specific amendments and their outworkings should they be accepted by the House today. It is important that we assess the consequences of each amendment and reach our decisions after taking into account the full facts surrounding each one.

I turn first to the proposed amendment to clause 5, which relates to pension board representation. It is very similar to an amendment debated at Consideration Stage, which attempted to restrict employee representation to trade unions. The clause already allows those who are appointed to the board for the purpose of representing members of the scheme to be members of trade unions but does not state that they must be. Although I am sure that it is likely that many members would like to have representation from a trade union on the pension board, there are also members who are not members of any trade union and would not necessarily wish that to be the case. Therefore, I will not support that amendment.

Amendment No 2, which relates to clause 9, again seeks to increase the maximum gap in a person's —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: No, not at the moment.

Amendment No 2, which relates to clause 9, again seeks to increase the maximum gap in a person's pensionable service that can be disregarded for pension revaluations. Again, we will not support the amendment because the Bill as drafted already allows for five years, which is in line with the typical maximum career break and is a fair provision for those who have had a break in pensionable service.

I will move on to the amendments that apply to the local government scheme. Amendment Nos 13 and 14, which apply to clauses 18 and 28 respectively, would delay implementation of the reform of the local government scheme by one year. It is somewhat disappointing that a reform that should generate necessary savings is being delayed. However, I have sought an assurance from the current Environment Minister that the delay will not have financial implications for the Executive, nor will it result in an added burden to ratepayers. If that is confirmed, we will support the amendments.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: Go ahead.

Mr Wilson: Does she accept that, although it will not have any cost for the Executive, it will have a cost for the scheme, which has been described as fully funded but is actually underfunded at present? Indeed, there is quite a lot of catch-up to be done. The danger of an attempt to fill the gap created by another delay in increased pension contributions is that ratepayers will pay for the delay.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his intervention. I sought an assurance from the current Environment Minister about the cost that it may put on to ratepayers. At this precise moment, the information that I have is that it will not have implications. Hopefully, that can be thrashed out further on in the debate.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: Go ahead.

Mr Attwood: Does the Member accept that, currently, the NILGOSC scheme is, as far as I can recall, fully funded to 89% of its anticipated requirements? That is much better than many other pension schemes in the private sector, which, as we all know, are underfunded by significant sums. NILGOSC is one of the best performing pension schemes in its investments, to the point that nearly 90% of its anticipated costs are funded. In any case, NILGOSC has developed a moderate recovery plan to ensure that it gets to 100% or surpasses 100% of anticipated demand.

Mrs Cochrane: Again, I thank the Member for his intervention. It is positive that NILGOSC has looked at a recovery plan, provided that that does not simply put an additional burden on ratepayers.

Finally, then —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way again, just so that this is on the record?

Mrs Cochrane: Go ahead.

Mr Wilson: I am glad that it has at least been admitted that, although the scheme was described as fully funded, it is not fully funded and could not pay out fully at the moment. Does the Member accept that part of the recovery plan was that increased contributions would start from 2014-15 and that now, of course, there will be a year's delay in those increased contributions?

Mrs Cochrane: Again, I take the Member's point. That is why I went to the current Minister of the Environment specifically to ask for an assurance that there would not be a cost. Hopefully, the Finance Minister will have some more information on that.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: I will move on at this point. Thank you.

Finally in this group of amendments, I want to refer to new clause 29A. I understand that Mr Allister will be aware that the Justice Minister has been pursuing this issue for some years. He has repeatedly pressed the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to recognise the particular circumstances that a small number of police widows find themselves in. We are talking about a small number of widows and very particular circumstances. Yet, the objections from both Whitehall Departments have been that amending the regulations would breach principles such as retrospectivity and parity. At this stage, the Justice Minister has not accepted those arguments but has not yet found a resolution. Mr Allister proposes that the Bill offers an opportunity to address the issue. The Alliance Party has very real sympathy with the circumstances in which these widows find themselves. We will listen carefully to what the Finance Minister has to say on the matter. In

particular, we await his informed opinion on whether an amendment such as that proposed by Mr Allister can bring about a resolution of the issue.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way on that point?

Mrs Cochrane: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr Wilson: I have noticed that, in the absence of the Justice Minister, the Member has tried to make some defence of him, but does she agree that, if the Minister had been sympathetic and not hard-hearted, he could, at a very early stage, have agreed to change by regulation the terms of the pension scheme to enable those who were forced to live in sin because, if they had got married, they would have lost their pension —

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think the Member needs to be careful with his language. To refer to people who choose a certain way to live as living "in sin" visits upon those people an unfortunate reference.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's points have been noted, and I am sure that Mr Wilson will take that on board.

Mr Wilson: I was merely using the colloquial term.

The point I am making is this: had her Minister agreed to change this by regulation, the folks who were forced to choose between not getting married and keeping their pension and getting married and losing their pension could have had the issue resolved.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his intervention. Having dealt with one of my constituents who is in that situation, it is my understanding that the Minister of Justice has, on numerous occasions, tried to address the issue and has gone back and forward. I have seen the correspondence around that. Yes, there may be ways in which it could be properly resolved through legislation, and we continue to press the Minister on that as well.

I want to know whether the amendment that is before us today can bring about a resolution. Is it possible to use a DFP Bill to amend police pension regulations? If the Bill before us can, in fact, be used to resolve the issue, we should take the opportunity. If it cannot, we will wish to hear from the Finance Minister whether it might be addressed through secondary legislation. If it can, we will support such a solution.

Mr Givan: I speak in support of amendment No 15. My colleagues have dealt with the other amendments in the group. I will curtail my remarks solely to the amendment in respect of RUC widows who seek to remarry. I have met one of the widows in that circumstance. She lost her husband, who was killed because of the job that he was doing, and she had very young children. She is now in a position where she would seek to remarry but the financial consequences of doing so are very severe. She has been stuck in that position for quite a number of years. She wants to do the right thing, according to her faith. The individual who I have been dealing with is a Christian, and she wants to honour the principles that she lives by. However, if she did so, the regulations would bring a great deal of financial hardship.

I know that my colleagues have campaigned on the issue, including the Member of Parliament for my constituency, Mr Donaldson, and, as this constituent resides in Strangford, Jim Shannon, the Member of Parliament there. They have collectively campaigned on this with the Home Secretary, Theresa May, and the Prime Minister, David Cameron, who has been engaged on the issue. My European Parliament colleague, Diane Dodds, has been campaigning on the issue from January 2011. The issue has been ongoing for a considerable time.

I know that the Member for North Antrim, who tabled the amendment, will be aware of the case that I mentioned, because I have been reading through correspondence that that Member has been engaged in. We have sought to deal with this. There have been exchanges of correspondence with the Prime Minister, the Home Secretary, David Ford, the Human Rights Commission here in Northern Ireland and the Victims' Commission, and all of them have been unsuccessful. I have been particularly disappointed by the Minister of Justice's approach to this. It has not been helpful in trying to find a resolution.

Diane Dodds, a Member of the European Parliament, recently engaged the Justice Committee on the issue. I thank Members from all parties who sit on that Committee because, when the matter was raised, we all felt that it was a case worth pursuing. We then sought a legal opinion on the issue from the Attorney General. In response to the Committee, the Attorney General made a number of points that would be worth the Assembly bearing in mind in deciding whether it has the competence to deal with the issue.

1.45 pm

He made the point:

> *" the Royal Ulster Constabulary Pension Regulations 1988 are the bedrock of pension provision in relation to the police."*

He went on to state how the relevant different sections — I will not go through them — of different legislation empower the Department of Justice as the authoritative body to deal with the issue. He said to the Committee:

> *"although the Department is primarily responsible for making regulations there is a complex consultative process that must be adhered to".*

That includes the Department of Justice having to engage with the Policing Board, the Police Association for Northern Ireland, the Department of Finance and the UK Police Negotiating Board, for those regulations to be consulted on and, therefore, to be lawful. I am not aware of the Minister of Justice having even commenced any of those processes to bring forward his own regulation.

The Attorney General went on to say:

> *"it is clear to me that the Department has taken over entirely the Secretary of State's role in relation to police pensions irrespective of whether such pensions are payable to RUC officers and their dependents or PSNI officers and their dependents. Accordingly, it is the responsibility of the Department to make similar provision for RUC widows as is provided for in the Police Pension (NI) Regulations 2009 in respect of the PSNI if it wishes to do so."*

Members will be familiar with the current law, whereby widows of serving officers who were killed can remarry, should they choose to do so, without any financial consequences to the pension that they have been in receipt of. This is a matter of equality: there is a current

group of employees who have this provision, and there are those who have been impacted in the past who do not. It is right that we now move to address this issue by bringing forward this amendment. We have seen from the engagement over the past number of years that the Department of Justice has not wanted to bring forward regulations. Although the Member for East Belfast indicated that the Minister has engaged with Whitehall and that Whitehall has concerns about the issue, it is clear from the legal opinion of the Attorney General that it is for this Assembly; it is a wholly devolved matter, and it is for the Minister of Justice to bring forward regulations.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: Yes.

Mr Wells: I waited until Mrs Cochrane came back into the Chamber before saying this, because clearly all that she was doing was parroting words given to her by the Justice Minister. She was told, "In my absence, please tell the Assembly my concerns about this". Does the Member accept that the Minister has form in this regard? If he does not like something or is uneasy with it, he has a quite annoying habit of not telling the Committee or the Assembly; he puts it into the bushes by asking for a working party or more research, or saying that he is valiantly trying to get it through.

The reality is that the Minister has been in position now for over three years. If he had wanted to do something about this, there would be clear evidence indicating that there was movement. Mrs Cochrane made it very clear that there has been absolutely no movement, which means that it is probably never going to happen. Therefore, I entirely agree with what Mr Allister is trying to do. I hope that other Members, rather than causing further suffering and distress to those ladies, will back the amendment.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for his intervention.

The point that I want to continue making is that, having sought to put pressure on the Minister of Justice to bring forward his own regulations in compliance with the processes that currently exist, and having got evidence that that is not going to happen, what are Members to do? I recognise that it is somewhat unusual to use this Bill to address something that the Department of Justice should have addressed by way of regulation. However, it is entirely reasonable for that approach to be taken. Therefore, the Bill should be used to facilitate the changes that we have sought.

I have engaged with the Finance Minister, Mr Hamilton, on this particular issue. I have sought to get the reassurance from him that, despite advice that he may well be receiving, it is going to be competent and we are able to do this because of the particular issues at stake. Hopefully, the Minister, when responding later, will outline how he has been able to try to deal with this. I had a number of conversations with him and Diane Dodds over the weekend on this particular issue to try to make sure that the amendment can be facilitated and hopefully have the endorsement of the Minister, which can then reassure the House that it is the right thing to do. It will put right something that will affect a very small number of people.

I recognise that the Assembly will, by and large, deal with legislation that will impact on the vast majority of people. However, if we in the Assembly are to do something for the one or two in society, I think that it is right that we do so. That is why we support devolution. I have no doubt that, if this had been left to direct rule, we would not be able to make this particular change. However, because of devolution, we are able to look at particular circumstances, and, where we are able to make positive change, we can do so. That is why amendment No 15 should be commended, and I trust that the House will be able to give it its full support.

Mr I McCrea: I will be brief in my contribution, given that most of what my party needed to say has been said. I thought that the proposers of amendment No 1 would have learned from the debate at Consideration Stage that, when they did not get their way for the unions, they were not going to get their way for this one either. The amendment includes the words:

"must include representation from any trade union".

However, it is blatantly obvious. I think that my colleague Paul Girvan referred to the fact that 56% of people in the public service pension scheme are members of trade unions, so it is highly likely — in fact, it is certainly over 50% likely — that any membership of the scheme would include members of a trade union. So, I do not accept that the amendment is necessary, and I will not be supporting it.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: I will.

Mr D Bradley: Could the Member explain to the House what exactly is wrong with this amendment? What is wrong with trade unions, which, as you said yourself, represent a good majority of members in the schemes, being named in the Bill as representatives of their members?

Mr I McCrea: I think that what we debated at Consideration Stage on the previous amendment on this matter applies to this. The fact is that naming them in the Bill will discriminate against those who are not members of trade unions. The Members can wax lyrical as often as they want about this issue, but the fact is that it discriminates. I heard them refer to equal rights, human rights and many different rights, but what about the rights of those people who are not members of a union?

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: Yes.

Mr Attwood: Would you provide to the House the legal advice that you have received that led you to say that that amendment would be discriminatory? Where is the legal advice? If you are relying on that word and on its precise legal consequences, you should provide that legal advice, otherwise you should withdraw the claim that it is discriminatory.

Mr I McCrea: I think that the Member has gone a wee bit too far. If I have an opinion on whether it discriminates, I do not need to seek legal advice to provide me with that. I am entitled to that opinion.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: No; I am going to move on. Obviously, they are not listening, no matter what is said. I will move on, because we are running very close to 2.00 pm.

I think that, as other Members said, five years is a fair period to allow people to take a career break that will not

impact their pensions. I said the previous time that it felt as though they were plucking a number out of the air. They had 10 years the previous time, so they are trying their luck with seven years. However, I do not think that that is going to happen either.

As other Members said, we are not going to divide the House on amendment Nos 13 and 14. It is disappointing, as Judith Cochrane said, that this is continuing to 2015, but again, we will not divide the House. As my colleague Paul Givan said, one or two people are affected by the issue that amendment No 15 seeks to address. In this case, if it is the right thing to do, we should do it. I have no doubt that the Minister will detail whatever information he has about the amendment's competency and whether what it seeks to do can be done. Like other Members, I am disappointed that the Justice Minister has not brought that change in via regulation. Nonetheless, we are where we are, and hopefully we will deal with the matter through the amendment.

We will certainly not be supporting amendment Nos 1 and 2, but we will not divide the House on any of the other amendments in the group.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm, I suggest that Members take their ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member called to speak will be Jim Allister.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Attorney General: Reappointment

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their decision regarding the reappointment of the current Attorney General. *(AQO 5365/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Consideration of the options for filling the position of Attorney General (AG) after the current term ends in May 2014 is under way.

Mrs D Kelly: The deputy First Minister will recall that, in the autumn, the First Minister said that he and the deputy First Minister would be reaching a settled view about the appointment of the Attorney General and be making an announcement within a matter of weeks. It is now a matter of months. What further information can the deputy First Minister give to the House?

Mr M McGuinness: I can give no further information to the House other than to state the position that we recognise that, come May of this year, the position of Attorney General needs to be filled. We had a discussion about that during the past seven days, and we hope to be in a position to make an announcement very shortly.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Given the issues that the Attorney General has involved himself in, does the deputy First Minister think that he has strayed outside his remit?

Mr M McGuinness: It is important that we understand the different roles and responsibilities of the Attorney General (AG). When he was appointed, we invited him to undertake the non-statutory role of chief legal adviser to the Executive. He also has a range of responsibilities derived from statute, convention and practice. Section 22(5) of the Justice Act 2002 requires the Attorney General to exercise his functions independently of any other person.

There may well be times when the AG, in his statutory role, acts in ways that others may consider unhelpful. There may be times when we as an Executive differ from his views, but it would be wrong of us to seek to curtail his actions when he is acting in his independent statutory role.

Ms Lo: Will the reappointment process take into account the controversial and sometimes unhelpful or inappropriate comments and remarks that the Attorney General has made in the past few years?

Mr M McGuinness: I am not sure what remarks the Member refers to, but I made it clear in my initial answer that there were times when people voiced objections to what they considered his involvement in areas that he should not have been involved in, whilst we as an

Executive absolutely have to respect the independence of his office. We have to remember that the Attorney General is a statutory officer with a range of responsibilities derived in part from statute and in part from convention and practice. Section 22(5) of the Justice Act requires the Attorney General to exercise his functions independently of any other person.

On the Attorney General's appointment, we also invited him to undertake the non-statutory role of chief legal adviser to the Executive. Such a role is usually carried out by the senior law officer in comparable jurisdictions. One of the terms of reference of the Angiolini review was to examine and make recommendations on possible tensions between the Attorney General having to balance his role as chief legal adviser to the Executive with his statutory responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Haass Proposals: Cost

2. **Mr Frew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether any analysis has been carried out regarding the cost of implementing the Haass proposals. *(AQO 5366/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: The Haass talks concluded on New Year's Eve without agreement between the five Executive parties on the proposals that were put forward. In the absence of such agreement, there has been no assessment or analysis of the cost of implementation. The panel of parties was asked to bring forward recommendations that would provide long-term and sustainable solutions in the best interests of the community and make peace more resilient going forward. It will, therefore, now be for the parties to agree a way forward, and, at that stage, it would be appropriate to consider the funding and budgetary implications of the agreed measures.

Mr Frew: Given that victims were at the heart of Haass, that it was the twenty-second anniversary of the Teebane atrocity last week and that no one has been brought to justice for that heinous multiple murder, will the deputy First Minister, by his own admission a member and leader of the IRA, give all the information that he has to the PSNI to assist the victims and the families of those murdered that day?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member takes a great liberty in attributing to me information that I have absolutely no knowledge of whatsoever. The reality is that, in the course of the Haass discussions, there was a huge responsibility on all the parties to come forward with an agreed approach to dealing with the issues of victims; parades; and flags, symbols and emblems. It does a grave disservice to victims if we find ourselves, as the Member has unfortunately found himself, in a position where he is tempted to score political points.

We have to recognise that we have a duty and a responsibility as politicians to find solutions to these problems. We all entered the discussions with a very clear understanding of the challenges before us. I, for one, am not prepared to shirk my responsibilities as a political leader to try to find outcomes that will be beneficial to victims. In the context of the Haass recommendations, a menu of options was put forward that quite clearly could, if implemented, deal with a lot of the concerns that victims have. We are all much better working positively and constructively together to find solutions as opposed to engaging in what I consider to be a very low attempt to score a political point.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. What does the deputy First Minister think the implications will be if the parties do not agree on a way forward through the Haass talks?

Mr M McGuinness: I have to say that I think that there will be implications for victims, for communities looking for a resolution to the issue of parades, for loyal orders who wish to parade and for people who, I think, are mature enough to engage in a debate on how we respect the British identity in the North and the Irish identity in the North. These issues represent huge challenges.

Remember that our parties were part of a process called cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI), in which a lot of good was work done. A lot of that good work is now in the Together: Building a United Community approach. Just a few days ago, the First Minister and I attended a very important event in the Waterfront Hall involving a lot of young people and organisations. Those young people hope that we can continue to move forward and deal with these situations. However, we failed to deal with the three issues during the CSI process. Some parties play-acted, and some parties stepped out of the process. That is why, with the agreement of the five party leaders, we had to bring in Richard Haass. It is our responsibility to find a solution to the three issues. Will we find a solution by repeating the CSI failures? I think not.

Mr Cree: Will the deputy First Minister give an assessment of the impact of introducing a whole raft of new quangos on the policy to reduce the number of arm's-length bodies?

Mr M McGuinness: All parties in the Assembly accept that the three outstanding issues that we are trying to find resolutions to require imaginative and innovative approaches. The dialogue and discussions that took place over a six-month period, culminating in intensive talks prior to and after Christmas, left us in a position in which, for example, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party told the media that he was 80% to 90% in agreement with the approach adopted in the Haass discussions. Of course, if you are in agreement with 80% or 90%, that effectively means that you are in agreement with the architecture that was proposed by Richard Haass. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: I see heads shaking, but I think that the public, having heard the Ulster Unionist Party say that it was 80% to 90% happy with what was being discussed in the final days of those talks, will have realised that much of the discussion centred around the establishment of the Historical Investigations Unit —

Mr Nesbitt: Language.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: — and a recovery mechanism and other mechanisms to provide the solace and comfort that many victims' groups are seeking.

Mr Byrne: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers. Does he agree that extra resources may be required from the British Government to implement the Haass proposals? Given that we want to be in a positive

frame of mind, how confident is the deputy First Minister that legislation can be moved in the Dáil, the House of Commons and, indeed, here in due course to make sure that implementation happens?

Mr M McGuinness: There is a huge responsibility on the British Government in particular to recognise that, in the event of agreement being reached, they should make a financial contribution towards the establishment of the important bodies to deal with what are very contentious issues in the process. I contend that, whatever price will be paid by the British Government, it will be minimal in the context of resolving issues that cause great aggravation in our community and have, by their existence, created all sorts of difficulties in these institutions. I met the British Secretary of State recently, and that issue was raised. I have also raised the issue with the Tánaiste, Eamon Gilmore, who I have contact with and met recently. From the interest taken by the White House and the State Department, there is a very clear recognition that, in the context of agreement being reached, the British Government should make a financial contribution towards the resolution of these issues.

The Member asked about legislation. The big focus at the minute is on whether or not the meetings that we are involved in at party leadership level in the Assembly can find a way forward. If we find a way forward, we will then face the issue of legislating.

Delivering Social Change

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress on the Delivering Social Change framework. *(AQO 5367/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): As Members will be aware, the Delivering Social Change framework was set up to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It represents a new level of joined-up working across government to achieve tangible, long-lasting social benefits for those who need them most. Underpinning all that work is a recognition of how important it is that all our children and young people get the best possible start in life. That is why the early work of Delivering Social Change has focused on the identification of the needs of children and families to ensure that the most urgent and significant problems in our society are addressed.

The initial six signature programmes announced in October 2012 are focusing on early interventions to tackle issues before they develop into problems and to give children a good start in life. For example, it includes prenatal interventions, early years interventions and programmes for those who are not in education, training or employment. Significant progress has been made on those programmes, and they are beginning to make a real impact. However, those signature programmes alone will not eradicate the serious issues such as poor health, low educational attainment and chronic unemployment.

Reducing intergenerational poverty can be achieved only by all Ministers working together with a longer-term view to the next Programme for Government period and the years beyond. We have recognised that, and a policy project board has been established to look at how the Executive can improve the quality of life for our communities in the areas of health, education, employment, family and community life, and cohesion. Through a more joined-up approach, we believe that we can make changes in children's lives and, in doing so, help break the cycle of multigenerational poverty that blights so many of our communities.

Mr Anderson: Further to that detailed response, what consideration is being given to future projects?

Ms J McCann: A lot of consideration has been given to future projects. The board that I mentioned has been looking at, for instance, the Active Ageing strategy and issues concerning people with disabilities.

The Member will know that, recently, we also had the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People strategy, which is now out for consultation. We are looking at a number of projects in those three areas in particular, but we are concentrating primarily on children and young people and on families.

2.15 pm

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What consideration has been given to extending the consultation period for the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People strategy?

Ms J McCann: As I said in my reply to the previous question, the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People strategy, which has been launched and is out for consultation, sets out proposed outcomes, indicators and actions that we hope will improve the outcomes for children and young people. Although we have said that the consultation was due to close on 21 February due to the statutory deadlines, we acknowledge that that time period is not in keeping with good practice as outlined, for instance, by the Equality Commission, so we hope to extend that period. I do not know whether the Member has had a chance to read it, but we are actively engaging with people in local communities who have a particular interest in those areas of work. We will be going out to get their ideas to influence any future policy.

Mr Dallat: I have listened to the junior Minister with some level of confusion. She will recall that these hubs were to be signed off by the end of January, which we are now in. Have leases been negotiated, and are we going ahead?

Ms J McCann: I am sorry; for clarification, is that the family support hubs or the social economy hubs? *[Interruption.]* I am happy enough to answer the Member's question.

Mr Speaker: Order. I appreciate that, Minister.

Mr Dallat: The hubs that were promised by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for Delivering Social Change.

Ms J McCann: I am not being facetious here; I just want to answer your question. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms J McCann: There has been a bit of difficulty with the family support hubs. We had a meeting recently at which that was clarified; they were supposed to be in place much more quickly than they were. We are being told that they will be in place by April this year. All eight social economy hubs, and a ninth, extra one, will be in place soon, and the

locations are there. I take the Member's point about the family health hubs, because we are very keen to get those in place as soon as possible.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the junior Minister for her answers. Is she content that the consultation on the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People strategy will last only five weeks — she touched on that in her previous answer — and that the child-friendly version of the consultation document is not yet published?

Ms J McCann: As I said, we were put under a bit of pressure because of the statutory deadlines by which we have to report to the Assembly under the Child Poverty Act 2010. We did acknowledge that it was not in keeping with the Equality Commission's recommendations for consultations. We do not want to consult just the stakeholders and the people who deliver the service; we are very keen to consult the children themselves, so I think that what we will see, hopefully, is that consultation with the children and young people. We started that off last Friday at an event in the Waterfront Hall, where hundreds of young people came together. I take on board what you are saying, because we are very keen to make sure that children and young people are actively involved in that.

Social Investment Fund

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they expect funding to be allocated to projects via the social investment fund *(AQO 5368/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann: We have agreed indicative financial allocations for each of the nine social investment fund (SIF) zones. Officials have met the chairs of the nine steering groups, and then each steering group, to agree the projects in each of the area plans that can be funded from the available resources for each zone and to discuss the next steps to progress the delivery of the projects. We expect that the first tranche of projects will receive letters of offer in the coming weeks. Officials are focusing further efforts on securing approval for those projects that sit within the limits of affordability in each zone but have not yet been fully approved. We anticipate completing this exercise by the end of the current financial year.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Minister McCann for her answer. Now that allocations have been decided, when will local groups and projects be informed about how they have fared in the application process and whether they are likely to receive funding?

Ms J McCann: I sympathise with the point about the length of time that it has been taking for some projects. We are hopeful that, by the end of next month, letters of offer will go out to some of the lead organisations that will be delivering them. We are very keen to get that money on the ground, because, having come from the community sector, I know how frustrating it is for community organisations that are constantly looking for funding for projects. We are really trying to get it out as soon as possible, and I will keep the Member informed about how that is going.

Mr Campbell: Will the junior Minister and the deputy First Minister ensure that, at the next round of funding under the SIF, when they are discussing interface areas in particular, account will be taken of communities of either side of that interface to ensure that there is a balance in funding applications, particularly in hard-to-reach communities on either side of it?

Ms J McCann: Certainly. We are taking where the most need is into consideration. We want to ensure that all communities have the money and the resources that they need to put the services, projects and programmes in place. It does not matter what side of the community they are from. We are looking at this specifically to help people who are disadvantaged and who are in most need.

Mr Rogers: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. What consideration has been given to rural impacts in the strategic area plans for SIF?

Ms J McCann: The Member will know that the social investment fund was for right across the North, unlike neighbourhood renewal, which is mainly for urban areas. The social investment fund also included rural areas. We know that SIF will not cure all the ills that are out there, so we are very keen to work with other programmes that are already out in communities, such as neighbourhood renewal. You mentioned rural communities, and we are very keen to work within area plans.

This came from the bottom up, if you like. Steering groups are deciding what projects and programmes are prioritised for getting this funding. So, it is for the areas, represented by the steering groups, to decide that.

Mr Allister: After the protracted delay, is it sheer coincidence that OFMDFM is holding off the announcements on what projects have been successful to get those announcements as close as possible to the local government elections?

Ms J McCann: No, nothing could be further from the truth. As I said, I have worked in the community sector, and I know the difficulties that people in that sector have in trying to get resources and funding for programmes and the different things that they do there. So, we are trying to get this funding out as quickly as possible, and we will be doing that.

Investment Strategy

5. **Mr Milne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's investment strategy. *(AQO 5369/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: In October 2012, we launched the latest revision of the investment strategy, covering the years 2011-2021, envisaging a total investment of something like £13·3 billion. The strategy is sufficiently flexible to respond to developments in priorities and policy, as well as to changes in the wider economic context. That includes access to further capital, which was agreed as part of the Building a Prosperous and United Community agreement that was announced in June 2013.

In the financial year 2012-13, some £1,300 million was invested in capital infrastructure projects, and I expect a broadly similar figure for 2013-14. During the past year, a number of significant projects have been completed, and new ones have been started or have commenced in planning. To ensure that we are making best use of the resource that is available to us, we are completing a review of existing infrastructure and an assessment of future needs. This will ensure that our investment strategy

continues to be informed by the latest evidence. That has been complemented by innovative research by the Strategic Investment Board and Queen's University on new strategic infrastructure planning models to assist Departments and public bodies, and by action to manage property assets more effectively.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Can he provide an update on the development of the Community Safety College at Desertcreat?

Mr M McGuinness: I am sure that all Mid Ulster MLAs will be happy to know that, following some difficulties, the two sponsoring Departments — Justice and Health — have agreed on the design and costings for the college. It is expected that the contract will be awarded in June, when work will begin on the site. Construction is expected to be completed by autumn 2016, and the college will open shortly after that. The total cost of the college, including construction, equipment and ICT will be in the region of £157 million. In line with our Programme for Government commitments, the college's location helps to address regional imbalances in investment, and the inclusion of social clauses in the contract will provide training, work and business opportunities for local people.

It is also important to state that there will be a meet-the-buyer day in March 2014. That will provide opportunities for local businesses to become involved. We are all absolutely agreed that, in the context of the huge contracts, it is very important that small local businesses be given every opportunity to be in there seeking opportunities for themselves and for their employees.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra cuimsitheach. Can the deputy First Minister give us any indication as to why the announcement of the date of commencement has again slipped? Many of us who have been involved closely in trying to advocate the project have seen the date slip quite considerably. We were told that it would be March, then it was to be May, and he has just announced that it will be June.

Mr M McGuinness: The Member is aware that the Community Safety College is a joint venture between the PSNI, the Fire Service and the Prison Service. When the college is completed, it will be a world-leading centre of excellence for training. Initial tender returns received in December 2012 were significantly above the pre-tender estimates, resulting in a process to review specifications and designs. We are all very conscious that that has been the primary reason why we have ended up in a slippage situation. I have taken as keen an interest as anybody in the project. I am very anxious to see it completed, because the college will be hugely beneficial to people, not just in the constituency but all over the North, in seeing the decentralisation of important bodies out of Belfast.

It is also important to state that significant elements were opposed in the first instance to the project going to Cookstown. It took people such as me and others to stand against those who wished to have it in the Belfast area. I am happy to say that we won the day, and the centre of excellence for community safety will be built in Cookstown, starting in June. A bit of slippage? I will accept that over the college not going there at all.

Mr McCarthy: How will the Executive's investment strategy be utilised to remedy the disastrous effects in many areas in Northern Ireland, particularly on the Ards peninsula, where so many sea breaches, flooding and coastal erosion affected many people's houses and businesses?

Mr M McGuinness: In my initial answer, I said that built into all of this is flexibility. We all have to be very conscious of the incredibly worsening weather situation and the extremes of weather that we have been experiencing in recent years. No doubt, those responsible for devising a strategy will have to take account of coastal erosion and how that can be to the detriment of local communities, such as those on the Ards peninsula. Therefore, it is a point well made.

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. We move on to topical questions.

2.30 pm

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry

1. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry. *(AQT 601/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister McCann to take that question.

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that there have been recent developments. The people who were affected by historical institutional abuse have been going to Banbridge. We are trying to ensure that the people who come forward and have to face that process will have as many support mechanisms and services as possible. We are concentrating on that. Obviously, the inquiry is independent, but we are helping and are very keen to make sure that the people who come forward are supported in the horrendous ordeal that they have to face.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. She and the deputy First Minister will be aware that the evidence given this week, I think, or last week by Sisters of Nazareth nuns was described as "haphazard and piecemeal". What obligations do institutions such as the Sisters of Nazareth have when it comes to cooperating fully with the inquiry?

Ms J McCann: There could not be anything more dreadful than what those people had to go through. I think particularly about the vulnerability of the children involved, because they had nobody to turn to. Everyone should approach the inquiry, regardless of the basis on which they are giving evidence, with openness and transparency. I hope that that is the case, whatever organisation people are from.

Child Poverty Strategy

2. **Mr Anderson** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it proposes to take forward the child poverty strategy to ensure progress. *(AQT 602/11-15)*

I commend the "turning the curve" exercises in the new child poverty strategy.

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, junior Minister McCann will take that question.

Ms J McCann: The Member will know from what was said earlier that the new Delivering Social Change strategy for children and young people is out to consultation, and included in that is the child's outcome model. We have been in consultation on that for some time with stakeholder organisations. We are trying to base that around the health, family support and educational achievement outcomes for children.

We are bound by the Westminster Child Poverty Act 2010 to report to the Assembly by the end of March. That might not be possible, and the date might slip simply because we want to go out to consultation and get information. That is where the strategy sits, and hopefully we will have more information to bring to the Assembly in the coming weeks and months.

Mr Anderson: Will the strategy be laid in time to meet our statutory obligations in the Child Poverty Act?

Ms J McCann: I have just said that that is what we hope to do. It might slip by a couple of weeks, but that is all. We do not want to cut the consultation period short, because we are very concerned about the Equality Commission's view. We want to consult as many people as possible before we bring the strategy back. It might slip by a couple of weeks, but that is all.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Haass Process

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given our commitment to the ongoing Haass process, whether the deputy First Minister can outline his view of the next steps. *(AQT 604/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: The next steps are very clear and are in the public domain. The party leaders in the Assembly have met on two occasions. They will meet again tomorrow, which will probably be a lengthier meeting than the first two. There is a huge responsibility on all of us to find a way forward on these three contentious issues.

It is incumbent on all of us to be positive and constructive and to recognise that the lot of politicians among the general public is not great. I find that embarrassing. What we need to do is show the public right across society that we have the ability to tackle these difficult issues. We have tackled even more difficult issues in the past. When you look at where all of the parties are now — in an inclusive Executive and Assembly — you clearly see that the challenges before us could, if resolved, improve the standing of politicians and increase the public's confidence in our ability to work together in a positive and constructive way.

That is the mode that I am in. My involvement in this process for over 20 years has been characterised by forging agreements with others. In forging agreements, we all have to recognise that, at times, compromises have to be made. I think that the compromises made to bring us to where we are today were honourable ones. We need to continue to do that in the interests of our people.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. In light of the Haass deliberations on the past, will the deputy First Minister join me in congratulating the authorities for continuing to seek justice for the family of Eamon Collins, who was so brutally murdered, and in calling for anyone with any evidence or information to pass that to the Police Service of Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: In the course of the Haass discussions, we had a remedy to deal with those issues. Unfortunately, thus far, we have not reached agreement on how we go forward. In the context of, hopefully, reaching agreement on how we take that forward, there will be many other cases, not just that of Mr Collins, that, if the families so wish, need to be dealt with. What we provided for public consumption, as all who have read the Haass document will know, is a menu of options for families. I do not know what the Collins family wishes at this time. No doubt we will be apprised of that in the coming period. There is certainly a huge responsibility on all of us to put in place processes that will deal with all of these issues comprehensively, right across the board, and provide options for families who will decide either that they want the truth but not prosecutions or that they want prosecutions. It is our duty and responsibility to support them all.

Holocaust Memorial Day

5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister how it will commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day. *(AQT 605/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: I understand that our junior Ministers will represent the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister at an event that will take place shortly in, I think, the City Hall. It is very appropriate that we commemorate the day. The First Minister and I have attended Holocaust commemorations in the past, which is hugely important. I, for one, am absolutely delighted that Adolf Hitler was defeated by the Allied forces in the Second World War. I hate to think that we would have been living in subjugation to the Nazis here in the North or on the island of Ireland, had he got his way. I recognise the terrible suffering and misery of the Jewish people who lost their lives during the Holocaust. In fact, others from the Assembly and I visited Auschwitz and saw at first hand the terrible conditions in which people lost their lives.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response and share his sentiments about this important day. However, does he agree that the best commemoration is action to eradicate discrimination and prejudice of any kind? Will he update us on the racial equality, sexual orientation and community relations strategies that would take such action here in Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that the Member probably knows better than anybody else the challenges that face us in how we go forward on those matters. From my perspective, I absolutely recognise that we need to live in a society where everybody is treated equally and there is no discrimination whatsoever. It is our responsibility as legislators and political leaders to ensure that we live in a society where people feel valued, no matter what their sexual orientation, religious belief or political allegiance. That is a huge responsibility, but there are also huge difficulties in getting to a place where we can find absolute agreement on all those issues so that we can drive forward with an unequivocal approach to protecting the rights of citizens.

Legal Advice

6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister what expert legal advice, in the specific field of legislative competence, is available to Ministers from lawyers employed within the Department. *(AQT 606/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, all sorts of legal advice is available to the Department through the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO). All Departments have access to that expertise, and all Departments avail themselves of that expertise on an ongoing basis. Separately, we have the Attorney General, with his particular expertise. There is no shortage of legal advice for the purposes of ensuring that we push forward with legislation. Obviously, drafting legislation is a particular gift that not everybody has. Therefore, that absolutely puts pressure on legislative drafters when we find ourselves in a scenario where there is a lot of legislation to be processed.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. On the specifics of the proposed amendment to the ill-fated Planning Bill, which would have brought some economic planning matters within OFMDFM, is he aware of whether Sinn Féin and/or the DUP sought advice on whether the amendment was legislatively competent and whether the advice was that it was legal or not legal?

Mr M McGuinness: I assure the Member that neither the First Minister nor I would have pushed forward with that project without having had legal advice. It is also important to state that the First Minister and I met the Minister of the Environment in, I think, November last year. It is our hope that, as a result of ongoing discussions, we will see a way forward to ensure that we bring the Planning Bill before the Assembly.

Cyberbullying

7. **Mr Ross** asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether its actions are making the cyber-community a safer community, given the focus on cyberbullying last week, with individuals convicted for sending menacing tweets. *(AQT 607/11-15)*

Mr M McGuinness: That is hugely important. Particular difficulties and problems are being experienced by our young people, not just in the North but all over the island. We are all very conscious that we are fast approaching Safer Internet Day, which, I think, is in February. I know that an awful lot of good work has been done by people like Jim Gamble, a former member of Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), and others, who all recognise the great dangers that the Internet can present to our young people. It can present great opportunities for our young people, but, on occasion, it presents great dangers. We are very focused on the need to ensure that, working in conjunction with the Police Service, we move forward on the issue as we learn more about these situations.

There was one particularly tragic situation in Ballybofey, County Donegal, where, in the past couple of years, two siblings lost their lives to suicide.

Those are very tragic situations, and it is incumbent on all of us to address the issues that present those dangers to young people. The best way to do that is through a joined-up approach, working with Internet providers, police and experts.

2.45 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Southern Trust: Junior Doctors

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the number of junior doctors recruited by the Southern Health and Social Care Trust in the past five years. *(AQO 5380/11-15)*

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Member for his question. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust directly recruited three junior doctors in 2009-2010; six in 2010-11; three in 2011-12; six in 2012-13; and two in 2013-14. The Southern Trust has approximately 225 junior doctor posts, and the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) has filled over 90% of those posts.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept that succession planning for doctors will be important in hospitals? Is he content that enough training is in place for F1s, F2s, senior house officers (SHOs) and, indeed, registrars to meet the needs of retiring consultants?

Mr Poots: It is certainly an issue for us. We work with NIMDTA to identify the number of doctors that we might need to move things forward. We have issues in particular areas. For example, obstetrics and gynaecology (O&G) and emergency departments are two areas where we can sometimes struggle to fill positions. NIMDTA is very well aware that that is the case. It has a role in ensuring that there are adequate numbers of doctors to fill those positions.

Often, we have a greater problem when it comes to middle-grade doctors than we have with junior doctors. Last week, I raised the matter with Theresa Villiers that we used to be able to bring doctors into Northern Ireland and, indeed, right across the UK from any Commonwealth country. However, because of European regulations, we are being restricted in doing that. I for one will be very prepared to challenge European regulations if they impact detrimentally on people's health. I will encourage the Home Office and land and border security to look at those issues.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: The cost of locums for the appointment of junior doctors was £5 million in the Western Trust, because often junior doctors do not apply because of regional disparities and deficits issues in the western area. How can the Minister address that particular issue? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Poots: I am not in a position to force people to work in particular areas. Jobs are advertised and recruitment is carried out. People apply for jobs. I recognise that it is more difficult to fill posts in areas away from Belfast. It is more challenging and difficult, and we have to deal with that. The Western Trust works very hard on recruitment. However, it finds challenges in particular areas and specialties. We need to recognise that. We will support the trust in what it attempts to do. In spite of everything, we

are getting good results in the Western Trust area on many fronts and it is to be congratulated for that.

Mrs Cameron: What efforts are being made to recruit doctors for the emergency departments at Downe Hospital and Lagan Valley Hospital?

Mr Poots: In response to my request, the South Eastern Trust has redoubled its efforts to attract emergency medical staff to both the Lagan Valley Hospital and Downe Hospital. Advertisements have been placed in the local press, in addition to further contact being made with various recruitment agencies. The trust has endeavoured to recruit middle-grade doctors to all of its hospitals. However, it has not been possible to fill all of the vacancies, primarily due to a regional and national shortage of those staff. In addition, local hospitals also have difficulties in attracting staff of that type for reasons such as geographical location; perception of stand-alone facilities; and the increasingly stringent clinical standards whereby medical staff have to demonstrate competencies linked to volume and case mix which cannot be maintained in smaller hospitals.

During the financial year 2013-14, the trust has incurred expenditure of around £4,000 on two recruitment campaigns. The costs do not include the use of locum medical staff. In July 2013, a speciality doctor post was advertised. On 16 June 2013, there were three applicants for nine vacancies, and two appointments were made. On 7 January, advertisements were placed in the media for a consultant and for speciality doctor posts. Outside the normal recruitment processes, the trust has also tried to develop its own middle-grade staff, often by working intensively with locum staff to develop their skills to a point where they are able to work at middle-grade level and to become trust employees.

The trust has also opportunistically brought in GP trainees who have expressed an interest in emergency medicine, and it has helped them to reach the point at which they are able to cover middle-grade roles. It has also found that traditional advertising has been largely unsuccessful in filling middle-grade posts. Recruitment of staff across emergency departments is a UK-wide theme, and it is currently estimated that up to 50% of all emergency department posts are unfilled.

Mr Beggs: Junior doctors go through a training programme and, ultimately, so do middle-grade doctors. Can the Minister assure us that there is a sufficient training budget for doctors and nurses that means that, in the future, we will not continually face vacancies?

Mr Poots: I do not want to sound sexist in any way, shape or form, but we have a higher number of females training as doctors now. I think that, at this point, a higher number of doctor trainees are young women as opposed to men. However, many more females choose to opt out in their thirties than would have been the case previously, because of the demands of life, raising a family and so forth. That is a choice that many of them make. For example, the average age at which a male GP retires is 57, and the average age at which a female GP retires is 37. So, one can see where the problems can arise. There has been a fundamental shift in the number of females now training to be doctors, and many of them do not want to be working full time. Some of them opt out of the system at a relatively young age, and that causes us greater problems. Although more people are being trained now than ever, the retention of doctors is very important.

I think that there may be opportunities to look at how we attract people back into practice. So, if someone drops out because they want to be with their children at that early stage in life, what is the potential of getting them back into even part-time employment at a later stage? Perhaps some of the hurdles are too high to get over, and we need to look at how we can be more flexible in bringing people back into employment in the healthcare system.

Orthopaedic Service: Altnagelvin

2. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline plans for the staffing and resourcing of the orthopaedic service in Altnagelvin Hospital. *(AQO 5381/11-15)*

Mr Poots: I am advised by the Western Health and Social Care Trust that it has plans in place for the capital development of an additional theatre space by 2015. The trauma and orthopaedic service will use part of that to develop the elective inpatient and day-case capacity in the trust, thereby reducing the reliance on the independent sector. The trust will bid for recurrent revenue and for capital equipment investment for that service development in the coming months. The trust is also working with local commissioners on several developments for that service, including bone health and pre-operative assessment.

Mr P Ramsey: I declare an interest as a patient at the orthopaedic department at Altnagelvin. Does the Minister share my concern that we had a centre of excellence for children's orthopaedics at Altnagelvin for the entire north-west but that we are losing that capacity? Parents fear greatly that they will be forced to take their children to Belfast. What can his Department do to assist to bring that capacity back to the orthopaedic department?

Mr Poots: My understanding is that that is about doctors and not about finance. It has not been done to save money; it is about an ability to have the correct and requisite number of people who were capable of providing the service. Therefore, we will provide the support that the Western Trust seeks and requires from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) for recruitment and support to help to ensure that such a service can exist. I understand that that has had difficulties and that that is why we are in the position that we are.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call Mr Dunne, I want to say, in the mildest terms, that this is a specific question about a specific hospital: Altnagelvin. I am not prejudging what the Member's question might be.

Mr Dunne: This question is about Altnagelvin Hospital.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Dunne: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Will the Minister give us an update on the new primary percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) unit at Altnagelvin Hospital, which will, I understand, go a long way to treating heart attack patients in Londonderry?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for what is a very topical question. The introduction of the service in Belfast and at Altnagelvin will mean that patients having a heart

attack will be taken directly to a cath lab that is capable of undertaking the procedure on a 24/7 basis. That is a substantial step forward in Northern Ireland for heart attack victims. It means that they will bypass emergency departments in other facilities and be taken directly to a cath lab.

I hope that Members will not ask silly questions at some future point about why an ambulance bypassed a certain hospital. It will have done so in the interests of the patient. It might not always get the right result, because we are talking about life-and-death situations. However, it will ensure that many more people survive a heart attack as a result.

The pilot took place at the Royal. The service became operational 24/7 on 30 September 2013. It is planned that the Altnagelvin service will provide a daytime PCI service from spring 2014, with a 24/7 service in place by summer 2014. Until the final phase of the regional expansion is complete, services for patients who are not in the catchment area for Belfast will continue to use clot-busting drugs, followed by a planned PCI, before they are discharged from hospital.

Mr Speaker: I say to the whole House that, although I know where the Member was coming from, his question certainly was about a different service. *[Interruption.]* Order. It certainly was about a different service from the one raised in the main question, but I allowed it. Members should not make light of rulings from the Chair.

Cystic Fibrosis

3. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to improve care for people with cystic fibrosis. *(AQO 5382/11-15)*

Mr Poots: In 2012-13, significant investment was made to improve care for cystic fibrosis patients. That included £4·4 million identified recurrently to support the full introduction of the new drug treatment Ivacaftor and a further £693,000 to implement two treatments approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE): mannitol dry powder and tobramycin dry power, both for inhalation. There has also been investment in the children's service, including more staff for dietetics, physiotherapy and pulmonary function services, and further improvement in the process of transition from paediatric to adult services.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he indicate to the House when the review of the cystic fibrosis service is due to take place?

Mr Poots: The cystic fibrosis team in paediatrics currently does not meet the standards set out in the Cystic Fibrosis Trust's 'Standards of Care' from 2011. Over the next few years, there will be investment opportunities to correct the small number of staff required to meet the guidelines for paediatrics under the vulnerable specialities work stream of the HSCB, if that is deemed appropriate following the publication of the next cystic fibrosis review report. So, there is a willingness to ensure that we can meet the needs of people with cystic fibrosis.

Mr McKinney: What is the Minister's assessment of the current methods of diagnosis for those with cystic fibrosis?

Mr Poots: Cystic fibrosis is commonly and, in most instances, successfully identified at a very early point in paediatrics. I recall very well dealing with kids who had cystic fibrosis when I led a church youth group. In fact, of the 440 people with the condition in Northern Ireland at the one time, we had three of them.

All those were identified when they were babies. At that time, all of them were told that their life expectancy was around 20 years. Unfortunately, that transpired to be the case in one instance, but the other two are still alive. The average life expectancy for cystic fibrosis is now 41.

3.00 pm

As a result of the fantastic work that was done through our research teams in Northern Ireland, we have identified a solution to the problem coming from the Celtic gene of cystic fibrosis. As a consequence, those people can have a full life expectancy. It has been a huge investment of almost £4·5 million for the acquisition of that drug, but those people will have a full life expectancy. That involves around 23 people. The investment is significant, but those are the big decisions that we have to make on whether we fund a service such as this, which has such an impact on people. However, funding that service will leave us short somewhere else. Those are big decisions that we have to arrive at.

Ovarian Cancer

4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if his Department will launch an ovarian cancer awareness campaign, as previously voted for by the Assembly on 11 March 2013, to coincide with Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month in March 2014. *(AQO 5383/11-15)*

10. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the awareness campaign for ovarian cancer. *(AQO 5389/11-15)*

Mr Poots: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 4 and 10 together, as they are about the same subject. I am aware that March has been designated Ovarian Cancer Awareness Month by four leading ovarian cancer charities, and I thank them for helping to highlight the signs and symptoms of the disease. I also encourage any woman who has concerns about possible symptoms to go to her GP as soon as she can.

The Public Health Agency is developing a cancer awareness campaign for Northern Ireland, which will prioritise ovarian cancer. In taking that forward, the agency is evaluating current cancer awareness campaigns being conducted in England and Scotland and conducting an evidence review to determine which specific tumour sites to include. That work is necessary to guide the development of the Northern Ireland campaign and will take several more months to finalise. Following that, the dates for the campaign will be announced and enacted as soon as possible.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he join me in paying tribute to women such as Una Crudden, a tireless campaigner for ovarian cancer awareness, and, as we are in Cervical Cancer Awareness Month, Sharon Montgomery of Cervical Cancer Northern Ireland? Does he agree that targeted, stand-alone campaigns are needed

to raise awareness of symptoms, increase early diagnosis and reduce the impact of this type of cancer on women in our community?

Mr Poots: We certainly need to target specific areas, and that will be done. A number of organisations and groups support people with various types of cancer. Some years ago, I was introduced to Angels of Hope by Mr Anderson, because he had a special interest in the subject. I have had the opportunity to visit that facility. I have met Una on a number of occasions, and she is a fantastic lady. I have also met Sharon on a number of occasions, and she is another fantastic lady. Those people are raising awareness, and I greatly appreciate what they are doing. We want to work with them and have their support in our work to highlight to the public how best they can identify the early signs of cancers and, hopefully, get treatment at an early point, which can stop the cancer progressing to fatal consequences.

Mr Wells: I am sure that the Minister will join me and Mr Lyttle in congratulating Una Crudden for her outstanding work on ovarian cancer. What does the EUROCARE-5 study reveal about cancer survivorship rates in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The fifth study in the series analysed data from cancer registries that covered all or part of 29 countries, covering over 50% of the adult and 77% of the childhood population of Europe, including anonymous data from 74,000 cancer patients in Northern Ireland. It compares five-year survival from diagnosis for more than nine million adults and 60,000 children diagnosed between 2000 and 2007. The main conclusion is that cancer survival has improved but still varies widely between European countries, despite major improvements in cancer diagnosis and treatment during the first decade of the 21st century. Nordic countries — with the exception of Denmark — central European countries such as Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, and some countries in southern Europe, particularly Italy, Portugal and Spain, have the best survival rates for cancers.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers to this point. I, too, commend Una Crudden for the efforts that she has made to highlight the disease from which she suffers. Given that we had the debate nearly a year ago, in March 2013, that there does not seem to have been much progress since then and that the evidence is that only 3% —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to her question.

Ms McCorley: — of women are confident that they can identify a symptom of the disease, is there not a case for a stand-alone campaign?

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that it is not as a result of anybody dragging their feet. Courses of work are being carried out. It is critical that, when we launch a campaign, which we will, it is done on the basis of the best knowledge available. That is the work being done. We will ensure that the messages put out are strong and powerful and that we can stand over them. The UK National Screening Committee states that, at present, screening should not be offered, except in the context of the Medical Research Council's randomised control trial, which is due to report in 2015-16. The trial is investigating the effectiveness of screening for ovarian cancer using a blood test or an ultrasound screening. Two hundred thousand women between the ages of 50 and 74 have been recruited, and Belfast City Hospital is one of the centres involved.

A sister study, the UK familial ovarian cancer screening study, is also ongoing. Its primary objective is to develop a screening strategy for ovarian cancer. It wants to identify the most appropriate screening test criteria for the interpretation of results and determine the screening interval for women at high risk because of family history or inherited genetic predisposition. A lot of things are happening. The public may not be fully aware of them, but a lot of things are going on in the fight against ovarian cancer.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the Minister's commitment to launch the cancer awareness campaign. I am sure that I join other Members whose lives have been touched by cancer. I did not get to know one of my grandmothers as she died from ovarian cancer at 41. Will the Minister commit to further research into the duration and frequency of symptoms before diagnosis, the stage of disease at diagnosis and subsequent survival?

Mr Poots: I probably dealt with a lot of that in my previous answer when I talked about the work that we are doing with Belfast City Hospital as part of a UK-wide research programme. We take ovarian cancer very seriously. It is a cancer that is difficult to identify and recognise because it can be confused with symptoms of other things that are troublesome but certainly a lot less dangerous. Consequently, not everybody is identified as quickly as they should be. Therefore, we need to do more work to ensure that the condition is identified earlier so that people have a greater chance of having their lives saved.

Palliative Care

5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to ensure that the best possible palliative care is provided. *(AQO 5384/11-15)*

Mr Poots: My Department's palliative and end-of-life care strategy for adults in Northern Ireland is titled 'Living Matters: Dying Matters', and it provides a blueprint for ensuring that the best possible palliative and end-of-life care and support are provided for the terminally ill and their families and carers. A significant initiative is under way in support of the implementation of the strategy's recommendations and as part of the wider Transforming Your Care reforms.

In September 2013, the Health and Social Care Board, in conjunction with Marie Curie Cancer Care, embarked on a programme of work to transform the delivery of palliative and end-of-life care in Northern Ireland utilising Marie Curie's nationally developed Delivering Choice programme.

My Department has also recently undertaken a review of HSC services for children and young people to provide a strategic direction for the development of services over the next 10 years. Palliative and end-of-life care for children and young people has been considered on its own to give prominence to this important area of paediatric services. On 5 January, I launched a public consultation on the review of paediatric palliative care.

The consultation document sets out 18 recommendations aimed at enhancing the existing high-quality care and support for children and young people with life-limiting or life-threatening conditions, as well as their families. The consultation will run until 28 March 2014.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. What results have been found from evaluations by his Department of the Delivering Choice model?

Mr Poots: The Delivering Choice programme is already being delivered at a number of sites across the United Kingdom. It is helping to pioneer new ways of working that are designed around the individual and their families or carers. An independent evaluation of the Delivering Choice programme in Somerset by the University of Bristol in 2012 showed that, where the programme was in place, there was evidence of reduced emergency admissions, which were down by 39%, and A&E attendances, which were down by 34%, in the last month of life, compared with areas where the programme was not in place.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. Pain-reducing drugs and pain control are central to palliative care. Can the Minister outline his position on the availability of such drugs here in comparison with other areas such as England and Wales?

Mr Poots: Sorry, was that pain-relief drugs?

Mr A Maginness: Yes.

Mr Poots: The feedback that I get on the standard of end-of-life care is, generally, very positive. Whether it is organisations such as Marie Curie Cancer Care, the Northern Ireland Hospice or many of the other charities that provide support for people, or whether it is our palliative care teams, I never hear anything but huge credit for the dedicated support that they give, their knowledge of the issues that they deal with, their sensitivity and care, and the support that they can quickly enlist from other key clinical providers such as doctors and so forth. I have had occasional complaints but, when compared with many other areas of health, the positive view that people have of the care that is provided massively outweighs them. I have not picked up that there is an issue on that front.

Paediatric Services

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to improve paediatric services. *(AQO 5385/11-15)*

Mr Poots: My Department is consulting on its review of paediatric healthcare services. The review aims to build on our existing services for children, which are delivered to a high standard. The review has produced proposals for the future development of hospital and community services, and palliative and end-of-life care for children with complex and life-limiting conditions. The overall aim is to strengthen Northern Ireland's paediatric healthcare services for the next 10 years. I would urge anyone who has not already done so to contribute to both consultations because my Department is keen to hear the views of the public on these important services.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister provide an update on progress towards the new regional children's hospital?

Mr Poots: My colleague the Finance Minister visited the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children with me on 7 October. He was quite taken aback by the condition of the hospital in which our children are being treated. He has indicated that we can have the finance, and a project to replace that outdated facility is now a priority for the Executive. As such, £15·5 million has been allocated by the Executive for the scheme in 2014-15. Further associated capital costs will be considered by the Executive as part of the next Budget process.

The main aim of the scheme is to ensure that all paediatric services are delivered in an environment that meets current standards. The capital cost of the project is around £250 million. That will cover the design and building of the hospital as well as the site infrastructural work needed to facilitate the running of the new facility. The outline business case has been reviewed by DHSSPS officials and is being considered by DFP. The business case approval could be in place, hopefully, within the next few weeks, with work commencing in 2014 and expected to be completed by 2020.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer to the Minister of Health. We now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Firework Injuries

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many firework injuries there have been in Northern Ireland in the past year. *(AQT 611/11-15)*

Mr Poots: I have to say that that is something that we can view considerably more positively. It has been the best year for firework injuries since data began to be collected in 1996. During the 2013 Halloween period, six patients reported to emergency care departments with firework-related injuries, which was eight fewer than in 2012. Data on firework injuries is collected specifically for the four weeks around Halloween, and it is not possible to report on the number of persons who go to emergency departments with firework injuries at other times of the year.

In 2007, a multi-agency firework safety awareness campaign was established. That was supported by the Ministers responsible for the Department of Justice and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and the group developed the advertising campaign that has run for the past seven years. The 2013 campaign was very successful and achieved a 75% reduction in the number of firework-related injuries. We are delighted that that is the case and that many young people who would have been injured in previous years have avoided injury as a result of paying attention to the campaign.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response and welcome the fact that there have been fewer injuries in the past 12 months. What measures does the Minister think are making a real difference with the public in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The campaign has been ongoing. Sometimes I criticise the press and media in the House, but, in this instance, I thank the press and media for assisting us and getting a message out that fireworks are dangerous and need to be used in the proper context if people are to genuinely enjoy having fun with them. We need to use every tool in our armoury and get the message across to

the public that teenagers fooling around with fireworks is not a safe use of them. They are dangerous. They can be enjoyed but they need to be enjoyed appropriately.

January Monitoring Round

2. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how the £30 million allocated in the January monitoring round will be used. *(AQT 612/11-15)*

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. We will have to invest in a series of things. As I indicated to the House, one of the areas where we identified particular issues and problems was with children who have been identified as being at risk. I think that it will shock many members of the public to learn that hundreds more children have been identified as at risk this year than last year, and a lot of that has to do with the issues being highlighted on television relating to Saville and, indeed, many other personalities, most of whom are associated with the BBC. That brought it to people's attention. Some £5 million is being spent on that.

There are a number of other areas, including urgent care and elective surgery, that we will want to continue to support, because we have made a real dent in many of the waiting times, and people are receiving care in a much more appropriate time frame. So, we will spend that money on a whole series of things.

While we continue to attempt to save money in the system, having a system that is as efficient as possible is always a challenge for us. If we do not deliver efficiencies, we will deny services to people as we will have spent money on things that are unnecessary through inefficiency.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The chief executive of the Health and Social Care Board said that a further £28 million would be obtained in transitional funding for Transforming Your Care. In the June monitoring round, the Department was only able to secure £9·4 million, and a further bid of £7 million was submitted in the January monitoring round. Is Transforming Your Care now at risk?

Mr Poots: It is not at risk. We would like to see it maintaining the momentum that has been developed, and the integrated care partnerships that are a key aspect of it are now up and running. However, we certainly could have used more funding, had we received it. Some of that might have gone into invest to save for voluntary early redundancy, but, if that is not available, we will not invest in that this year, and maybe that opportunity will not exist for individuals to take up as time moves on.

So, we will just have to work through with the funding that we have. I greatly appreciate the support that the Finance Minister has given me. I should say that there are considerable additional pressures on health this year. For example, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has 2,500 additional admissions to hospital, despite a whole series of work that reduced the number who would need to be admitted. We have many more older people and many more people with chronic illnesses than was the case five and 10 years ago. That will continue to grow, and those pressures will continue to build.

January Monitoring Round

3. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the recent January monitoring round allocation will assist patients. *(AQT 613/11-15)*

Mr Poots: It will certainly help to alleviate significant and inescapable pressures that have emerged across Health and Social Care. Such an allocation will play a critical role in helping to address a range of pressures in front line services that will affect the most vulnerable, including our looked-after children and elderly population. As the extent of each of those pressures will be different in each trust, the HSCB and local commissioning groups will be working with trusts to assess local cost pressures as a basis for allocation.

The trust that represents your area, the Southern Trust, would have indicated at the outset of the year that it thought that the financial climate was particularly challenging. It made a number of efficiencies, and, as a consequence of having made more efficiencies at an earlier point, it was finding it more difficult than some other trusts to meet the demands that were being made of it.

That is an area of concern, so we want to ensure that urgent care is fully supported and that there is no impact on that. However, we also want to maintain a good standard of elective care to ensure that people receive operations at an appropriate time.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for that response. Does he expect 2014-15 to be as challenging financially?

Mr Poots: I think that it will possibly be even more challenging. The scale of the financial pressures in 2014-15 is substantial. My Department is engaging with the HSCB and trusts to fully understand the nature of those challenges and to identify potential savings, measures and efficiency opportunities to address them. Although significant savings opportunities have already been identified, our initial planning work still suggests a significant and as yet unresolved financial pressure in that year. Therefore, the Executive's full engagement will be required to ensure that health and social care services for patients and clients in Northern Ireland do not suffer as a result.

E-cigarettes

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action the Northern Ireland Executive, led by him and the Department of Health, will take to deal with the sale of e-cigarettes to under-18s, given that the Government at Westminster are bringing forward an amendment to the Children and Families Bill that will outlaw such sales. *(AQT 614/11-15)*

Mr Poots: I am certainly taking note of what is happening in England. Things seem to be moving rapidly, therefore, I think that we will need to be looking at how we can quickly assess the situation and take some movement on it. I was speaking to my teenage daughter the other day, and she was telling me that lots of children in her school are using e-cigarettes. That is something that I would be most unhappy with. I know that smokers are using e-cigarettes as an alternative, and it is probably a better alternative than smoking. However, I do not think that it is any alternative to get youngsters under the age of 18 hooked

on nicotine. I think that it is very important that we make a full assessment of this issue and respond quickly to it. I will be looking closely at what Westminster is doing to see how we in Northern Ireland could move this forward with the appropriate knowledge on the subject.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. However, given that e-cigarettes contain dangerous toxins and that the amount of nicotine, other chemicals and contaminants varies across products, how concerned is he about e-cigarettes? Although some will say that they are there to reduce the number of people who are engaged in smoking tobacco, they are now seen as a trendy thing, particularly for young people. Therefore, we need to be taking urgent action in Northern Ireland in the way that is being done elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

Mr Poots: I was engaging with my older daughter, who is at university now, and she told me about the sorts of numbers who are smoking. Those are bright, intelligent young people who are doing their third-level education and smoking cigarettes, and smoking will kill at least half of them. When you ask how that happened, the answer is that it is seen to be cool, hip and trendy. A lot of the cool people in films, on our TV screen, and so on, smoke.

The tobacco industry has been very good at making smoking appear cool. I have no doubt that the people selling e-cigarettes will have no problem in making it appear to be a cool thing to do. Nicotine is a more addictive substance than heroin. We really need to challenge the use of nicotine in such a way. We need to discourage people, particularly our young people. Two thirds of smokers start smoking when they are under 18. We need to get the right messages out and take the right actions to ensure that young people do not start smoking in the first place and do not believe that smoking is a cool, hip and trendy thing to be engaged in.

Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cooperation between Dublin and Belfast on children's heart services. *(AQT 615/11-15)*

Mr Poots: A course of work has commenced. We recently appointed the final person to the team. It is someone of eminence from Glasgow, who will assist us in developing what it is possible to do with paediatric congenital cardiac services in Belfast in association with the services at Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Dublin. I committed to that at an early point.

When the first proposal came out that we should stop services in Northern Ireland and use services available in England, I opposed it. I think that that was the right thing to do. I have always been opposed to that idea. However, a number of children from Northern Ireland will always have to travel to England because of the high complexity involved. Indeed, a number of children from the Republic of Ireland will also have to travel to England to have that more complex surgery. We are delighted to have the team set up and in place to look at the work.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Would he like to comment on the recent incident of an air ambulance having to make an emergency landing in Liverpool? Given what happened and what the family said about the service, surely that is something that we should be trying to eradicate.

Mr Poots: It was for that very reason that I opposed the notion that we should be reliant on having our paediatric congenital services provided by England. We have a big issue with attracting the appropriate skills base because of the smaller number of surgical procedures that take place here. That is why I have committed to working with Dublin. It is in the best interests of children that we do so, and that is very important.

We have had circumstances in Northern Ireland in which emergency surgery was required, but heavy fog, for example, would have prevented flights from taking off at all. Having use of a facility on the same land mass is something that we desire. My first preference is to ensure that we maintain and support services at the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children in conjunction with services in Dublin, and I need their support to deliver that. I hope that the team will identify a course of work that will show that that can be done in a safe way.

The name of the professor had slipped my mind, but it is Dr Sinclair from Glasgow, who will join the team led by Professor Mayer.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Public Service Pensions Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Clause 5 (Pension board)

Debate resumed on amendment Nos 1, 2, 13 to 15 and 19, which amendments were:

No 1: In page 3, line 43, at end insert

", and must include representation from any trade union recognised by the employer".— [Mr Attwood.]

No 2: In clause 9, page 6, line 11, leave out "5" and insert "7".*— [Mr Attwood.]*

No 13: In clause 18, page 11, leave out lines 32 to 34 and insert "31 March 2015".*— [Mr Attwood.]*

No 14: In clause 28, page 16, line 19, leave out "2014" and insert "2015".*— [Mr Attwood.]*

No 15: after clause 29 insert

*"**Police pensions***

***29A**.—(1) Regulations C9 and C9A of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Pension Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 (S.R. 1988 No. 374), as substituted by Schedule 1 to the Police Service of Northern Ireland Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, (S.R. 2006 No. 152) (widow's, etc. pension or gratuity to terminate on re-marriage or other event) shall cease to have effect as from the reinstatement date.*

(2) Where any person's entitlement to receive payment on account of a pension or a gratuity under the Regulations of 1988 was terminated by virtue of regulation C9 or C9A, the pension or gratuity shall be reinstated and become payable as from the reinstatement date.

(3) Nothing in this section authorises or requires any payment on account of a pension in respect of any period before the reinstatement date.

(4) For the purposes of this section the reinstatement date is 1 July 2014.".— [Mr Allister.]

No 19: In clause 36, page 21, line 13, at end insert

"( ) section 29A;".— [Mr Allister.]

Mr Allister: I am pleased to speak to amendment Nos 15 and 19, to which a number of Members have already kindly referred. Unaccustomed as I am to having widespread support, I welcome the indications of that for the amendment.

Let us be very clear that the purpose of the amendment is to bring equality of treatment to all police widows. At the moment, we have an inequality in the retention of lifelong benefits by widows because, since the changes made under the new 2009 regulations, a new widow — to put it in those terms — retains her lifelong benefits on remarriage or, indeed, cohabitation. The Member for East Antrim Mr Sammy Wilson gave an interesting description of some people's chosen lifestyle, but let us be clear that, under the regulations, if someone cohabits as husband and wife — equally, if they marry — they are prohibited from retaining their pension under the old regulations. However, under the new regulations, someone who either cohabits or marries is not so prohibited. The essence of the disparity and inequality is that a widow from the 1980s, 1990s or early 2000s who wants to remarry has a very considerable financial price to pay, whereas a widow from more recent years who wants to remarry has no financial price to pay. She retains her pension. That is the essence of the inequality, and the purpose of amendment No 15 is to apply the same rights across the spectrum of police widows.

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

Of course, the amendment does not discriminate on the basis of how one becomes a police widow. It is not just for those who were widowed by virtue of a terrorist act, a road traffic accident or other causes. It applies across the whole arena of how one becomes widowed. It applies to people who were widowed in the early years of the PSNI as much as it applies to people who were widowed during the tenure of the RUC; it makes no distinction. Rather, it seeks to revoke from a specified date — from 1 July, to give the Bill time to have Royal Assent and all that — the original preventative regulations, which would have prevented someone from remarrying and holding their pension.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his very clear explanation of his amendment and the purpose behind it. During his research, did he discover any similar anomaly in any other pension scheme? Will he agree that amendment No 11 in my name and those of Mr Attwood and Mr Rogers, which proposes that a biennial review be conducted and a report laid before the Assembly, will pick up and rectify such anomalies through that review?

Mr Allister: I have no doubt that there are other concurrent pension schemes that draw a distinction between recently widowed spouses and those widowed in former times. There are such schemes, for example, in parts of the National Health Service and maybe elsewhere. The issue that was drawn to my attention, and for which I have been striving to find a remedy for some time, is specific to police widows.

It was, of course, open to any Member to bring an amendment such as I have brought. However, because pension provision is devolved, it is, in the main, open to the Ministers in charge of those Departments to change the regulations through secondary legislation in order to make the provision to which the Member refers. Indeed, there was some reference earlier to the fact that, in this case, the Minister of Justice could, perhaps, have done that. I will maybe return to that in a moment. Whether it is the Health Department or any other Department, there would be scope for Ministers, with the oversight of pension policies within the ambit of their own Department, to bring policy into line in the same way as I seek to bring it into line in respect of police widows.

On the point that it could have been done by secondary legislation, by amendment of the regulations, I think that it was Mrs Cochrane who asked whether we were satisfied that it could, in fact, be done by the methodology deployed here of using the primary legislation. The first of two things to say about that is that the amendment was accepted by

the Speaker for debate because he was satisfied of its competence.

Secondly, of course, the fact that it is primary legislation means, of necessity, that anything that secondary legislation can do, primary legislation can also do. Therefore, the fact that something might normally be dealt with by way of secondary legislation is no bar to dealing with it in primary legislation. That is why the opportunity is taken in this primary legislation to deal with an issue that might have been dealt with by another means but was not.

I should make it clear to the House, since the matter was raised, that I had considerable correspondence with the Justice Minister about this issue. I first raised it with Minister Ford in correspondence back in November 2012. He replied to me on 19 December 2012, indicating that the generality of approach was that pensions provisions for police officers were negotiated nationally and, therefore, the inclination was to follow what was done nationally. Therefore, he had been pressing the Home Secretary about the issue and had, in essence, not obtained any satisfaction.

I forwarded Minister Ford's letter to the then Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Wilson, who replied on 9 January 2013. Among the points that he made was that it was already available to the Justice Minister to amend the provision for survivors' benefits in the police pensions scheme in secondary legislation. I sent that response to the Justice Minister on 14 January 2013, a week after I got it. He replied to me on 25 March, again indicating that such schemes are normally negotiated nationally.

He went on to say:

> *"Agreement of other Executive colleagues would also have to be sought for such a change because of the potential impact on other public sector schemes, and the costs would have to be borne by the resources available to the Executive for the funding of its expenditure programmes. Currently, there is neither the support nor the provision within either the Executive Budget or that of the current UK Government to introduce such a change for existing survivors".*

He then tells me again that he had raised the matter with the Home Secretary. So, in essence, the Justice Minister was saying to me that he could not or would not make the changes and that, if he wanted to make them, he would need Executive approval. Maybe that is one of the benefits of a Back-Bencher being able to table an amendment directly to primary legislation, circumventing the risk of not getting something of that nature through the Executive, if that is a risk. So, we are where we are today in that regard.

The fact that the Justice Minister said that he was not minded to move on that matter in his own right was disappointing to me, but I accept that that was the view that he took. Therefore, when this Bill came along, I saw the opportunity to try to deal with the issue. The Justice Minister said that, if further resources were required to activate this change, that would be an issue. Of course, the change, primarily for existing widows, is cost-neutral because, if someone is on a pension and retains their pension upon remarriage, there is no extra cost to anyone. Where I suppose there is the potential for extra cost is that, picking up on a point that Mr Girvan made, the amendment, to give equality to people who have already remarried, in clause 29A(2) provides that, at the reinstatement date, namely 1 July 2014, anyone who had remarried and whose benefits were terminated by virtue of their remarriage shall from that date, not retrospectively, have their benefits restored.

For the absolute avoidance of doubt, where the second paragraph of my amendment refers to the "Regulations of 1988", it encompasses the changes made thereto by the 2006 changes. It is not referring to the original regulations. Indeed, it could not be because the amendment refers to "C9A" of the 1988 regulations, and, in the original regulations, there was no C9A. C9A was substituted, as indeed the original C9 was substituted, by the 2006 regulations. So that we are absolutely clear, what is in mind in regard to that second paragraph is the regulations as defined in the first paragraph, substituted by the 2006 regulations —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member was here but, unfortunately, the Justice Minister was not during the exchange between myself and Mrs Cochrane. The Minister has an endearing habit that, if he does not like something that is proposed, he does not tell the Justice Committee that he hates it, but ensures that it is kicked into the long grass, put on the long finger, sent out for further consultation, or that it dies a death very slowly and quietly. You can never accuse the Justice Department of having a can-do attitude when it comes to this issue.

Will he accept from me two points? First, the amount of money that we are dealing with, no matter what scenario is painted by the Justice Minister, is so tiny as to be of absolutely no consequence whatsoever for public expenditure. Secondly, does he agree with me that if the issue had not been raised by means of an amendment by a private Member, it would have died a death and would never have been seen again?

3.45 pm

Mr Allister: I can probably agree with both points. One cannot say if it would have died a death, because I know that a lot of people were exercised about it, and one of the ladies who talked to me showed me extensive, voluminous correspondence that she had had with other public representatives, and efforts made by them — and Mr Givan referred to some of that — with the Home Secretary and others to try to find a solution, and none was forthcoming. One cannot say if a solution would never have been forthcoming, but this was an opportunity too good to miss to deal with this issue, and, since this dimension is devolved, to deal with it in this Chamber in a manner that brings some respite to a modest number of people, but it is respite that is very significant to them.

I do not want to pry into the personal circumstances of anyone, but I will recite very briefly the sort of individual who will benefit from this: a young woman who was widowed in her late 20s, with three small children. Twenty years later, she is trying to put those children through university, and she meets someone whom she wants to marry, but she cannot do it because the financial circumstances are such that if she forfeits the pension that she has reared those children on and that she is

putting them through university, in large measure, on, she sacrifices them — so she sacrifices her own interests, and she does not remarry. That is not fair, and it was worse in that case because, in those circumstances, with the publicity that attended the 2008-09 change, there was a popular conception that the change made was going to apply to all widows. In fact, in good faith, believing that was so, that lady proceeded to make her marriage plans, only to discover that the change did not apply to her, and she was to be treated differently because she was under the 1988 regulations. So, she had the double blow of having to cancel her marriage plans.

The purpose of this legislation is to help people like that. Mr Wells is right: it cannot be, and is not, a large number of people, but to them it is a very significant issue, and one that, if we can, we should address. I believe that, in this amendment, we can address it equitably, and we can bring some sense of fairness and equality to widows past and present in terms of their rights to retain their lifelong benefits.

I recommend the amendments to the House. I am pleased to have been able to bring them. I noted the comments that others have been seeking a solution in this matter, and I know that to be true. If I might be permitted to say this, I am glad that, as in the seeking of a solution on the special advisers issue, it was the TUV that pointed out the way and led the way, and I am glad that, likewise, we have got a solution, I trust, on this issue.

I welcome the apparently near unanimous support for the proposition, and I believe that all of us can take pride in doing something worthwhile for a deserving class of people, namely police widows, irrespective of when they were widowed.

Mr Agnew: I am pleased to speak on behalf of the Green Party in Northern Ireland on the amendments to the Public Service Pensions Bill. I will start where Mr Allister left off.

I commend him for bringing forward amendment Nos 15 and 19 to take into account a particular section of police widows and to ensure that they get equality in pension provision and do not have to make the difficult choice that others highlighted, which is whether to not marry and receive a pension or to marry and significantly lose out financially. That is an invidious position, but I suspect that it was an unintended consequence of legislation. However, the fact that we have known about it for a number of years and have not put it right is not acceptable, and I think that this opportunity to do so is welcome.

I also hope that we can take that principle of equality from the debate. In other areas, the defence against righting inequalities has been that doing so is not legally required. Saying that something is not legally required is not a sufficient defence, and I am referring specifically to the equal pay settlement that continues to be denied to those who worked for the NIO and the Department of Justice. They face an inequality but are being told, “We are not legally required to give you back pay”. There should be a sense of justice and equality. When people look at the background to their claims, they see that it becomes clear that their pay should be brought into line with that of their peers and co-workers and that they should not be in an unequal position. So, I commend Mr Allister for tabling amendment Nos 15 and 19, and on behalf of the Green Party of Northern Ireland, I will be supporting them.

Amendment Nos 13 and 14 relate to the NILGOSC pension scheme. I am pleased that, although there is perhaps not unanimity of support in the Chamber for those amendments, they will not be blocked by those who are not ardently in favour of them. They seem to be sensible amendments, given the timeline of the legislation. To implement the Bill by March 2014 would be difficult, and it is my understanding that there are some practical issues with doing so, not least of which is the implementation of an IT scheme. There is enough of a precedent in large public sector IT schemes to know that we should not rush them. I think that we are better getting it right than getting it quickly. So, I welcome the fact that, like Mr Allister’s amendments, these amendments are likely to go through the House. In that respect, good sense will have prevailed.

Perhaps more controversial is amendment No 1, which is what I intend to spend the majority of my time on. It concerns the place of trade unions on the pension boards. I found some of the claims on that amendment to be quite incredible. It was said that a mere 56% of employees affected are represented by trade unions and that that is somehow an insufficient and insignificant number. Why should trade unions expect to have a special place on the pension boards, given that they represent only 56% of the employees who are affected?

I will refer back to the 2011 Assembly elections. The Democratic Unionist Party, whose Minister put forward the Bill, received 30% of the vote. Of course, the Minister alone cannot pass anything without the support of other parties. Incidentally, Sinn Féin received 26% of the vote. Combined, those two parties can pass legislation in the House and can legislate for every person in Northern Ireland with 56% of the vote. So, when it comes to legislating and governance in this part of the world, 56% is seen as sufficient for representing the people of Northern Ireland, because those two parties have that combined mandate. Yet, somehow when it comes to trade unions, 56% is derided as an insignificant, paltry amount of support. We are not talking about just turning up at a ballot box. We are talking about employees paying their dues to a trade union and mandating the trade unions to act on their behalf in employment matters. To say that we should not give them their place clearly underlines what has already been suggested, which is that this is a purely ideological attack on the trade unions, and therefore an ideological attack on those workers who pay their dues to trade unions and ask them to represent them.

Examples have been given of trade unions acting in a certain manner with maybe not every employee agreeing, yet those employees continue to pay their dues, give their support to their trade union and empower it to act on their behalf. Mr Wilson suggested that workers should represent themselves. That is exactly what the trade union movement is about. The trade unions are not somehow detached organisations that take money and do their own thing. They represent the workers, are empowered by the workers and, indeed, are made up of the workers. The trade union is a collective group of workers representing the many.

There is nothing in the amendment that restricts representation solely to trade union representatives. Mr McCrea said that it would be discriminatory to have those people on the board who represent only 56% of the workers. I challenge anyone in the Chamber to find me

another worker who could sit on the pension board and say that he or she represents more than 56%. Where would that person get that mandate, other than through collective organisation, which is, in effect, what a trade union is? It is clear that the opposition to the amendment is purely and simply ideological. I do not accept that the amendment is simply another attempt to do what was attempted at Consideration Stage. I accept that there was a problem with the earlier amendment, as it sought to require only trade union representation.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Which you voted for.

Mr Agnew: I accept that there were problems with it, but, at the time, it was the best thing on the table. I think that this is a better amendment. The debate should be focusing on what is in the amendment, not on what happened at Consideration Stage. There should not be a simple knee-jerk reaction when the term "trade union" is used. Certain parties have problems with trade unions. As we have seen, Mr Poots has ended up in court as a result of his problem over appointing a trade unionist. This is purely an ideological attack. The amendment is good for the employees affected by the public sector pension scheme, as it would ensure that they had the best, most professional and well-trained representatives acting on their behalf on the pension board.

I have yet to hear a single argument as to why it is not in the best interests of employees to have their trade unions, which they pay into, represent them and their interests on the pension board. Not every worker does, I accept that, but a significant proportion of workers pay into trade unions. There is nothing in the amendment that prevents other workers collectively putting forward representatives who represent their interests, if they deem their interests to be different from what the trade unions are advocating.

I ask those Members who intend to oppose amendment No 1 to reconsider their position and to act in the best interests of those public sector employees who wish trade unions to represent them. There is precedent here. I have sat on North Down Borough Council, where the DUP members absolutely refuse to allow trade unions to represent council staff directly to councillors. This continued attempt to block workers being collectively represented through trade unions, which they choose to do, is absolutely dogmatic and unjustifiable. Workers choose that every time they pay their dues.

I ask that the Assembly act in the best interest of workers and not follow a simple, dogmatic, ideological agenda of opposing trade unions at every approach. There is absolutely nothing wrong with trade unions doing that. In fact, it is entirely right that workers seek to empower themselves through collective organisation. It is absolutely, fundamentally wrong that the Assembly should do anything to try to inhibit those workers from collectivising and ensuring that their rights are met, even when they sometimes feel that their Government are not acting in their best interests.

4.00 pm

I commend amendment No 1 and thank the SDLP for tabling it. I was glad to put my name alongside. It is absolutely right that we set a positive precedent today that workers' views are important and will be considered, and we make legislation not by trampling on them but in consultation with them.

Mr Hamilton: I was going to welcome Further Consideration Stage, but that might be pushing it. I was going to thank Members for their contributions, but that would definitely be going too far. However, I recognise the effort that has been put in by many Members in tabling and moving amendments and contributing today.

If I may, I will take each amendment in turn and try to address some of the issues that have been raised and some that perhaps have not been raised.

I begin with amendment No 1, which is an amendment to clause 5 in respect of union representation on pension boards. As was said by many contributors, it is a similar amendment to that tabled by the SDLP at Consideration Stage. The previous defeated amendment would have had the effect of restricting member representation to the trade unions and would have discriminated — I think that that is a fair use of the word — against employees who may not be members of a trade union. As I said at Consideration Stage, not all public sector workers are members of trade unions, and not every area of the public sector is as unionised as others. There are many examples, some of which Mr Wilson outlined previously, of trade unions and their members not always agreeing on the best approach to issues. I am glad that that amendment, which would have unfairly discriminated against pension scheme members who were not also trade union members, was defeated at Consideration Stage and its deficiency accepted by Mr Agnew, who voted for that amendment at Consideration Stage. Amendment No 1 would provide that union representatives "must" be members of boards. I remain of the view that the amendment is unnecessary. There is absolutely no reason to make it explicit that unions must be included. The Bill is not about exalting the position of the trade unions. Clause 5 is about creating a pension board to:

> *"assist the scheme manager in ... securing the effective and efficient governance and administration of the scheme".*

The effective and efficient governance and administration of a pension scheme does not necessitate trade union representation on the pension boards. Trade unions are not barred from being members of a pension board, and some trade union representatives may well become members. However, to carve out a special place for trade unions, as though they and they alone are the only people who can represent employee interests on pension boards, is anachronistic and harks back to a bygone era. The secondary legislation process provides scope for Departments with scheme responsibilities and the various scheme member representatives, including the trade unions, to refine further the constitution of the pension boards on the basis of the existing provision in the clause, which is rightly inclusive and sensible.

Mr Attwood outlined the answer to those who may have concerns about it not being explicit in primary legislation, which is — I am at risk of repeating myself several times today — enabling and framework legislation. I may be misquoting him slightly, but I think that the general thrust of what I am going to say accurately reflects what he said previously. He said that, due to regulations, he had to appoint trade union representatives to the NILGOSC

scheme when he was the Minister responsible for that scheme. That is absolutely right. A former Minister, probably many, many years ago when the regulations were drafted, ensured that — I am not familiar explicitly with the regulations, but I am guessing from the tenor of what he said — it was explicit that trade union representatives be put on the pension board. There is nothing to restrict any of the five Ministers who are responsible for pension schemes covered by the Bill to appoint, or indeed make explicit that there should be appointments of, people from trade unions. There is no restriction. People from trade unions are not barred. What is being put forward in the amendment, which, to carry on from what Mr Agnew said, is perhaps slightly better than the previous one, still carves out a special and privileged position for trade unions. I suspect that, in time, there will be trade union membership on the pension board —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Hold on for one second.

However, the composition and constitution will be a matter for the responsible Minister. I will give way.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. He is saying that the amendment carves out a special and privileged position for trade unions. I disagree with him on that. Does he not see that the amendment merely recognises that the vast majority of staff involved — 56% — are represented by the trade unions? It just recognises that fact; it does not carve out any special or privileged position for them.

Mr Hamilton: I disagree. I think that it does carve out a special and privileged position. Given the number that the Member cites, a sizeable minority are not members and have chosen not to be so of their own volition. In the Consideration Stage amendment, their interests would not have been represented at all. Doing what is proposed in this amendment, irrespective of what expertise or interests the trade unions might have, is carving out a special and privileged position for them. I am keen not to labour the point further because I have a sense of déjà vu about all of this. However, I reiterate that there is nothing to prevent the relevant responsible Minister, when putting through regulations in secondary legislation —

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Let me finish.

There is nothing to prevent the relevant Minister making provision for or even appointing trade union representatives to the pension board. Therefore, not accepting this amendment or the one put forward at Consideration Stage does not bar trade union members from being representatives. As I said, I suspect that many of them of will be. I will give way.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. He referred to the responsible Ministers not preventing trade union members being on the pension board. I do not have the exact quote. So is he giving a guarantee that neither he nor one of his party colleagues will seek, as they have done in the past, to prevent trade unionists being on boards?

Mr Hamilton: I give no guarantees except this one: I guarantee that the person whom I appoint to represent employee interests will be the best-placed person to do so. I think that that is a fair and reasonable guarantee and assurance to give the Member. I will not say that the person has to be a member of the trade union because such a person may not best represent employee members of the pension scheme. I cannot speak for colleagues. I am sure that they would not want me to speak for them. The Member may want to have a quiet word with the Member in front of him, who is responsible for one of the schemes. That is the only guarantee that I am prepared to give: I will appoint the best person to represent the interests of employees.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will give way, but I want to move on to amendment No 2.

Mr Attwood: The Minister gave the game away when he referred to the law on trade unions and their entitlements being that of a “bygone era”. Will he accept that, before any Minister appoints anyone from the employee side to pension structures, it will be done only after consultation with employee groups? Will he further accept that it is not a matter of whether it is a special and privileged position; it is the law that trade unions and their members are accorded certain rights and have certain responsibilities as part of the overarching industrial relations framework? You may call it special and privileged, but it is, in fact, the law. You should recognise that, within the industrial relations framework under the law, trade unions have a particular position and one that should be acknowledged, not diminished.

Mr Hamilton: I can give the assurance that, throughout the passage of the Bill to the point at which it is today, engagement with trade unions has been frequent. In fact, special arrangements were made and bodies created to allow that engagement to be much more structured across a range of trade unions. When I am bringing forward the regulations that I will be responsible for, I do not envisage that there will be a lack of engagement with trade unions or, to use his terminology, employee groups. It is interesting to take that phrase and apply it to some of the people who are still excluded by the amendment, which are people like the Civil Service Pensioners’ Alliance, which is a UK-wide group specifically representing the interests of pensioners. To take Mr Agnew’s point, it may well be that somebody from that organisation may be the best person to represent the interests of employees in, say, my scheme, or the scheme that Mr Ford or Mr Attwood’s party colleague Mr Durkan is responsible for, or whatever scheme.

I am not against engaging with employee groups. Since my appointment as Minister back in the summer, I would like to think that my engagement with trade unions on a range of issues has been thorough. However, I am not in the business of carving out a special and privileged position in the legislation for anyone, irrespective of what their expertise might be.

Can I move on —

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Will the Member give way? I know that you want to move on, but this is important.

Mr Hamilton: I will, yes.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: This goes to the core. Across the Chamber, lots of Members have gritted their teeth and got on with the necessary reform process, and I do not want to reopen that issue. However, on the basis of the mandate that the trade unions have by virtue of people

voluntarily signing up for membership, surely the Minister must concede that, even on a proportional basis, the trade unions have an absolute right to be there. They have been mandated by the workers we are discussing here.

Mr Hamilton: I do not accept that they have been. I understand the point that the Member makes, but I do not accept that trade unions are specially or separately mandated to have representation on a pension board. In responding to the amendment, I hope that what I have said has not given the impression that it is my view or the Executive's view that trade unions should be barred from membership of the pension board. I am merely saying that they should not have a position as of right on a pension board. There are issues around competence, expertise and other interesting things that have to be borne in mind. I do not think that we would want to have a special position for anybody on anything, whether they were interested, whether they had expertise or whether they had competence. I am not saying that I do not think that there is anybody in the trade union movement who ticks all those boxes. However, I emphasise again that it is very much up to the Minister responsible at the stage of the secondary legislation that provides scope for Departments with scheme responsibilities to include, if they wish, trade union representation.

If the House will let me, I will move on to amendment No 2, which is a proposed amendment to clause 9 in the names of the SDLP and Mr Agnew to change from five to seven years the break for reckonable service. The SDLP and Mr Agnew's proposed amendment is re-fighting old battles. It seeks to replace the maximum period of up to five years for which any gap in a person's pensionable service will be disregarded for purposes of revaluations with a maximum of up to seven years. Members were unconvinced with a very similar SDLP amendment that was put forward at Consideration Stage, and I remain unconvinced of the need for any change to what is in the Bill.

I do not intend to rehearse all the arguments that I made at Consideration Stage. Suffice it to say that, in my view, the rationale for five years has not changed and is in keeping with the standard length of career breaks across the public service — a point made by Mrs Cochrane in her remarks. As I said previously, five years is an appropriate level. It is in line with the general norm of terms for career breaks permitted in public service employment. The period of five years is considered reasonable and adequate and, indeed, generous. I think that it is considered as a privilege that is not open to many in the private sector. In my view, no argument and no analysis of the cost has been put forward for seven years as opposed to five, or, indeed for 10 years.

It is unfair to expect those who choose to stay in service or who take standard length breaks from service to foot the bill for those who choose extended breaks beyond the established norm and for which the clause makes adequate provision. In my view, the logic for five years prevails and is a fair balance across all the members of a pension scheme, some of whom may never have any breaks in reckonable service. Those variances must be paid for with the costs of the scheme, and if they are permitted, such costs must be managed and contained by the scheme. As Members will, of course, be well aware, controlling the costs of public service pension schemes is a core issue behind the whole thrust of pension reform. So I urge Members —

4.15 pm

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will. I am very near the end, so he is in just in time.

Mr Attwood: I am curious about the argument now being deployed that no argument was presented about the costs of moving from five years to seven years, which is true. However, if the Minister is minded to accept Mr Allister's amendment, is he saying that he has worked through the costs that would arise from that amendment if passed? If you have not worked through the costs of that amendment if passed, are you not being inconsistent?

Mr Hamilton: It is not for me to consider the costs. The Member has not, in any of the amendments that he has put forward at this stage or at Consideration Stage, made any argument in respect of cost. He certainly offered no analysis. It is not my job to consider the cost, other than to state the obvious that there would be a cost. However, I will hazard a guess that the cost of the Member's proposed amendment would significantly eclipse the cost of Mr Allister's proposed amendment. I do not think that it is sensible for him to muddy the waters of Mr Allister's amendment, which, in my view, is righting an injustice — I will come on to that later on — with this amendment, which is again trying to give members of the public sector an increasingly privileged position. It is wrong to equate the two issues. I do not have the numbers, and it is not my job to provide them, but I suspect that the cost of Mr Allister's amendment is significantly lower than the cost of the Member's amendment, which would not just affect a couple of people. Mr Allister and others will know this better than me, but those likely to be affected by his amendment are small in number, so the cost would be contained. However, everybody in the public service could be affected by the Member's amendment, so the cost would be very sizeable.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for giving way. First of all, I rebut this argument that I was trying to muddy the waters. I think that I was the first Member to say publicly today that the SDLP was backing Mr Allister's amendment. That is not muddying the water. That is being crystal clear about supporting an amendment that I said was well crafted and well argued.

The point, though, is the point of principle. I hope that you do accept Mr Allister's proposed amendment. The cost consequences may be small, but you do not know that. Similarly, in respect of the argument that you deployed about our amendment and the cost consequences of moving from five years to seven years, you said that you do not know. I do not know. I went on various websites and could not find out how many people might take a career break of five years and what the cost consequences might be as a result. I think that it would be very small. If it is very small, which I sense it is, you should not deploy an argument about cost when you do not know what the costs will be.

Mr Hamilton: I will not, then, dwell on the moving of an amendment that you do not know the cost of. I think that that is a fair point to make, as well.

I think that conflating the two amendments is wrong because Mr Allister's amendment deals with an injustice, whereas the Member's amendment does not. That is why I think that it is wrong to try to tie the two together in making

a point in this debate. I reiterate this point: I am pretty sure that the cost of Mr Allister's amendment is small in comparison with the potential cost of the Member's amendment, which would be applicable to everyone in the affected schemes. It is, therefore, a cost that could rise and rise and be many, many millions. I am sure that, in comparison, Mr Allister's amendment would cost a mere fraction of that.

I will move on to amendment Nos 13 and 14 to clause 18, again in the names of members of the SDLP and the Green Party, to change the effective date for reform of local government pension schemes from 2014 to 2015. Amendment No 13, if accepted, will put back the date for the implementation of the reform by one year, and amendment No 14 is consequential to that. I was interested to see those amendments emerging at this point in time.

Members may be interested in a bit more background on this issue. Employee contributions have been increasing across public service pension schemes such as police, firefighters, teachers, Health and Social Care and the Civil Service since April 2012 as part of a three-year programme of phased increases.

The last increases are due to be implemented in April this year. This programme of increasing employee contributions was in line with a decision that our Ministers took late in 2011. Her Majesty's Treasury had made it abundantly clear that, if we did not implement these changes, we would have to make up the shortfall to Her Majesty's Treasury, with the amounts starting at £55 million for 2012 and £110 million for 2013, rising to £140 million a year from April 2014.

In Great Britain, local government schemes were exempt from those increases, and the stance was taken that the overall reform of the local government schemes would be brought forward by one year from the rest to 2014 rather than 2015 to in effect compensate for the delay in increasing contributions. I do, of course, know that local government pension schemes are funded schemes, albeit underfunded, as Mr Wilson pointed out, and, therefore, they operate on a different financial model from the rest of the unfunded public service schemes. Nevertheless, they are part of the overall programme of pension reform, and it is absolutely correct and fair that they should be.

Prior to contributions being increased for all other schemes in Northern Ireland, the then Environment Minister, Mr Attwood, assured his ministerial colleagues that his intention was to address the short-term and longer-term pension reforms in a single reform measure for the Northern Ireland local government scheme, with the intention that the new pension arrangements would be in place for April this year. Therefore, the Minister confirmed that he would not be taking action to increase contribution rates for members of the local government pension scheme for Northern Ireland in line with the three years of increases that were planned for the other public service schemes.

Mr Attwood wrote a number of times to his ministerial colleagues and directly to my predecessor as Minister of Finance and Personnel assuring them that all was in hand and on track to meet the 2014 deadline. In his letter of 6 June, which was his last before leaving ministerial office, there was no indication that the April 2014 target for implementation would not be achievable. Therefore, the reform of the local government pension scheme was on track to be implemented in April 2014 in line with England and Wales.

Minister Durkan, who, as we know, took over as Minister of the Environment in the summer of last year, first wrote to me in November 2013 highlighting concerns about the implementation date of April 2014 for the local government scheme in Northern Ireland. I found that to be very late in the day, given the previous correspondence from Minister Attwood. In his letter, Minister Durkan concluded that that change in the implementation date would have no implications for the Executive Budget. I make it absolutely clear that that would need to be the case. He stated that, for short-term savings, regulations would be made to allow the actuary to take account of benefit changes when setting the employer contribution rate for the next three years, thus generating a future saving of just over 2%. There is provision in the Bill to allow retrospective implementation, if the deadline could not be met administratively. However, I am aware that the retrospective implementation would be challenging, and Mr Attwood outlined that in his contribution.

In conclusion on these two amendments, I am disappointed at the lack of progress on the reform of the local government pension scheme in Northern Ireland. Let me make it clear that, if these amendments are approved today, I will still expect the reforms that would be delayed to be implemented in 2015 along with every other scheme. That is not least because it is underfunded and progress needs to be made on that front. However, that said, I am minded to support both the amendments, as retrospective implementation of these changes, while legally possible, will be challenging in making sure that all is done properly, so it is not desirable. So, I urge Members to support amendment Nos 13 and 14.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Attwood: I am glad that you read into the record the various pieces of correspondence back and forth, because I think that it confirms that there was a firm commitment to try to advance pension reform, even ahead of 2015, but it did not come to pass. However, do you accept that, in June 2013, when the equivalent scheme in England and Wales went out to public consultation about their regulations and the shape of what the scheme might be, it transpired that a lack of detail was emanating? Given that there was going to be some degree of reliance on the scheme in England and Wales to inform this one, do you accept that it was at that moment that the thing began to pivot in such a way that means that today we cannot live up to the initial expectation that NILGOSC and the local government scheme would be in advance of, not behind, the schemes for other pension holders?

Mr Hamilton: I accept the point the Member's point about following what England and Wales have done. I did not go through that potted history to embarrass anyone, not that there is anything in there to embarrass anybody. I think that the Member left office not long after 6 June. The letter of 6 June did not indicate that there was a particular problem. The first correspondence that I received from the Member's successor was not until November. I cannot account for the in-between period, but I think that the Member will accept that that was quite late. However, I

accept the reasons for things shifting forward. Although I could have said, "No, we will progress this and implement it. It has to be done on time", I appreciate that that would present challenges for the current Environment Minister because of the timing of getting his regulations through, to the extent that the regulations might pass only after the changes should have been implemented. Retrospectively doing that would get messy and problematic, so the best course of action is to move forward by accepting amendment Nos 13 and 14.

I will conclude my perspective on the group by talking about amendment Nos 15 and 19, which I touched on briefly earlier. They concern proposed new clause 29A, which is on police pensions. I welcome amendment Nos 15 and 19. I understand that the content of the proposed new clause is something that the Minister of Justice has been petitioned about by several local representatives, including Mr Givan — he mentioned Diane Dodds, Jeffrey Donaldson, himself, the Justice Committee and, obviously, Mr Allister — to make a change for police widows and widowers in Northern Ireland. I presume that it is a gender-blind amendment.

I certainly understand and share Mr Allister's concern about the inconsistencies between police pension scheme legislation for pensions paid to police widows and widowers on remarriage. For example, the 2006 police pension regulations made for the new police scheme, although less generous overall, to provide for lifelong benefits to be paid to the surviving spouse or nominated partner of a police officer. Conversely, the existing terms for a pension or gratuity payable to the surviving spouse under the Royal Ulster Constabulary Pensions Regulations 1988 will be stopped if the survivor remarries. In November 2012, the Minister of Justice highlighted the actions that he had taken in petitioning the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the issue. Unfortunately, he concluded then that there was neither support nor provision in the UK Government Budget to introduce a change that would resolve the inequity for existing survivors.

I appreciate the issue that Mr Allister raised about the drafting of the second subsection of the proposed new clause. I accept, as he mentioned, that, when he refers to C9 and C9A, it is, of course, referring to those as amended in the 2006 regulations. I realise that what we have before us today is a sensitive issue. We should remember that it is especially emotive for those who have lost a wife, husband or partner who served in the police. It is patently unfair for the survivors of police officers, whether in the Royal Ulster Constabulary or the Police Service of Northern Ireland, to be treated differently in any way.

A few Members asked about the competence of the amendment and whether I thought that it is right. In many respects, it is not my job to judge its competency. The Bill may be a Public Service Pensions Bill put forward by me, but once it comes to this stage, having gone through Committee Stage and Consideration Stage, it belongs much more to the House than it does to me. Judging competency is not a point for me. I think that Mr Allister made that point previously. However, in checking out its competency, as well as whether Mr Allister's intention in making the amendment could be achieved, my advice is that that is certainly the case. Amendment Nos 15 and 19 appear to achieve the ends that Mr Allister desires.

There is probably a broader point to make. I will attempt to raise it, and you can rule me out of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Whenever such issues arise and amendments come forward quite late in the day, the ability of Departments, in particular, to address some of them in a very short period is not helped by the Standing Orders of the House. It might have been better if we had had a bit more time. Although the amendment has had universal support, there may have been other amendments to this Bill, or may be to future Bills, that require a bit more time. We may even pick up some of the drafting issues that we mentioned previously.

4.30 pm

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I appreciate the Minister giving way. I remind Members on his side of the House that, during the first Justice Bill, we required an Exceptional Further Consideration Stage to deal with problems with an amendment that was produced and supported on that side of the House at the last minute. I agree entirely with the Minister's point.

I also want to confirm that Mr Allister quoted at some length from a letter that I wrote to him as the Minister of Justice on 25 March 2013, which included a reference to the Home Secretary, who:

> *"while sympathetic to the widows concerned remains unwilling to lend her support."*

Mr Allister did not read the continuation of that paragraph, which states:

> *"Indeed, her position on the matter concurs with that of the Department of Finance and Personnel. Its view remains that to make such a change for existing survivors would run contrary to the normal practice of no retrospection in respect of improvements to the design of pension schemes and that reform can only be considered for future cases."*

If the Minister is saying that that is no longer the position of the Department of Finance and Personnel, I welcome it.

Mr Hamilton: The Member quoted from a letter that refers to retrospection. I am happy to give way to the Member who proposed the amendment, but he made it clear previously, and it is certainly my understanding of his amendment, that it does not deal with those individuals in a retrospective way. Rather, should the House pass the amendment today, the reinstatement will, I believe, take place in July. I am happy to give way to the Member to allow him to confirm that.

Mr Allister: Absolutely. Two categories are affected. There are those who have not remarried, who, from 1 July 2014, if the Bill passes and the amendment is passed, would be able to remarry without losing their pension. There are then those who have already remarried and lost their pension. From 1 July 2014, they would regain their pension, but that is prospective not retrospective. Nothing is being paid back to them for the pension loss, but prospectively, from 1 July, they would have reinstatement.

Mr Hamilton: That is certainly my understanding of the amendment.

Mr Ford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will, but I have to say that I am not overly happy at being a conduit for a conversation between the Member and Mr Allister. However, I will give way on this one further occasion.

Mr Ford: The Minister said that it is not being retrospective. I agree with Mr Allister's explanation. His amendment is quite clear that it would not result in back pay, so to speak, for those who have previously lost pensions. My understanding is that the term in which DFP referred to retrospection was in changing the rules of a pension scheme after it was already in place. In that sense, this is clearly retrospective.

Mr Hamilton: I am glad that we have cleared up the issue of retrospection in the application to individuals — I hope. I go back to the point that, whether this is competent or not, it is not my judgement call, which is in part why I made my previous point. The Member tabled his amendment, as many other Members tabled their amendments. The amendment went forward, was selected, was put on the Marshalled List and is up for debate and the judgement of the House. In that sense, the view of the Department of Finance and Personnel on the issue per se is neither here nor there. At this minute in time, it belongs to the House, and, as far as I am aware, it is up to the House to decide what it wishes to do.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Wells: The Justice Minister — sorry, I think that he is speaking as the Member for South Antrim on this occasion —

Mr Ford: No, I am speaking as Minister.

Mr Wells: The seating arrangements made me think that you were speaking as a Back-Bencher. The Minister made a point about retrospective application and it not being in order to change the rules and regulations of a pension scheme once it is in operation. The pension trustees of the scheme of which I am a member in the House have had a scheme up and running since 2000. There have been numerous changes to the operation of the scheme in the benefits that accrue and the amounts paid. Indeed, quite a radical change is coming. It is perfectly in order and entirely normal to change a pension scheme that is in operation subsequent to its coming into place, so the argument of retrospective application does not apply in this case. That is all that Mr Allister's amendment is seeking to do.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his useful contribution. I frequently bow to his superior knowledge of pensions, and I think that he is right in this respect. What I believe or whatever the Department's position is almost immaterial. The amendment has been tabled in the House, and it is for the House to decide whether it is right to do that. I sense — I am a good enough judge of these things — that the House is minded to make the amendment. In that respect, it does not matter what my or the Department's position is. However, as I made very clear, I am sympathetic to it. We have the opportunity to make that change and, in the interests of fairness, I urge all Members to support Mr Allister's two amendments.

I want to move on and conclude my contribution to this group of amendments. I will recap: I urge Members to oppose amendment Nos 1 and 2. Amendment Nos 13 and 14 are consequential, and I am content for Members to support putting back the implementation of local government pension schemes until 2015 to allow for the reform of local government. I recognise that retrospective implementation would be complex and challenging, and the Minister of the Environment has provided assurances that there will be no financial impact from that delay. As I just said, I am pleased to support amendment Nos 15 and 19, which are consequential, and I am glad that there is evident support across the House for them.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá an-áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht thábhachtach seo. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I begin by declaring an interest as a member of the teachers' pension scheme, albeit one who is protected by the 10-year transition conditions built into the schemes.

It was a useful and even, at times, a lively debate. When we started with an early reference to the film, 'Life of Brian', I began to wonder whether we were going to go down that road and arrive at the Reduced Shakespeare Company, but, thankfully, it did not get that far out of hand.

Mr Attwood moved the amendments that stand in the name of the SDLP. By way of background, he mentioned that the London Government have said that the changes were designed to last for a generation. He pointed out that a top-up facility over an 18-month period is already mentioned in a new pension Bill coming from London, although I think that he considered that to be more of an election ploy than anything else. He mentioned the move towards a wider European model for pensions but warned that the Treasury has not yet finished with pensions and may come back with more legislation. Mr Attwood also referred to the "thoughtless folly" of those who originally intended the legislation to be sanctioned by way of a legislative consent motion.

In addressing amendment No 1, Mr Attwood urged trade union representation on the pension board. He said that the Bill was silent on that and that the Minister said very little at Consideration Stage to offer any reassurance. He also said that amendment No 1 does no violence to anyone and pointed out a fact that has been repeated here a number of times, which is that the unions represent quite a sizeable majority, about 56%, of staff. In response to Mr Wilson, Mr Attwood said that those represented by the unions joined them voluntarily and that there was, therefore, good reason why the unions should be named in the Bill.

Mr Wilson, engaging in debate with Mr Attwood by way of intervention, claimed that the trade unions had a conflict of interest in relation to pensions. Mr Attwood very ably responded and pointed out the need for voices to promote ethical investment. He said it was good that there would be people who took an ethical view and that all views should be heard. An ethical view should have a voice. He said that trade unions would represent that voice, as well as speaking on behalf of their members.

Mr Wilson contended that pension fund members would prefer a better financial return, to which Mr Attwood replied that there were certain obligations around pensions to do no harm and, indeed, to do some good, rather than the opposite. He said that the Bill should respect the statutory role of trade unions in acting on behalf of their members and that there was a certain suspicion around the exclusion of any mention of trade unions.

Mr Attwood argued that trade unions should be recognised in the Bill. He outlined the good work that trade unions have done for their members and employees across a wide range of legislation, including employment rights, health and safety improvements, pay and conditions, the minimum wage and the transfer of undertakings scheme. He pointed out that the NILGOSC scheme guaranteed trade unions a place under its regulations.

Moving on to amendment No 2, Mr Attwood proposed that the five-year threshold be raised to seven years. He made the argument that the nature of the workplace is changing and that we should give greater recognition to family life and the work/life balance. He said that we should allow for the small number of people who wish to avail themselves of that.

Moving on to amendment No 13 on the NILGOSC scheme and the proposal to extend the date until 31 March 2015, Mr Attwood made the argument, which was made by others, that it was a fully funded scheme and should be treated differently, given its different nature. He offered five reasons for extending the scheme until 31 March 2015. He talked about the scale and complexity of the process. The original intention was that changes in England and Wales would be followed but, as it turned out, those were delayed, and that delay was reflected here. He warned that we should not rush in. Transitional regulations, he said, had run into difficulties and we should allow those to be resolved. He said that consultation was still ongoing and that we should honour that by taking some time to allow for the updating of payroll computer systems and, of course, the completion of the consultation. He said that large numbers of employees were women, and some worked part-time. He added that we should take the time to get it right. Mr Wilson intervened and implied that a further extension would not be honoured. Mr Attwood reassured him that NILGOSC wanted things to move forward quickly, but that could not happen because of the reasons that he outlined.

Mr Attwood expressed his support for Mr Allister's amendment No 15, a new clause, and his consequent amendment No 19. In doing so, he praised the Bill Office staff for their expertise and effort under severe time restrictions.

Mr Girvan said that amendment No 1 put the trade unions, as he described it, at the top of the tree. However, I pointed out to him that there was nothing in amendment No 1 that created any hierarchy of representation, so that was simply not true. Mr Cree was quite predictable in his response to the amendments put forward by the SDLP, but he expressed support for Mr Allister's amendments.

4.45 pm

I think that Mrs Cochrane misinterpreted amendment No 1. She seemed to suggest that the members of a board must be members of a trade union. I tried to correct this misrepresentation on several occasions, but the lady was not for turning. She accepted three interventions from Mr Wilson but not even one from me, so I have to say that I feel badly done by. However, that does not prevent me from making the point that Mrs Cochrane's interpretation of amendment No 1 is severely flawed and one that she should correct, even if she has to take further advice from Mr Wilson.

Mr Givan argued that new clause 15 and amendment No 19 should have been adopted by the Minister of Justice. He said that it was unusual but entirely understandable to use this Bill for it. I think that that was —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Sure.

Mr Ford: Did Mr Givan also point out that the previous Minister of Finance and Personnel opposed any such idea?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. No; in fact, he did not point that out. Thank you very much for intervening to point it out. That clarifies the situation.

Mr McCrea claimed that naming trade unions as representative of their members on the face of the Bill would be discriminatory against others. However, he was unable to share with Mr Attwood the legal advice that he had received on that issue. Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you will understand that, if our amendment were discriminatory, the Bill Office and the Speaker's Office would have pointed that out to us. That was not the case. Our amendment was deemed to be competent by both the Bill Office and the Speaker's Office. Mr McCrea's contention that amendment No 1 is discriminatory is total nonsense.

Mr Allister proposed new clause 15 and amendment No 19. He underlined the inequality in that, under the present arrangement, new widows may retain the pensions, whereas, under the old regulations, that was not the case. Mr Allister admitted, after my intervention, that such a contradiction may exist in other pension schemes, and that that may be addressed in secondary legislation.

I pointed out that amendment No 11 in the name of myself, Mr Attwood and Mr Rogers in the second group, which proposes a biennial review, could deal with such anomalies that have not come to light. In fact, I think that the anomaly that Mr Allister points up in his new clause and in amendment No 19, and other anomalies which may still be in schemes, underlines once again the good sense of bringing this Bill before the Assembly rather than acquiescing in a legislative consent motion. Mr Allister detailed the case of one widow who was frustrated in her plans to marry because of the anomaly that his amendment seeks to deal with. As I said, the SDLP supports Mr Allister's new clause and amendment No 19.

Mr Agnew spoke strongly in favour of amendment No 1. He considers that the 56% of the workforce who are represented by trade unions is a considerable section of staff. He believes that trade unions represent their members well and that there is nothing in amendment No 1 that restricts membership of boards to trade union members only.

His assessment was that many Members expressed opposition to amendment No 1 purely on ideological grounds. In fact, he went as far as to say that, in some cases, it was a mere knee-jerk reaction. He said that the amendment was good for employees and that no good arguments had been offered by any Member against amendment No 1. He appealed to Members to reconsider their position on that amendment and said that he was glad to add his name to it.

It is difficult to encompass the whole range of the debate, so I will move on to the Minister's contribution. I did not

hear anything from the Minister that offered any real argument against amendment No 1. He said, as did Mr Girvan earlier, that it elevated trade unions above other representatives. However, I believe that nothing could be further from the truth. The amendment does not carve out any special or privileged position for trade unions; it simply recognises that trade unions represent a sizeable majority of staff. The amendment does not prevent any non-unionised staff from being represented. The Minister criticised our previous amendment, and he now criticises the current amendment. Minister, you cannot have it both ways.

On amendment No 2, the Minister did not accept the rationale that Mr Attwood put forward about family life and work/life balance. Mr Attwood pointed out the contradiction in the Minister's position, in that he had not costed Mr Allister's amendment but was willing to accept it. The Minister said that it is not his job to provide the figures. That is a strange statement from a Finance Minister.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Of course.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Member accept that neither amendment is my amendment, and that, therefore, the responsibility, if indeed there is a responsibility to bring forward costings, is not mine in those circumstances? I caution the Member that he is once again conflating, as did his colleague, Mr Allister's amendment with his own party's amendment. Is he saying — this is the logic of his argument — that if Mr Allister has not provided costings, which he has not, I should turn down, refuse or reject his amendment? That is the logic of the Member's argument.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for his intervention. The Minister — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have exercised extreme patience with Members who are shouting from a sedentary position. That patience is now exhausted. I remind Members that paragraph 30 of the leaflet that you were recently provided with says that you are not to do that. Continue.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I point out to the Minister that it was he who introduced the element of cost to the debate and criticised our amendment on that basis. So, I think that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, as the old saying goes.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Surely, yes.

Mr Hamilton: I will put the same point to the Member again, because he completely glossed over it. Is he saying that the House should reject Mr Allister's amendment — this is the argument that Mr Attwood advanced — because it has no costing attached to it?

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for his intervention. No, I do not recall saying that.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: Yes.

Mr Hamilton: I am not accusing the Member of having said that; I am accusing his colleague of having advanced that argument. As he has risen to defend the position that Mr Attwood advanced, is he accepting the argument that the House should reject Mr Allister's amendments because there are no costings attached?

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: He has not even got up.

Mr D Bradley: Yes, of course.

Mr Attwood: I have been mentioned in dispatches, so I will rely on Hansard for this. Hansard will unambiguously confirm that the first time that any issue about cost was mentioned it was neither me nor my colleague but the Minister who did so. He made a very precise argument that one of the many reasons that he is not prepared to accept moving from five years to the seven years proposed in amendment No 2 was because of cost. In reply, I merely said to him that I had not introduced cost, he had, and I asked him what the cost consequences would be. I said that if he was going to rely on costs in one amendment, he should do so in another. That is very different from somehow extrapolating, as this Minister is inclined to do, that on the basis of cost we should reject Mr Allister's amendment. That simply does not add up.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. It clarified the situation and was very precise as well. If the Minister questions one amendment on the basis of cost, he should question other amendments on the same basis.

I will move on to amendment Nos 13 and 14, which deal with the NILGOSC extension to 31 March 2015. The Minister eventually said that he accepted the amendments on the basis that Minister Durkan had given him an assurance that there would be no cost to the Executive. He also mentioned the difficulties that any retrospective aspect might cause.

The Minister quite rightly said that the issue in Mr Allister's amendments was a sensitive one and that it was unfair to treat people differently. He mentioned the competency issue and said that it was not his job to make a judgement on that. He did say, however, that the advice that he had received suggested that the amendments could be made and were competent.

Mr Ford intervened and pointed out that, in a letter to him, DFP had agreed with the Secretary of State that changing pension rules retrospectively was not permissible. Mr Allister clarified that his amendment was prospective, not retrospective, and that it would not entail any back payments. Mr Wells also intervened to point out that the rules of the Assembly's scheme had, in fact, been changed. In the end, the Minister expressed his clear support for Mr Allister's proposed new clause under amendment No 15 and for amendment No 19.

That summarises the debate as far as I can do so, wide ranging as it was. I apologise to any Member whose contribution I did not get around to referring to. I appeal to Members to support all the amendments in the group — amendment Nos 1, 2, 13, 14, 15 and 19 — as they would improve and strengthen the Bill in so many ways. After all, that is what we are here to do.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 41; Noes 54.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Eastwood and Mrs McKevitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

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

Amendment No 2 proposed: In page 6, line 11, leave out "5" and insert "7".— *[Mr Attwood.]*

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We now come to the second group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 3, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 4 to 12, 16, 17, 18 and 20. Members should note that amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 are all mutually exclusive with one another; amendment No 12 is consequential to amendment Nos 3 and 5; amendment No 17 is consequential to amendment No 12; and amendment Nos 18 and 20 are consequential to amendment No 10. Will Members bear with me for just a few moments, please?

The debate stood suspended.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I wish to inform the House that the Speaker has received notification from members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

> *That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 27 January 2014 be extended to no later than 12.00 midnight. — [Mr Weir.]*

Executive Committee Business

Public Service Pensions Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Debate resumed.

Clause 10 (Pension age)

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move amendment No 3: In page 6, leave out lines 15 and 16 and insert

> *"specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65".*

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 4: In clause 10, page 6, line 22, at end insert

> *"(b) prison officers; or*
>
> *(c) paramedics and ambulance care attendants".— [Mr Agnew.]*

No 5: In clause 10, page 6, leave out lines 27 and 28 and insert

> *"specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65".— [Mr McKay.]*

No 6: In clause 10, page 6, line 29, leave out from the beginning to the first "the" on line 33 and insert "Any".— *[Mr McKay.]*

No 7: In clause 10, page 6, line 36, at end insert

> *"(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—*
>
> *(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and*
>
> *(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons is such age as the order may provide.*
>
> *(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.*
>
> *(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure.".— [Mr Attwood.]*

No 8: In clause 10, page 6, line 36 at end insert

> *"(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—*
>
> *(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and*
>
> *(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons must in the order specify 60.*
>
> *(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.*

(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure.".— [Mr Attwood.]

No 9: In clause 10, page 6, line 36, at end insert

"(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—

(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and

(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons may in the order specify any age not exceeding 60 but not less than 55.

(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.

(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure".— [Mr Attwood.]

No 10: In clause 10, page 6, line 36, at end insert

"(5D) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review of the provisions of section 10 as to how such provisions may affect the persons set out in section 1(2)(a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) of this Act, shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly and shall do so in advance of commencement of section 10 (apart from this subsection) further to the relevant commencement provisions at section 36 of the Act.".— [Mr Attwood.]

No 11: In clause 10, page 6, line 36, at end insert

"(5E) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review at intervals of not less than every two years following commencement of section 10 of the Act as to how the provisions of the Act affect the persons set out in section 1(2) of the Act and shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly on or before six months following the commencement of the review.".— [Mr Attwood.]

No 12: In clause 10, page 7, line 7, leave out paragraph (c).— *[Mr McKay.]*

No 16: In clause 32, page 18, line 18, leave out from "is" to "higher" on line 20 and insert

"does not exceed 68, but is not less than 65".— [Mr McKay.]

No 17: In clause 33, page 20, leave out line 24.— *[Mr McKay.]*

No 18: In clause 36, page 21, line 11, at end insert

"( ) section 10(5D);".— [Mr Attwood.]

No 20: In clause 36, page 21, line 15, at beginning insert

"Subject to section 10(5D)".— [Mr Attwood.]

This group is focused on clause 10, as was the case at Consideration Stage. I do not think it would be good legislation for the public sector pension age to be automatically made the same as the state pension age. There is much evidence —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There are a number of conversations going on. I ask Members to respect the Member who has the Floor.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like I said, I do not think it would be good legislation if the public sector pension age was to be automatically made the same as the state pension age. We received a lot of evidence at Committee, and I am sure that Members have received evidence individually as well, that backs up that claim. It should be subject to the same scrutiny as many other devolved areas. Of course, parties will have different views on what age it should be — whether it should remain at 65 or rise to 68 over a period of time in future years, or otherwise. The amendments that we have brought forward introduce flexibility into the scheme regulations to try to meet what Members are looking for in the Bill.

Flexibility really is the key thing. We do have flexibility in the Bill already through a previous Sinn Féin amendment at Consideration Stage, which took into consideration the needs of firefighters. There were also similar amendments at that stage from the SDLP.

So, that is evidence. The reason why we did that was that evidence may still be forthcoming on the effects on service provision of a greater pension age for firefighters. So, it is crucial that we have a devolutionary role and are accountable for pension age. We should not hand that over en masse to Westminster.

Indeed, in the debate on the previous group of amendments, Paul Givan, I believe, made the point that amendment Nos 15 and 19 show the benefit of devolution. That is because, if those issues were in the hands of direct rule Ministers, they would never have been dealt with. I suppose I echo that concern in a different way, in that if we have the power of pension age and the variance of that in response to whatever issues come up as a result of the legislation, we need the flexibility to respond accordingly. We may have instances where evidence points to certain legislative changes having an effect on public service provision. In those cases, we should have flexibility to respond accordingly.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Mr Wilson: He is talking in very vague, general terms, saying things such as, "We have to have flexibility"; "There may be cases when we want to exercise some discretion". Could he be quite specific? Under what circumstances would he see the flexibility that he is asking for being exercised?

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention. The thing about pensions is that it is such a huge issue. The Committee considered the case of the firefighters. We were all sympathetic to the case that they put forward, because we delved into that in detail. We have not considered in full the case of paramedics or prison officers and so on. So, we believe that, by putting those matters at a secondary level, they can be considered. We may arrive at the same decision on the set pension age as is introduced in the Bill, but we think that that flexibility should be there. If the Ministers responsible in each respective area, whether that is education or health, want to make exceptional circumstances because of the effect that it might have on front line service provision, we believe that that flexibility should be put in place.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way again. He is now getting down to specific cases. For example, we may wish to put greater flexibility in to allow for earlier retirement in education. What would the justification to the general public be for saying that, while a manual labourer working on a building site has to work until the age of 66 or 67, which is what happens in the private sector, a teacher should be allowed to retire at the age of 65 because we have built in that flexibility? Where is the logic in that? How does he defend that?

Mr McKay: Where the legislation that is before us is concerned, Westminster could decide that the state pension age is 80. We would not be able to do anything about that. That does not make sense to me. We might take the position that what Westminster is proposing on state pension age may be agreeable, but the whole purpose of devolution is that there should be local accountability for those matters. We may receive more evidence in the Williams report to show that firefighters should not be on the front line at the age of 60 because people's lives would be put at risk. Given that there are cases like that, I think that we should give due consideration to the issues in a more detailed way. The purpose of the Assembly, the Departments and especially the Committees is to ensure that we make the right decisions. If we make the wrong decision on this legislation, there is an opportunity to tinker with the regulations to ensure that any difficulties can be easily ironed out further down the line.

Amendment No 4, which the Green Party tabled, extends the police pension age of 60 to prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants. I suppose that that reflects some of the concerns that were voiced at Committee Stage. In Committee, we heard at length about the firefighters' case, as I outlined. We heard about the Williams review and evidence that firefighters would be unable to maintain the required fitness levels at 55 to 60 years of age. As I have already said, there are other roles that we did not look at in detail. To be fair, the Fire Brigades' Union came before the Committee by itself. It gave detailed evidence and responded to questions. We had an opportunity to follow up on many of the issues with the Health Minister and his Department. We did not receive conclusive answers. I think that the Assembly made the right decision to make an exception for firefighters at Consideration Stage.

If it is the case for firefighters, it certainly might and could be the case for people in other public service roles. The Finance Committee noted from its research and evidence that, apart from firefighters and police officers, certain other physically or emotionally demanding public service roles, such as that of prison officers, or of teachers, as the Member who spoke previously mentioned —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Mr Wilson: The Member is making a distinction. He is somehow saying that public service roles are much more demanding than roles in the private sector. I gave one example in an earlier intervention of how, in the private sector, to which amendment No 4 would not apply, workers may well be required to work in far more physically demanding conditions, yet they would not have that flexibility. How does he make the case that public service jobs are more demanding than jobs in the private sector? He is making that distinction with that particular amendment. Does he not recognise just how divisive that is in the public debate between private sector and public sector workers?

Mr McKay: In the amendments that we are bringing forward, we are setting the range at 65 to 68 years of age. Within that, regulations could still be put in place that reflect what the Westminster Government want. Therefore, as I said, we have deliberately been flexible in that regard so that we will have flexibility at regulation level.

My previous comments about certain roles being physically or emotionally demanding, such as those of prison officers, teachers, paramedics and mental health nurses, come from the Committee report, which was agreed by all parties in the Assembly. The report was based on the evidence that came before us. Therefore, those roles were identified as being potentially problematic when discussing the consequences of an automatic link between normal pension age and future increases in the state pension age. The main issue for my party is the fact that you are almost giving a blank cheque to the Westminster Government by ensuring that any future increases in the state pension age automatically become the norm here, regardless of whether they are right or wrong. The fact of the matter is that we should not give that power of accountability away, regardless of the respective position that each party here holds on what should be the normal pension age for those particular occupations.

The BMA cited the Working Longer review in its argument against setting a link between the normal pension age and the state pension age. That report will consider the evidence of the impact of working beyond 60 years of age. The BMA argued that the Bill should be amended to enable the review's findings to be taken into account. Similarly, UNISON cited the Working Longer review, which will look at specific groups, such as paramedics, who are named in the Green Party's amendment. UNISON also made the point that public sector employers may find it preferable that some groups have a lower normal pension age. Linking to state pension age means that there is no role for the Executive or the Assembly to consider potential economic and employment impacts as well as service impact. That is a considerable gap.

NASUWT also opposed the state pension age linkage. Interestingly, the cross-party Committee for Education also raised concerns about the impact that increases in the retirement age for teachers may have on employment levels for qualified teachers. Of course, that is a huge issue at the moment. The Executive and the Assembly should therefore have some flexibility in making decisions around that issue, because it impacts on unemployment, and on youth unemployment in particular.

5.30 pm

The Finance Committee sought DFP's view of the merits of an amendment to provide flexibility at secondary legislation stage for individual Departments and Ministers to determine, in the scheme design, the most appropriate normal pension age for schemes falling within their remit. Ultimately, the Committee was unable to agree clause 10.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. He is quite generous in giving way, and it allows for some debate on

the issue. He is now making spurious arguments about the economic impact of all this. If the retirement age for teachers went up, he asked about what would happen to young teachers and would we find that there were no vacancies for them. Does he accept that, if we deviate from the legislation and the provisions in the rest of the United Kingdom, we will pay for it out of the public purse and the block grant? If we are paying to allow teachers at one end to retire earlier than they do in the other parts of the United Kingdom, where is the money coming from to recruit teachers as new entrants at the other end?

Mr McKay: We might deviate by adopting the amendments, but we could adopt them, and there could be no cost to the local budget. Indeed, we have already deviated from Westminster on firefighters when we introduced flexibility, which is quite similar in principle to these amendments. Therefore, there will not necessarily be any additional cost as a result of our amendments, because it has the framework of 65 to 68 years of age. That is an issue for another day. If the Minister of Health or the Minister of Education wish to bear a particular cost because they feel that a certain issue should be addressed, that is entirely down to them. Obviously, there are economic service impacts, which should be taken into consideration by the respective Ministers, Committees and MLAs. That is the responsible way to approach the legislation.

I will quote from the Committee report:

> *"the Committee believes that there is a need for sufficient flexibility to enable evidence-based decisions to be taken at a scheme level on whether certain public service roles ... should have a lower NPA than is set in the Bill. As such, the Committee recommends that the Minister of Finance and Personnel tables the necessary amendment to clause 10 at Consideration Stage to provide this flexibility, on the basis that any costs arising from future decisions to vary from parity in this area at a scheme level will be met by the responsible departments."*

So, yes, there may be a cost if Departments want to go down that route, and they will have to put a case forward to meet those costs.

There has been considerable concern about clause 10 standing without any inbuilt flexibility. The General Teaching Council expressed concern about the number of unemployed teachers over the past four years. Clearly, high unemployment rates among recently qualified teachers could be worsened by putting those powers elsewhere rather than in the hands of Executive Ministers.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. I really cannot allow him to go on with this nonsense about the fact that, if you increase the retirement age, you will create unemployment at the other end. The logic of what the Member is saying is this: let everybody retire at 40, and we will do away with all unemployment because everybody who is unemployed at present can take up the jobs of the people who retire at 40. How do you afford that?

Mr McKay: I will explain to the Member again. We are talking about introducing flexibility, and if a Minister wants to make a change that has a cost, he or she can put forward a rationale for meeting that cost within his or her own budget or otherwise. We are talking about primary legislation, and we want this to be set at secondary level — regulation level — so that we can make exceptions for those cases, such as firefighters. We have already agreed that there should be an exceptional case for firefighters, and a cost will be associated with that. Evidence may come forward that indicates that firefighters should not retire at 60. I am sure that many Members on both sides of the House might sympathise with that case. That is why we need to look at this in greater detail, rather than just taking a broad-brush approach to all employees. We are talking about over 200,000 employees in the local economy. I think that we owe it to them to consider this in the fullest way, regardless of what conclusion we come to, whether it is to go with the status quo proposed at Westminster or otherwise. That is what we should be doing as legislators.

On the other party amendments, we are quite in favour of the Green Party amendment and look forward to listening to the case for that. We are also in favour of the SDLP amendments, many of which stand exclusive.

In conclusion, we believe that there is an opportunity to introduce flexibility in the Bill through all the many amendments before us. It is irresponsible not to make provision for the Assembly or the Executive to take into account the impact that this will have on employment, youth unemployment, the economy, the public service and, perhaps most crucially for a lot of people, the emergency services. We should not have a dogmatic approach to clause 10, because it is guaranteed to create problems in the future.

Mr Weir: A few minutes ago, I moved a motion to extend the sitting until midnight. Members will be relieved to know that I do not intend to allow my remarks to drift on any later than about 11.30 pm. That is a guide for them. Given that we rehearsed some of these issues at Consideration Stage, I will try to keep my remarks fairly brief.

Broadly speaking, the amendments in this group break into four easily grouped sections. The Committee Chair moved and outlined the lead amendment in the first section, which includes amendment No 3 and a number of consequential amendments, namely amendment Nos 5, 6, 12, 16, and 17. Clearly, you either accept or reject them as a package.

I listened to the Chair speaking about those amendments, and what was there at Consideration Stage has, to a certain level, been rehashed but in a much more subtle form, so I praise him for his subtlety if nothing else. However, the cry that we cannot rely on perfidious Albion across the water or leave ourselves at the mercy of a future Chancellor is one that may not have quite the same resonance on these Benches as it does across the way.

I have to make a couple of points about this group of amendments. First, the Chair consistently said that the idea was simply to have flexibility. I think that, given the level of variation in the schemes within the envelope of cost, that is there already. Consequently, I question the need for them.

Secondly, I think that they point, again in a much more subtle manner, to a break between the normal pension age and the state pension age, which, I think, is fundamentally dangerous. It was, in broad pension reform and the broad central thrust of the Bill, one of the key recommendations of the Hutton report. If we move away from that broad thrust — there can be, in individual circumstances, some examination of that — it will start to cost the Executive tens of millions and then perhaps hundreds of millions as we

move on, which we can ill afford. The points made by my colleague Mr Wilson and others about the message that it sends out to the private sector, as opposed to the public sector, are highly significant. These amendments, however well they are dressed up, cannot be afforded.

The second set of amendments, which has one main amendment, No 4, and two consequential amendments, Nos 18 and 20, is an attempt to change the normal pension age in a couple of sectors. Again, although we all admire the work done by the people in those sectors, such as prison officers and paramedics, if we start framing legislation, particularly primary legislation, on the basis of occupations for which we have some sympathy or empathy, we will not make very good law. If you are in, if you like, an unsympathetic job, to be honest, you can stick it there for as long as you can tolerate it. However, if you are in a job that we have more empathy with, perhaps that could be —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Agnew: I would like the Member to clarify something. If he does not think that we should make, in legislation, exceptions for jobs with which, as he put it, there is sympathy, why are the police in the Bill? Why are they given an exemption?

Mr Weir: I am glad that the Member asked that. Perhaps it shows his level of ignorance of the general thrust of the Hutton recommendations. There were specific recommendations in the Hutton report on the police and, to some extent, firefighters. They were singled out, which was not the case for prison officers or anyone else, be it paramedics, ambulance drivers or whatever. That was a clear distinction. If we are going to say that such and such a profession is good, so we will give it good terms, or that such and such a profession is not quite so good, so it will not get quite so good terms, where do we put teachers, for example, as have been mentioned, or a whole range of occupations? You could pick out almost any profession. On that basis, there may be some of us who want to raise the age of retirement for tax collectors to about 90 because we —

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way, because, of course, it is about extending the rationale of the Hutton review. He may not have made specific references, but the reference was to do with the physical nature of those jobs. Therefore, it is about extending that to other areas of work for which the same rationale applies. To suggest that it is a matter of good jobs and bad jobs is erroneous. That was never the basis of the review.

Mr Weir: With respect, it seems that the Member opposite wants to put himself in the mind of Lord Hutton. If it is about extending the rationale, why not include some who work in the Forest Service, who have quite a physical job? Why not include those in Roads Service, for instance, who perhaps are out on the ground every day? Let us be honest: the Member opposite is not looking to extend the rationale because he has sympathy for particular professions; it is because he has a profound disagreement with the meaning and thrust of the Bill and is trying to kill it off by the back door. That is what is really behind this.

We have to stick with what is in Hutton and the recommendations that have been put in place. There will be scheme-specific regulations. If there is a desire, within the cost envelope of the overall scheme, for the Minister of Health to look at variations for particular types of employees, for example, there is the scope to do that. This would, essentially, impose that.

I can understand the concerns that people have raised about us being forced into a situation in which the age of retirement is escalating because of demographics and an ageing population. Quite frankly, I think that that is an inevitable evil that we are going to have to face up to in society. I can understand people saying that they entered a profession at such and such a position, with a particular retirement age, but the ground rules, or the goalposts, are shifting. If we were to accept the amendments of Mr Agnew and others, it would actually start to shift the goalposts in the opposite direction, because the normal pension age for these professions has been 65, and has been so for a number of years. At a time when we are asking large numbers of people in the public sector to accept a higher pension age because of changes in demographics, we would be singling out certain groups for whom to push the pension age downwards. That simply does not add up.

The reason why there have been a number of exceptions is the fact that there are jobs that certainly require a high degree of physicality. One of the principal reasons given for an exception when we heard detailed evidence from the firefighters was the sheer lack of any back-room jobs in the structure of the Fire Service for firefighters who had failed a very specific physical test. That number was not large, but there was virtually no opportunity for them to do back-room functions. There is much more flexibility on that with regard to prison officers or within the broad remit of the health service. If the Health Minister or the Minister of Justice feel that there is a strong case, I think they can make those variations. So, I am not supportive of those amendments.

On a more positive note, I turn to the idea of allowing some degree of variation, which gives at least some power to the Department. I refer to amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9, which are, largely, being pushed by the SDLP. There is some degree of merit in them. In the amendments, if we are talking about a greater level of flexibility, all our variations are on the same theme. Because it does not specify a specific age and allows that greater level of flexibility, I and, I think, my party would be minded to support amendment No 7, which is the one that allows the maximum flexibility. It does not have the same level of prescriptive quality of amendment Nos 8 and 9, so we would certainly be happy to support amendment No 7.

5.45 pm

Finally, the general idea behind amendment Nos 10 and 11 is a reasonable and sound one. It says, “This is obviously a very major change. We need to ensure that proper reviews are carried out by the Department”. The essential difference between amendment Nos 10 and 11 is an issue around timing. From that perspective, the weakness of amendment No 10 is that it comes in so early. Indeed, it really comes in before the changes are, in effect, put into place. There is an argument that, even if that were able to be carried out, the level of information generated from that would be very limited. I think that it is due to kick in six months into the process. From that point

of view, amendment No 11 is certainly the one that we on these Benches prefer. That seems to be quite a sensible approach. There is rationale behind it, and it has the most appropriate timescale. From that point of view, we are not willing to accept amendment No 10, but we are willing to support amendment No 11.

Mr Attwood: I confirm that we will support the Sinn Féin amendments, which add a little bit to the Bill, mindful that some of what is in the Bill will be in place only in the early 2030s. It will probably be 2034 before the pension age of 68 kicks in. Subject to what Mr Agnew has to say, we will support the Green Party amendments. Obviously, we urge everybody to support the SDLP amendments, which revolve around a concept that is already in the Bill and which, one way or the other, people might argue to introduce further into the Bill: how to scope out flexibility, and what flexibilities there may or not be on the far side of flexibility being scoped out. The essential discussion that Mr Weir touched on in his final comments is about how you scope out flexibility, and what, if any, flexibility might arise on the far side of scoping. That is the essence of the amendments that the SDLP is proposing.

If you were to go through various contributions from Consideration Stage, which I relied on earlier and I am going to rely on again, the proper conclusion that has to be drawn from that which has already been conceded here this afternoon and in the Consideration Stage, and the argument behind our amendments, is that you put as much as possible into primary legislation and that you have as much review as possible around what is in primary legislation. That is the only sustainable and proper place to be when it comes to the issue of flexibility. Unless you are going to create confusion and a bit of a muddle, the best way to proceed is to gather in the Bill now the various options of flexibility and methods of reviewing things to identify how flexibility might or might not prevail.

What do I rely on in argument to advance that position? At the risk of being kicked under the table, I will correct one point made by my colleague Mr Bradley. It was not a failure of his hearing; it was a failure of my explanation.

It was our own Finance Minister, not a Finance Minister in London, who said in Consideration Stage that the Bill was:

> *"designed to last for a generation at least." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p325, col 1.]*

Recognising that sense of things, his colleague Mr Girvan, who is not here at the moment, said at Consideration Stage about why it was worthwhile to have a Committee Stage, even though he said that the Bill could have been dealt with through a legislative consent motion. He said in Consideration Stage that the Committee had:

> *"given us an opportunity to see what flexibility could be worked into the scheme. There are probably those on the other side of the Irish Sea at Westminster who feel that some accommodation and further negotiation would have helped". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p353, col 1.]*

He made the argument in Consideration Stage, when he rejected the argument for a legislative consent motion, that you should build flexibility in to this Bill. That is something that he indicated that people at Westminster might wish that they had done when discussing their pensions Bill. In that regard, he was probably thinking about the Fire Brigades' Union, which has gone on strike four times in recent months about accommodation and flexibility.

That is what is at the heart of amendment Nos 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. Amendment Nos 10 and 11 are, in my view, the mummy and daddy of amendments, and amendments Nos 7, 8 and 9 are the children of the mummy and daddy amendments. That is how I think we should look at them. I am sure that that will produce some commentary later from somebody or other, but that is how they are.

Why do I think that we should have amendment Nos 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 as the parents and the children? Mr McKay again read into the record what he read into the record at Consideration Stage about the Committee's view. This is what the Committee said, and he stressed that this was what the Committee said. It was not what he thought or anybody else thought; he said that this was the Committee's view. Indeed, if you check Hansard, you will see that he says those words at or around 5.40 pm on the day of the Consideration Stage debate. He said:

> *"The Committee believes that there is a need for sufficient flexibility to enable evidence-based decisions to be taken at a scheme level". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p351, col 2.]*

He said that that was to determine whether public sector roles have a lower normal pension age than set out in clause 10. He then added, and again said that it was the Committee's view, that, if you leave it until the secondary legislation, why stipulate a normal pension age in the primary legislation in a rigid way? He was making the point that, if people rely on secondary legislation to scope out what should or should not be the flexibility, why should clause 10 contain a rigid description of what the normal pension age should or should not be?

I think that the argument about flexibility is added to by the Finance Minister's comments at Consideration Stage, when he berated the SDLP in the following way and then, in my view, added usefully to the debate once he showed a bit more wisdom. What he said about our amendments at that stage was that we, the SDLP:

> *"do not understand, comprehend or appreciate what this Bill seeks to do." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p346, col 1.]*

He went on to say that the Bill:

> *"is enabling framework legislation that provides flexibilities, where necessary ... It is important that the Ministers who are responsible for each of the pension schemes have such flexibilities." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p346, col 1.]*

So, the point that I am making is that the Committee is explicit and unanimous about flexibility. Mr Girvan now argues that it is good that we have flexibility, because those who passed the legislation may wish that they had shown more flexibility, and the Minister himself has now accepted that it is important to have flexibility in the legislation. The point behind all that is that there is no dispute about a need for flexibility, only about where it is placed and how it is shaped. That is what our three amendments — amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 — do. They would put into the legislation more comprehensively that which has already been conceded in the legislation specifically. That is the value of the three amendments.

They would put into legislation not just that the Finance Minister can bring about a situation of flexibility by way of order — a proposal in amendment No 7 that Mr Weir indicated the DUP might vote in favour of — but what the other options might be beyond that; other options that are in the Bill because of the amendments that govern the issue of firefighters and police officers.

We argue that it is better to create certainty in the legislation around what the flexibility options might be. Just as we have done for firefighters and police officers, it is better to put flexibility into the legislation without anticipating whether any one or other of the options might be taken up by the Finance Minister in future. We argue that the sum of the parts of amendments Nos 7, 8 and 9 is necessary to ensure that, as we go forward and in the event that any flexibility is required, people might have some sense of what the flexibilities are.

In short, there are five reasons why it is important to put the flexibility options that are outlined in amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 into the Bill. The first is that, for political reasons, we should say to ourselves and to those workers who may be affected by any one of the flexibility options that we acknowledge that the options, by way of order or whatever the Minister decides — be it 55 to 65, 55 to 60, or 65 — are the broad pitch on which we might or might not decide to play in the future.

Secondly, we would say to categories of workers that the options are not prescriptive or restrictive to two categories of workers only; namely, firefighters and police officers. Thirdly, if they were put into law, it would be saying that there is not one law for one and a different law for others and that the flexibility options might be available to all categories of workers if there is evidence to back it up, and I will deal with that point shortly.

Fourthly, it would recognise that, in putting forward the options and putting them in the Bill, we will not tie the hands of any Minister in bringing forward proposals, be it the Minister who is responsible for any one pension scheme or the Finance Minister. Fifthly, it would recognise that, as things stand, there are significant gaps in the data and evidence needed to interrogate what might be flexible options for the categories of workers that are named in clause 1. When you gather all of that together, it seems to me that to create certainty and avoid doubt, to show solidarity with workers, to recognise that there are gaps in data and evidence, and to demonstrate that there is not one law for one category of worker and a different law for another category of worker, it is best to put amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 into the Bill. That will ensure that all bases are covered as we move forward.

The parent amendments are amendment Nos 10 and 11. If made, they will provide the mechanisms that would be undertaken to identify whether any category or subcategory of worker should enjoy any of the flexibilities that are outlined in the previous amendments. In that regard, I want to rely on the contributions of Mr Weir — he has gone now, but he may return shortly — in the Consideration Stage debate. Whether he knew it or not, it was his contributions at Consideration Stage that got the SDLP thinking about what amendment Nos 10 and 11 might look like.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): He had better not come back.

6.00 pm

Mr Attwood: I wish he was here because I would be interested in how he would respond to what he said at that stage. Why do we believe that it is necessary to have a short-term review in advance of clause 10 being commenced and an ongoing review into the impact of clause 10 on all the categories of workers named in clause 1?

I do not think that I have ever relied so much on the words of the DUP to try to validate my arguments. However, putting that aside, this is what Mr Weir said of firefighters and police officers at Consideration Stage:

> *"Rightly, society needs them to have a particular level of fitness and physical ability. That is a clear issue that goes to the heart of health and safety concerns and saving people's lives."*

In justifying the flexibility that is shown to two categories of workers in clause 1, he says that it goes to the heart of health and safety concerns and saving people's lives. To qualify that assertion, he said:

> *"there is a requirement on firefighters that is simply not there in most other public sector realms. Consequently, theirs is a unique case."*

He added:

> *" A unique, cogent and impressive case has been made for the firefighters". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p354, col 2.]*

Let me be clear: I agree with Mr Weir's contention that clear issues go to the heart of health and safety concerns and saving people's lives that may justify flexibility. What I cannot accept — this is where there is a contradiction in the DUP position — is that, when it comes to firefighters, given the limits of evidence and data that were recorded by Mr McKay on behalf of the Committee through questions that were asked of one or two other Ministers, is the argument that there is not a "unique, cogent and impressive case" to be made for categories other than firefighters in the way that Mr Weir relied on.

Therefore, at this stage of the legislation, being mindful of how it will impact on categories of workers named in clause 1 other than firefighters and police officers, we have an obligation to identify in real time over the next short period whether there is a unique, cogent and impressive case to be made for other categories of workers.

To develop the point, I will go back to what the Finance Minister said during the Consideration Stage debate on this general theme:

> *"Where there might be age-related factors or concerns about possible correlations between pension age and fitness, it is right that they should be investigated and subject to regular review." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p360, col 2.]*

So the Minister has accepted that there may be some correlation between pension age and fitness and that it is right that they should be investigated and subject to regular review. If that is the view of the Finance Minister, it falls to him and the House to pass legislation in this Bill that interrogates the potential of a correlation between pension age and fitness, and has that investigated now and made subject to regular review. Otherwise, we are saying what

Mr Weir said was his contention, namely that, when it comes to firefighters and police officers, there is a unique, cogent and impressive case. We need to know whether there is such a case for others, and we need to rely on the Minister's words when he said that there may be a possible correlation between pension age and fitness, and that it should be investigated and subject to regular review.

If the Minister is minded to accept the general review clause whereby there would be a review every two years, on the basis of what he and the DUP have said, is it not also the case that there should be, as outlined in amendment No 10, an investigation or review now to draw a conclusion on whether there is a cogent and impressive case for flexibility? Why do I say that? I say it because, if anything, evidence is beginning to emerge that suggests to me that there is a unique and cogent case for other categories of workers.

Mr Weir, in his earlier contribution, said that Hutton identified firefighters and police officers and that that is the basis on which the flexibility might be granted in amendments to clause 10. Potentially, is there now, in real time, the same argument for other categories of workers? I will rely on just two pieces of evidence. The first is the evidence of the British Medical Association (BMA), not just to the Committee but to the ongoing Working Longer review, to which it said:

> *"there is a strong case that frontline medical staff have roles that are particularly physically, mentally and/or emotionally demanding and so should have their normal pension age capped".*

The BMA went on to make a point that seems to me to be compelling and conclusive. It said about front line medical staff that there will be individuals who have:

> *"Tasks that require physical exertion, good vision, dexterity, eye-hand coordination skills, rapid responses to events (including decisions in the middle of the night)".*

Many a long hour and day in the Chamber are spent discussing health service issues. As we speak, various reviews and inquiries are ongoing into the past conduct of health authorities and individuals in their employment. A lot of that comes down to whether the right call was made at any one time in individual cases and critical incidents. The BMA told the Working Longer review what seems to be self-evident, even though none of us is a doctor, namely that there are tasks that require physical exertion, good vision, dexterity, eye-hand coordination and rapid response to events, including at night. Does that not fulfil the Weir test?

What is the Weir test? Let me remind you. The Weir test is:

> *"a clear issue that goes to the heart of health and safety concerns and saving people's lives." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p354, col 1.]*

Those were Mr Weir's words at Consideration Stage, which, in his view, justified the flexibility for police officers and firefighters — issues of health and safety and saving people's lives. On the face of it, does the same not apply to doctors and other front line medical staff whose daily business is at the heart of health and safety concerns and saving people's lives? Their capacity or otherwise for physical exertion, good vision, dexterity, eye-hand coordination and rapid response to events is very challenging.

What I am saying to the Minister is that, beyond the ongoing review on the far side of the legislation being commenced, there is a need for an immediate review to interrogate evidence of that nature to see whether it does or does not justify the flexibilities that we propose might be visited upon any category of worker through amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9.

When looking at front line medical staff, we should also look at NIPSA's evidence to the Working Longer review. NIPSA, as touched on in Mr Agnew's amendment, made a particular comment on paramedics and what it refers to as "hospital property and estate staff", whom we often view as porters and people fulfilling that sort of function in the hospital estate.

They point to the fact that ambulance men and women have high sickness absence rates, but that there is an even higher sickness absence rate among paramedics. Given that, when they respond to an incident, they have to carry a responder, a portable defibrillator, oxygen cylinders and drugs bags, never mind all the other requirements of their job, it suggests to me that they, too, have issues with not only physical ability, but with good vision, dexterity, eye-hand coordination and the other categories of function required by doctors and other front line staff.

In conclusion, our argument is that you should put all the potential models of flexibility into the Bill to show support and solidarity, not least because they are already in the Bill for firefighters and police officers. That does no violence to any Minister responsible for any scheme or to the Minister of Finance and Personnel in bringing forward any proposals by way of order to the House. It does no violence to what it might or might not look like to have in the Bill the fact that it may be one of three options or it may be any other model within option number one in terms of the amendments when it comes to an order being laid by the Minister.

In the run-down period between now and when the Bill becomes live and commenced, we should undertake a review to determine whether the Weir test is or is not satisfied by other categories of workers. It may be that that review will not conclude in good time for the Bill being commenced, or it may give us a further evidence base upon which to say that an order might or might not be laid before the House by the Finance Minister. However, we owe that to other categories of workers beyond those who have already been identified, given the evidence that has been submitted in various places, including in the House and to the Working Longer review. We owe it to them to interrogate whether any flexibility, as outlined in the amendments tabled by the SDLP, should or should not be visited upon any other category of worker beyond firefighter and police officer. That is the common-sense position, the good-practice position and the position that safeguards the interest of the workers and those whom they come into contact with. For all those reasons, I commend the amendments.

Mr Cree: We are now on group 2, which has 14 amendments. In the main, these amendments have been considered before. Indeed, some of them have been voted on. I see no reason to change my opinion and will vote against most of them on behalf of the Ulster

Unionist Party. The exception, though, is amendment No 4, which has been discussed. That amendment wishes to extend the special age and fitness exception to prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants. That does tend to open a Pandora's box and, so far, the case has not been made, because there are many other worthy professions similar to the groups being promoted by the proposer. Surely the criteria must be sufficient fitness levels to do the job. There will be scope in the regulations to consider changes in the future should they be necessary.

I hate being predictable, as Mr Bradley referred to. The trouble is, if you take a straight line, you tend to become predictable. I will remain predictable and say that I see merit in amendment Nos 7 and 11 and will, therefore, support them. That is the second time I have supported two SDLP amendments, and I did not get credit the first time either. However, to be serious, we must not lose sight of the cost of pensions in the future and the ability of pension funds to meet their liabilities. We have to be realistic.

6.15 pm

Mrs Cochrane: I will turn first to the 10 amendments to clause 10. Clause 10 as drafted sets the normal pension scheme ages at the same level as they are for other public service workers in the UK. Amendment Nos 3, 5, 6 and 12, and amendment Nos 16 and 17 in relation to clauses 32 and 33 respectively, would essentially delete the link between scheme pension age and state pension age. To do that moves the Bill away from its intended outcome, which is to make public service pensions more sustainable by addressing the increased financial liability due to the increased proportion of adult life being spent in retirement. We already know that the cost of public service pensions has increased by a third in the past 10 years to £32 billion. Those spiralling costs are simply unsustainable, and we should not have to fund the additional costs at the expense of the provision of public services.

Amendment No 4, which was tabled by Mr Agnew, seeks to make changes to the schemes for prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants. The independent Public Service Pensions Commission did not recommend any exception from the general policy link between scheme pension age and state pension age for any groups other than firefighters and police officers and the armed forces, but subject to regular review. Also, it is my understanding that the normal scheme pension age for newly recruited prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants is already set at 65. Therefore, I do not see why we should take a step back from that change.

Amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 are all variations of each other and would provide an option for the Department of Finance and Personnel to specify by order that pension age can be set at something different from the state pension age. If we are to support any of these amendments, it would mostly likely be amendment No 7, as it is more flexible and does not tie us to any specific age.

Finally, amendment Nos 10 and 11 seek to ensure that the Department of Finance and Personnel conducts reviews on how the provisions of the Bill affect members of the various public sector schemes. We support that concept, as it is in line with the Hutton recommendations, although I seek clarification from the Minister as to whether a review prior to the commencement of section 10 could delay the implementation of the Bill and whether, therefore, there would be associated costs. That information will help to clarify whether we can support amendment No 10 and, therefore, amendment Nos 18 and 20 and amendment No 11, or just amendment No 11.

Mr Agnew: On behalf of the Green Party NI, I support a number of amendments in this group, namely amendment Nos 3, 4, 5 and 6. It seems like the House is going to go with amendment No 7 out of amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9, which are mutually exclusive, and I am certainly happy to support that, and the mother and father of all amendments, amendment Nos 10 and 11. I cannot help but reference that comment.

Mr Attwood: Mummy and daddy.

Mr Agnew: Mummy and daddy; apologies. We are happy to support those amendments, along with amendment Nos 16, 18 and 20. I am left unsure as to the rationale for amendment Nos 12 and 17, and I will listen to the winding-up speech and decide from there, but at this point I am still open-minded on those amendments.

I will address the amendments under review before I address my own amendment. It is right that we should base legislation on evidence, and we need to give ourselves the room to look at evidence. At the Bill's Consideration Stage I said that it was an accountant's Bill that was designed simply to balance the books. Whilst that should always be an important and key consideration in any piece of legislation, it is not the sole important factor, and we have to take into account the reality on the ground.

Whilst we may not want to make special exceptions for certain categories of workers, we have to consider it. The reality is that whilst we may want to extend the pension age for some professions so that the numbers add up, we contradict ourselves if those people are then unable to reach their pension age because of ill health. Although we can talk about life expectancy increasing, we have to look at health expectancy. That is where we must look at the evidence of the health expectancy of those workers and what they can be expected to do in the later years of their working lives.

Is it reasonable, fair and right that we should extend the working life of workers who are in particularly difficult physical areas of work?

It is not purely about the physical aspect, and that is why I welcome and put my name to the SDLP amendments to initiate the review process and to give order to exclude different areas of workers. I think that we need to gather more evidence on the impact on teachers of working late in life. The Working Longer review, which is ongoing, has been cited. So, we need to hear back on that evidence, and we need to give ourselves the flexibility to ensure that our policy and our regulations are based on the best available evidence and take into account the well-being of workers, not just the maximum that we can draw out of people. We should seek to ensure that, when we do increase health outcomes for people, we do not simply use that as an excuse to force people to work longer.

I welcome the fact that, because of an increase in the numbers of female workers, we have an increased workforce and increased contributions towards pensions.

That financial element is rarely referenced in these debates. We have had a significant shift in the level of female workers over recent decades, and at no point did we say that we should bring down the pension age because that meant that we were contributing more. Instead, we sought to produce more and to consume more to further fuel a consumption-driven economy. So, the economic arguments are presented almost as fact, but it is important to remember that they are very much a political take on facts and are not completely objective.

My amendment looks at paramedics and prison officers, and I will explain why I included them. Mr Attwood has stolen my thunder by pulling out a few quotes that I picked out from the Bill's previous stage. I will repeat some of what Mr Attwood quoted on firefighters. Mr Hamilton said:

> *"firefighters perform a vital role in the emergency services"*

I agree with that. So do paramedics. He continued:

> *"There are obvious public safety issues that mean that standards of fitness for the role for those in the Fire and Rescue Service should be in place and should be met."*

I agree with that. The same is true of paramedics. He also said:

> *"Where there might be age-related factors or concerns about possible correlations between pension age and fitness, it is right that they should be investigated and subject to regular review."*

That is true of firefighters and true of paramedics. He went on to say:

> *"for the future regime for firefighters, fitness assessment and maintenance must be the fundamental guiding principle, not age." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p361, col 1.]*

Again, I apply that to paramedics.

Coming back to Mr Weir's point about what was in the Hutton review, we can look at what Hutton said and interpret it in the way that we so choose. I cannot speak for Lord Hutton, but nor can Mr Weir. The rationale that he outlined for why there should be exceptions for firefighters and police officers applies to other professions, and I think that there is no doubt that paramedics and prison officers are among those. I am certainly not saying that they are exclusive to those professions. There may be others that we should be considering, which is why I welcome the SDLP amendments. I put those forward to highlight that we cannot simply single out members of the Police Service and firefighters and not look at other areas of work and other professions that, for reasons unknown to me, had, before this stage of debate, been ignored to a large extent.

Paramedics carry heavy equipment. In the unfortunate cases, where need be, we charge them with carrying our loved ones on a stretcher. There is a vital, physical element to their job. The nature of their work, among other factors, has led to the unenviable position of paramedics holding the record for the worst retirement rates for ill health in the NHS.

I did not pluck those two professions out of the air. There is clear evidence that paramedics already have difficulty meeting the current retirement age. We should acknowledge that, see how we can mitigate that aspect of their work and give people a realistic chance of working until their retirement age and being able to carry out their job to the level expected until then.

Prison officers must undertake five tests of fitness, and all must be passed in order for them to remain in their jobs. Test one is grip strength; test two is endurance fitness; test three is dynamic strength; test four is agility; and test five is static shield hold. Those are all aptitudes that will reduce with age, particularly towards the later stages of life and after possibly decades of working in a physically demanding environment. Indeed, when the retirement age of prison officers was looked at in the Fresh Start negotiations of 1987, front line prison staff had a life expectancy of 18 months above their retirement age. That is the type of evidence that we need to gather. Are we seriously suggesting that we expect people to work for the vast majority of their life, with no real expectation of a fulfilling and valuable retirement? I do not think that that is fair.

The issue of cost rightly comes up. We have to weigh up the cost, and, under devolution, we have to make our own choices in Northern Ireland. The Finance Minister may say that it is for those who table amendments to outline the costs, but I think that it is remiss of him if he has not assessed in his accounting what the cost would be of including different professions with similarly demanding roles to those of Fire Service and Prison Service personnel. I fail to understand the rationale for why police officers are included in the Bill but those other professions are not.

Mr Weir made the point that I introduced the amendment because I am not entirely happy with the Bill. I make no apology for that: I am not. I am not wedded to the state pension age set by the UK Government, none of whose parties' MPs was elected in Northern Ireland. That is why we have devolution — so that we can legislate in a way that we believe to be correct, without slavishly following the UK Government of whatever colour and hue it might be at any given time.

I suspect that when you pick away at the Bill and look at the reality for many professions, increasing the pension age beyond 65 — indeed, for many professions, beyond 60 — is not realistic or feasible. It might make the numbers add up, but you cannot force people to work beyond their physical capability, no matter how much you might want them to and how much it might suit the accountants.

I ask Members to support amendment No 4, and I thank those who spoke in favour of it. The Green Party NI supports the majority of amendments in the group.

6.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: In the middle of his comments, I think that Mr Attwood mentioned BMA evidence about the ability to respond rapidly to events, particularly at night. As I listened to him in full flow, having had much evidence down through the years in his role as Minister of the Environment and Minister for Social Development, and given the pleasure I had in shadowing him in Committee Chair and Deputy Chair positions over that time, I feared for my ability to respond at all had events extended much further into the evening, but we have picked up the pace somewhat.

I welcome the opportunity to comment on the amendments included in group 2 on clause 10. I remind Members, if

I may, what clause 10 is all about. It has provisions that are fundamental to the reform of public service pensions in Northern Ireland. The clause contains the vital link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age, with exceptions for police and firefighters, as has been mentioned by many. It also contains provisions to regularise normal scheme pension ages to 65 for all members of the workforce, with the exception of police and firefighters.

Amendment No 3, if adopted, would remove a fundamental plank of the reform of public service pensions, which is the linking of normal scheme pension age with state pension age for the majority of public service workers, with the exceptions that the Bill has made for police and firefighters. The amendments, if adopted, will delete all references to the link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age. The amendments provide for scheme regulations to specify normal and deferred pension age somewhere between 65 and 68. Amendment Nos 5, 6, 12, 16 and 17 are entirely consequential to amendment No 3.

The amendments go against the whole thrust of the reforms proposed by Lord Hutton and the Executive decision of 8 March 2012, which stated that the Executive would commit to the policy for a new career average revalued earnings model with pension age linked to state pension age to be adopted for general use in the public services schemes and would adopt that approach consistently for each of the public sector pension schemes, in line with their equivalent scheme in Great Britain, and not adopt different approaches for Northern Ireland.

The policy for the reform of public service pensions is formulated on recommendations made by the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission, sometimes referred to as the Hutton commission. The commission reported that the public service pension structure in the United Kingdom has not responded flexibly to rising pension costs and increases in longevity in the past few decades, and it is not tenable in the long term.

The Independent Public Service Pensions Commission, chaired by Lord Hutton, concluded in its final report, published on 10 March 2011:

> *"The introduction of the link to the State Pension Age, which will initially move Normal Pension Ages to 65, will move the proportion of adult life in retirement for public service pension scheme members back to about a third: roughly where it was in the 1980s. The current State Pension Age of 65 is already the Normal Pension Age for most new entrants to public service pension schemes. Moving to this for future accrual will more fairly distribute the benefits between scheme members. In the long term, the timetabled increases in State Pension Age should help to keep the proportion of adult life in retirement for members around this level, on current life expectancy projections."*

On the issue of affordability, we have two strands of legislative control. First is the primary enabling framework that the Bill will provide. If the Public Service Pensions Act in Northern Ireland differs significantly on key provisions from the Public Service Pensions Act in Great Britain, Her Majesty's Treasury will demand to be recouped for our more generous public service pension schemes in Northern Ireland. It is important that we get this primary framework enabling legislation through the legislative passage successfully and retain, in particular, the link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age.

Secondly, each scheme will have to produce its own secondary legislation, setting out the detail of scheme design. I will provide more details on that. There is scope at the secondary legislation stage to introduce variations to meet the needs of particular workforces. Again, those must be contained in the overall costs of the scheme. Such costs would have to be met by some form of adjustment to employer contributions and to members' contributions and benefits.

The essence of the reforms of public service pensions is to make them sustainable by addressing the ever-increasing pensions liability. We are all aware that the intention is that state pension age will increase to 66 by 2020, 67 by 2028 and 68 by the mid-2030s.

Why is that happening? It is a perfectly sensible and logical response that aims to control costs to the taxpayer and the public purse at a time when we are all living longer. The consequence of an ageing population is that we must align state and public pension schemes accordingly.

I consider it to be an issue of fairness. I have yet to hear a cogent rationale for treating public sector workers significantly differently from those in the private sector. Many in the private sector depend on their state pension and do not have an occupational pension.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for giving way. The rationale can work two ways. We could seek not to change the state pension age to recognise all workers and accept that the arguments made for firefighters, the Police Service and, by some of us, for other professions should ensure that those in physically demanding jobs do not have their pension age extended. It does not have to be that, because one group is being disadvantaged, we should disadvantage everyone equally.

Mr Hamilton: That is not particularly an argument for fairness, I have to say. I advanced the argument at Consideration Stage and have heard nobody who suggests flexibility, including the Member, give any argument for how any of us could tell a fisherman, farmer or someone who works in a heavy engineering business that they should continue working to the age of 66, 67 or 68 — most likely beyond that in the future — so that somebody working in the Civil Service can retire at the age of 65. I do not think that that is fair. Are they suggesting some sort of two-tier system in which some in the private sector work to an age well beyond 65 so that some public sector workers can retire at 65? To me, that does not seem fair. I have listened to the arguments put forward by Members and have yet to hear any strong argument for why particular employees should be treated more generously.

When the Bill was introduced, the House was advised about the potential cost of failing to meet the April 2015 deadline set by Her Majesty's Treasury for the main schemes: health, teachers, firefighters, police and the Civil Service. That is now estimated to be in the region of £300 million for the first year, 2015-16. The key issue to consider, should these amendments be accepted, is cost. Specifying a normal or deferred pension age below state pension age has the potential to increase costs. I instructed my officials to get some indicative costs on what the change would mean. I know from Consideration Stage

that there is some scepticism about the estimates provided by the Government Actuary's Department. However, I point out that we went to the Government Actuary's Department for the second estimate of the overall costs of non-compliance with pension reform at the request of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The amounts involved are significant, as we knew that they would be because the provision of public service pensions is a huge pressure on public expenditure. The Government Actuary estimated the costs of breaking the link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age and moving to a normal scheme pension age of 65 to be in the region of £30 million to £40 million in year 1, which is 2015-16, and rising in the longer term to £70 million to £90 million a year. Some might be wondering why the cost would arise in 2015-16. It is quite simple: the change would give rise to a future liability for the pension scheme, and the thrust of the reform is to have regular valuations and to effectively manage and anticipate costs that may materialise.

Cost is a critical issue. I made clear that there will be scope for variances by each responsible Minister at secondary legislation stage. However, the variances must be contained within the overall cost envelope of the pension scheme. If we were to break from and exceed the cost envelope of the equivalent scheme in Great Britain, Her Majesty's Treasury would undoubtedly seek to recoup the difference. Her Majesty's Treasury will not foot the bill for more generous public service pension provision in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom — why should it? I want Members to be under no illusion. I want to make it abundantly clear, yet again, that the Department of Finance and Personnel will not make up any shortfall to Treasury. Her Majesty's Treasury funding projections are formulated on the presumption that the policy intention contained in the Westminster Public Service Pensions Act will be applied in Northern Ireland. On that basis, any divergence from the policy contained in the Westminster Act has the potential to have a financial impact. This approach across devolved administrations was also recommended by Lord Hutton in his review.

We already have an estimate for the cost of delay from the Government Actuary's Department of £300 million a year. Therefore, we need to keep the impetus up and move forward on this important framework Bill, with enabling powers for secondary legislation. There is extensive scope for variance in scheme design at secondary legislation stage. Secondary legislation would be required to amend the rules of each devolved public service pension scheme to give effect to the reform measures in the Public Service Pensions Bill. That work would be taken forward by each of the Departments that have individual responsibility for pension schemes. The secondary legislation will provide scope for each relevant Minister to consider which variations may be possible and appropriate for each of their schemes. Ministers are likely to give consideration to the approach taken to date in mirroring the comparable scheme in Great Britain when designing their Northern Ireland scheme and its regulations.

Scope exists to vary the scheme design and regulations to suit the requirements of their individual workforces. In my view, those variations will provide scope to address emerging concerns such as the consequences of an older workforce and job capabilities. We need to be careful, however, about equating inability to perform work with older people. This will, of course, require consultation with scheme representatives and trade unions. Following such consultation, scheme-specific designs will be developed for each public service pension scheme in Northern Ireland. Ministers in Northern Ireland with responsibility for public service pension schemes will need to take account of keeping within the parameters of the cost of the overall core provisions set out in the primary legislation. Ministers will also need to take account of their counterpart schemes in Great Britain.

Ministers will also want to take account of the cost of changing their own IT systems. It should be noted that the IT systems that are used by main schemes here are modelled on the IT systems for the Great Britain scheme. Therefore, there will be a cost to amend systems if Ministers depart too far from their equivalent scheme in Great Britain. Variations to Northern Ireland scheme designs from their comparable schemes in Great Britain would have to be considered in the context of the overall scheme valuation, which will be subject to provisions for the valuation and cost controls as set out in GB.

A wide range of variations could be made in the secondary legislation. They include the level at which the accrual rate is set, the uprating factor for the annual revaluation of pension benefits while in service, the employee contribution rate, lump-sum payments, actuarial reduction, and the range of ancillary benefits.

In summary, it should be clear from the points I have made that schemes will have considerable scope to vary a number of factors at secondary legislation stage. In doing so, a key constraint will, of course, be any financial consequence. Such variances, which may be applied to firefighters, for example, as agreed at Consideration Stage, must be met in the costs of the scheme. That will mean a reduction in employee benefits and/or an increase in employee contributions. It is entirely appropriate to have some flexibility at secondary legislation stage. However, fundamental aspects of the reform must be adhered to, which is exactly the purpose of the framework-enabling legislation that we are debating today. Should that not happen, the money will need to be provided by the sector in question to make up any shortfall that HM Treasury will require.

I will certainly ensure that the principal Civil Service pension scheme in Northern Ireland, for which I have ministerial responsibility, will stay within its cost envelope. I will ensure that I will not have to explain to the electorate in Northern Ireland why I spend more on Civil Service pensions here than Great Britain does and, as a consequence, have to reduce the money that I have to spend on the provision of public services.

I urge Members to oppose amendment No 3 and the consequential amendment Nos 5, 6, 12, 16 and 17. The link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age must be adhered to in clause 10.

I move to amendment No 4, tabled by Mr Agnew, in respect of prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants. He tabled amendment No 4 to clause 10 to enable prison officers or paramedics and ambulance care attendants to avail themselves of the normal pension age specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme. Such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 60, but not less than 55. The provision to link the public service normal scheme pension age with state pension

age contained in clause 10 is, as I have already explained today and a fortnight ago, one of the core provisions of the Public Service Pensions Bill. Although I certainly value the service that is provided by our public servants across a range of diverse areas, I simply cannot agree with or endorse the points made by Mr Agnew and others who support that exceptions be made in this framework-enabling legislation for those groups of workers.

Mr Agnew, in his interventions with Mr Weir and his own comments, relied quite heavily on the physical nature of the employment. Mr Weir — now the elusive Mr Weir — made a point about physicality. We accept that there is physicality in jobs right across the public service. He mentioned Roads Service and Forest Service, and he could mention the Housing Executive. I might even want to have an exception for anybody who has the misfortune to work directly with me in the public service. With regard to physicality, the argument that Mr Weir advanced that there are other areas of the public service that are equally if not more physical than some of those that the Member put forward has been completely ignored in the Member's argument.

6.45 pm

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Agnew: I have not ignored them at all. Indeed, I acknowledged them in speaking to my amendment and to the amendments put forward by the SDLP. There should be a mechanism to look at other professions, and that is provided when you take my amendment and the SDLP's amendments together.

Mr Hamilton: The Member has ignored them in this sense: he has not brought forward a specific amendment giving the sort of flexibility that he wants for prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants. In that respect, he has ignored them, and he has ignored the arguments that Mr Weir advanced in respect of the physicality of other members of staff. I put it to the Member that his amendment has more to do with those who may have lobbied him than with any consideration of the evidence that may or may not be there. I do not want to jump ahead too much but, in many respects, amendment No 11 proposed by the SDLP is a far better amendment to deal with those problems on a range of physical jobs that might be out there and the effects that that might have on retirement age, rather than jumping to a conclusion here and now tonight. The difference with firefighters and police officers — certainly firefighters, which we addressed at Consideration Stage — was that the Bill and Hutton recognised that an argument was put forward that was evidence based. I have not heard a convincing argument that the members of staff that Mr Agnew wants to create flexibility for have an above-and-beyond physicality in their job that justifies the sort of exemptions that he is seeking.

I also listened to Mr McKay talk a lot about the representations that he had from teachers. Again, no amendment has been put forward tonight. I suspect that that is as much to do with the fact the Mr O'Dowd, the Education Minister, does not want him to advance such an amendment and tie his hands in respect of the cost that such flexibilities would incur.

The independent Public Service Pensions Commission did not recommend any exception from the general policy to link scheme pension age with state pension age for any employment apart from firefighters, police officers and members of the armed forces. I accept the point that Mr Agnew made about making any changes on an evidential basis. He will forgive me if I do not accept the evidence, such as it was, that he advanced during his contribution. Rather, I would like to have a more considered approach to it, and that is why I have sympathy for amendment No 11, and why I rely, at this point, on the work that was done by the independent Public Service Pensions Commission headed by Lord Hutton.

Members may not be aware of some changes that have already been made over the years to normal scheme pension ages, and I am now keen to enlighten them. Normal scheme pension age for newly recruited prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care workers is already set at 65, and has been for some years. The proposal to make provision in the Bill for a pension age of 60 for those employments would represent a regressive provision from the current position — a point that was advanced by Mrs Cochrane.

On 8 March 2012, the Northern Ireland Executive came to a decision about moving to a career average revalued earnings model and to adopt that approach consistently across all schemes, consistent with GB. The policy to link public service normal scheme pension ages to state pension age for prison officers, paramedics and ambulance care attendants is already established in the remainder of the UK — so that is the point about consistency with GB — in the Westminster Public Service Pensions Act 2013.

I will turn to the specific sectors mentioned. Further thought should have been put into this amendment, as there are varying inconsistencies. First, paramedics who joined the Health and Social Care scheme from 1 April 2008 onwards have a normal pension age of 65, which was introduced following a partnership review of NHS pensions by employers and trade unions. This amendment would mean that those staff would have a protected pension age of 65 up to 31 March 2015, then a normal pension age of 60 going forward if this amendment were carried.

Secondly, nurses and mental health officers who joined before 1 April 1995 have special rights to retire at 55. That will cease from April 2015 onwards. Again, if that amendment were carried, A&E nurses, for example, would have a higher normal pension age than paramedics.

Finally, the role of an ambulance care attendant involves the management and transportation of patients to and from healthcare facilities in non-emergency situations only. Therefore, they cannot in any way, shape or form be set in the same category as even paramedics and prison officers.

Northern Ireland Prison Service officials have made it clear that they do not support an earlier pension age for operational prison grade staff for the following reasons: first, prison officers are within the scope of the principal Civil Service pension scheme for Northern Ireland, and agreement was reached to introduce a new normal retirement age of 65 when the new pension scheme was introduced. That means that staff appointed to that scheme already have a higher pension age than 60. Secondly, the

Cabinet Office has moved to link normal scheme pension age for prison officers in Great Britain in the principal Civil Service pension scheme to state pension age, and parity should be maintained.

For paramedics and ambulance care workers, new entrants to the Health and Social Care pension scheme since 2008 have, as I mentioned, a normal pension age of 65. That includes paramedics and ambulance care attendants.

A tripartite review between NHS employers, NHS trade unions and the Department of Health in Great Britain has been established to address the impact of working longer in the NHS. The NHS has a diverse workforce, and the review has identified a range of groups of staff in the health and social care sector and the NHS for whom working longer is a particular issue.

I accept that there are areas of work where working longer creates physical issues. However, I want to go back to Mr Agnew's point, which he also made at Consideration Stage, about forcing people to work beyond their physical capability. If people are not able to work for a physical reason, such as a disability, it will not be the case that they will be forced to work until the new pension age, whether that is 66, 67, or 68. People will be medically retired as appropriate.

The review also identified a range of areas that could make it easier for people to remain in work for longer; for example, improving awareness of pension scheme flexibilities and developing more appropriate health and well-being policies.

The Public Service Pensions Bill provides for scope at secondary legislation to incorporate variances in scheme design in the case of each sector to suit the requirements of the workforces and to provide options for those who may not wish to or are unable to remain in service until normal scheme pension age.

Each Minister who is responsible for one of the five pension schemes that are covered by the Bill are perfectly free to create such differences as they see appropriate when they bring forward the scheme regulations. The only condition is that the cost of any variances is dealt with within the scheme's overall cost envelope.

In summary, I urge Members to oppose amendment No 4.

I will now turn to the SDLP amendments, which the Green Party also supported, on clause 10 provisions. Amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 would provide a new power to my Department to give effect to any review of the link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age. Amendment Nos 18 and 20 are consequential to those. Amendments Nos 10 and 11 would create a new requirement for my Department to conduct a review.

To understand all those amendments, it is logical to deal with amendment Nos 10 and 11 first. I want to ensure that Members fully understand what those amendments are about.

Amendment Nos 10 and 11 would require the Department of Finance and Personnel to conduct a review of the provisions of clause 10 and their effect on members of public service pension schemes.

Amendment No 10 proposes that the Department should lay a report on the review in the Assembly before the clause takes effect, and that review would exclude police and firefighters.

In his concluding remarks, Mr Attwood said that the amendment No 10 review might not conclude before the Bill becomes operative. That is exactly my concern. It may be his closet desire, but it is very much my concern. The review must be done, which he will know, given that this is his amendment. It is his amendment, so he knows that it must be done in advance of clause 10 becoming operative.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Attwood: Given the potential scale of the review and the fact that it is to be conducted in a short period of time, it seems to me that it may be able to conclude its view on only one or more than one category of worker as identified in clause 1. Therefore, I recognise that it is a short window and that it would be intense. It may not conclude at all its work, but it may conclude some of it.

Mr Hamilton: I am afraid that that is a risk that I am not prepared to take, because, if the amendment passes, my Department is required to lay the report before the Assembly in advance of clause 10 becoming operative. The Member will appreciate and, I think, accept that, given how extensive the piece of work would be, that would take some time. I cannot imagine that any Minister responsible for bringing forward regulations would start work on those regulations until the review was concluded. Therefore, if the review is not concluded until after April 2015, when the clause is to become operative, we have a serious problem.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Attwood: I think that he is misunderstanding the amendments, so let us go to the words. Amendment No 10 proposes that the Department:

> *"must conduct a review of the provisions of section 10"*

and

> *"shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly ... in advance of commencement of section 10".*

I would like to think that the review would be completed and concluded at the time when a report is laid before the Assembly, but it may not be. Therefore, the review report may be complete in one or other matter but may not be completed across the full range of the contents of the review. If that is the case, that is the case, but at least you could have a situation in which a review in part might be concluded for some categories of workers, a report could be tabled and, further to the report being tabled, some action taken by the relevant Minister in consultation with you. I think that that is a perfectly reasonable situation, given the time frames to which we are working.

Mr Hamilton: That may be the Member's view on how it works in operation. It does not sound as robust as perhaps he wants it to be, if it is simply a case of, "We'll review one category of workers and put a report forward, and sure it doesn't matter". My concern is that if we allow amendment No 10 to pass, we are required to complete a comprehensive review in advance of the clause becoming operative. If we do not get the clause operating when it is

meant to operate, which is April of next year, we will have serious financial consequences to deal with from Treasury.

May I also familiarise Mr Bradley with his amendment? When he was dealing with the issue of police widows and widowers' pensions, Mr Bradley said to Mr Allister, who is no longer in his place, that the reviews mentioned in amendment Nos 10 and 11 would deal with that sort of issue. They would not. The reviews that would be carried out as a result of amendment Nos 10 and 11, were those amendments to pass, would be to do only with the operation of clause 10, not any other issues that would be floating around.

Amendment No 11 would provide that the Department conduct its review every two years following the commencement of clause 10 and lay a report within six months of the review having started. The review would be more comprehensive, in that it will include police and firefighters, as well as other public servants listed in clause 1. The key difference between the amendments is that amendment No 10 proposes that the Department lay a report on the review in the Assembly before the clause takes effect, while amendment No 11, as I said, would provide that the Department conduct its review every two years following the commencement of section 10 and lay a report within six months of the review having started.

Although do not consider it necessary, given the scope that exists in secondary legislation, my Department would not be averse, in principle, to reviewing the link from normal scheme pension age to state pension age. In Lord Hutton's report on public service pensions reform, he recommended that the link between the state pension age and normal pension age be regularly reviewed, something which Mr Attwood pointed out earlier. Indeed, I agree: it should be reviewed. I understand that there is a review pencilled in for firefighters, for example — I remember that from Consideration Stage — after all the various legislation, including our own, is passed. I ask the Member to bear in mind that any review could recommend increasing pension age as fitness levels improve over time. In fact, the latest review of firefighters — the Williams review — concluded that, because of increasing and improving fitness standards, the pension age for new entrants should remain at 60 and not change. Let us bear in mind that any review could see the pension age go up for firefighters, or even for police officers, in future. Therefore, it is a two-way process. It is not something that will necessarily or automatically a reduction in age for everybody. In the longer term, if you take a very, very long-term view, I would expect most pension ages to go up. That is, in part, what the Bill is doing.

7.00 pm

Once again, I make it abundantly clear that, although there is scope for secondary legislation to have variances that take account of the particular needs of a workforce, they must be paid for by the pension scheme for that sector. The case has already been made for the link between normal scheme pension age and state pension age following the extensive review by Lord Hutton, who was appointed by the previous Labour Government. There is, therefore, no need to conduct such a review at this stage before the commencement of the Bill. Members also need to consider what such a review would achieve if done now. As for the practical consequences of these reforms when implemented in April 2015, a number of key facts must be considered. Many existing members will have full transitional protection and will retire at the normal scheme pension age that was specified when they joined. For the Civil Service pension scheme in Northern Ireland, for example, over one third can retire at 60. The increase to state pension age is some time off. I have already provided Members with the timeline: it will increase to 66 by 2020, 67 by 2028 and probably 68 by the mid-2030s. The normal scheme pension age changed from 60 to 65 for those joining public service pension schemes around 2006. I ask Members to consider those facts.

The obvious outworking is that few in our public service workforce will retire at 65 over the next few years. No one will work until 66 until 2020. Even in 2020, most will not have to work until 66 as they have benefited from the full 10 years of transition protection provided in the Bill. Therefore, there is no urgency to conduct a review of the actual impact on the workforce and those working in the public services in Northern Ireland. I also have a concern about the potential for such a review to be done, as I mentioned, before the commencement of clause 10. Any review will take time. I note that amendment No 11 requires a report to be laid in the Assembly on or before six months of the commencement of any such review. It is reasonable to expect such a review to take that time to complete, certainly if it is to be done comprehensively.

I remind Members that the matter we are debating today is the primary legislation to give effect to the reform of public service pension schemes in Northern Ireland. This will provide a framework of enabling legislation only. Work will then need to be completed by each sector on the secondary scheme-specific legislation and also on the logistics of changing IT systems. The House has also been advised —

Mr Attwood: I thank the Minister for giving way. I acknowledge — I do not necessarily welcome it, but I suppose that I should use the word "welcome" — that he indicated that he and others are minded to support amendment No 11. However, I cannot welcome the comments that he has just made about there being no urgency in a clause 11 review. Given that you are not minded to support an immediate review, as under clause 10, it would narrow some of the differences in the Chamber if you indicated that there might be some urgency around a review in clause 11. It would be useful if you indicated that there might be an earlier rather than a later review, which seems to be what you are hinting at. Given all the work that will be carried out in various pension schemes for the workers identified in clause 1, and given that a lot of work undertaken by your fellow Ministers, including the Minister of the Environment, might create some data and further evidence that could inform the wider review referred to in clause 11, it seems that that new source data might help you to conduct a clause 11 review, independent of and in addition to the fact that there are good reasons to undertake further interrogation of the potential categories of workers who could have flexibility further to the legislation generally. Is there not a requirement to do something earlier than you imply, which is a later clause 11 review?

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr Hamilton: I am not ill-disposed to an earlier rather than a later review. Perhaps, in drafting the amendment, the Member might have considered how early the first review should be. In inheriting it as it is, I repeat that I am not ill-disposed to doing it earlier rather than later. Certainly, if a raft of evidence comes forward, it would be necessary to do the review earlier rather than later. However, I reiterate that I do not think that the urgency is as steep as the Member thinks it is.

The amendment that, if he is right, I am prepared to accept, requires that to be done within two years. I do not think that there will be the sort of fundamental change that he thinks there will be inside two years, but all practical considerations taken into account, I am happy to do it significantly earlier than two years if required.

Mr Attwood: That is useful, because the clause was, with the assistance of the Bill Office, carefully drafted so that, technically, a review could commence as soon as clause 10 commenced. I am not sure when clause 10 will commence, but it certainly will not be any later than March of next year and, presumably, earlier. So, technically, a review could commence as soon as clause 10 was commenced. Although I would like that to happen, I welcome the fact that the Minister has now said that it could be earlier — indeed, I think that he used the phrase "significantly earlier" — than two years after the clause has commenced. That is some progress.

Mr Hamilton: I will not commit myself to a particular start date. The Member will know from ministerial experience that that is not a good idea. I accept the requirement placed upon me and my office by the clause and will adhere to that. However, I reiterate that I do not think that there is the same urgency because I do not think that it affects the volume of people that the Member thinks that it does, never mind the practical problems of doing a review as outlined in amendment No 10.

Amendment No 11 specifies that a review would take place at a later stage. I still do not think that it affects as many people as the Member thinks, but I will be bound by that amendment and we will advance said review. However, you have to consider the practical issues, timing issues and the gathering of evidence that would allow us to do that. It would be churlish to have it one year and 364 days after commencement of the clause, and that is not my intention.

When the Bill was introduced, the House was also advised of the potential cost of failing to meet the April 2015 guideline set by Her Majesty's Treasury for the main schemes. This is now estimated to be in the region of £300 million, as I said before. A review led by my Department — let me make this perfectly clear — will not mean that I, as Finance Minister, will provide any funding for changes. The thrust of the reform is to contain the costs to the taxpayer and the public purse. Any variances, therefore, must be contained within the cost envelope. Any sector that exceeds this will need to make up the shortfall to Her Majesty's Treasury. In summary, I ask Members to oppose amendment No 10 but support amendment No 11.

I will now deal with amendment Nos 7, 8, and 9. These are all variations of one amendment: the power to exempt certain persons from the link with state pension age and to specify a pension age. Each amendment would confer on the Department of Finance and Personnel a power to specify, by order, that the link for normal scheme pension age to state pension age should not apply for certain persons of such description also specified in that order. They would provide options for the Department of Finance and Personnel to specify that pension age be set at either that specified in amendment No 7, which would be such an age as specified in the order; that specified in amendment No 8, which is 60; or that specified in amendment No 9, which is not exceeding 60 but not less than 55.

Although I do not consider such a provision to be necessary, I realise that the issue of linking normal scheme pension age to state pension age is a key concern of a number of Members here today. I want to be clear that this link is necessary to control costs for the reasons that I stated earlier in the debate. At the risk of sounding like a stuck record, any variations must be contained within the costs of the scheme. If that does not happen, the sector in Northern Ireland will have to take money from the services that they provide, whether it is fire, education, health or police, to make up any shortfall that Her Majesty's Treasury will seek to recoup. Do not be under any illusion that I, as Finance Minister, will meet these costs. However, I am not opposed to ensuring fairness as the reforms roll out and am therefore content for my officials to review the issue.

We debated the issue of affirmative resolution last week. I remain of the view that negative resolution is the appropriate route and that affirmative resolution is a more elongated process that has the potential to delay any order coming into effect. That is all the more reason for Members to oppose amendment No 10 and have a review before the commencement date of the order.

I do not want to risk not achieving the date of April 2015 that has been set by Her Majesty's Treasury for implementation of the reforms. I am also reluctant to exercise retrospective implementation powers. I wish to have flexibility on this matter across the public sector pension schemes and, for that reason, I can support amendment No 7, which does not specify any ages, but I oppose amendments No 8 and 9. Thank you.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Had I not concluded? Can I allow the intervention?

Mr Speaker: Yes.

Mr Hamilton: If I can, I will. Sure, we are out for the night anyway.

Mr Attwood: You are just too keen to get out the door. I understand that you are now saying that you support amendment No 7 but not amendment Nos 8 and 9. However, you did not give any reason why you would not put an example of what a ministerial order might look in the Bill, save a general one in clause 7. Why not have options in the Bill for an order that you might want to table, as outlined in amendment Nos 8 and 9?

Mr Hamilton: He has certainly elongated proceedings. Those are options that the Member tabled in his amendments. They are mutually exclusive, so if amendment No 7 is made, amendment Nos 8 and 9 cannot be moved.

Mr Attwood: Is that the case?

Mr Hamilton: That is my understanding.

Mr Speaker: To clarify the position, the Minister is correct. If amendment No 7 is made, amendment Nos 8 and 9 will not be moved.

Mr Attwood: I have to withdraw my intervention. *[Laughter.]* I wish now that I had let you get out the door. In the very elaborate drafting of the amendments, there was probing in amendment Nos 8 and 9, but I felt that there was also some opportunity to make amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9. I will take the ruling of the Speaker and sit down quickly.

Mr Hamilton: I do not wish to elongate the Member's embarrassment, but amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 all refer to "(5A)", "(5B)" and "(5C)". Therefore, they are self-evidently mutually exclusive.

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Here is someone who may wish to elongate your embarrassment.

Mr Weir: I would be happy to elongate the Member's embarrassment. I may have this the wrong way round, but I think that the Member referred to amendment Nos 7, 8 and 9 as parent amendments, with amendment Nos 10 and 11 being the children. I suppose that it is really a question of which of your parents you are choosing. Indeed, in a slightly bizarre arrangement, they seem to be like step-parents.

Mr Hamilton: I am not getting into that.

I touched on the reason why I prefer amendment No 7. Although I do not think that amendment No 7 is necessary, in a spirit of conviviality, and recognising that there are concerns, I think that amendment No 7 gives the Department of Finance and Personnel much more flexibility to make an order on an age that will, perhaps, be prescribed as a result of the review that we have just been talking about. Amendment Nos 8 and 9 are much more prescriptive and tight. On reflection, I am sure that the Member will recognise that, in those circumstances, amendment No 7 is a better amendment for me to accept. With that, I rest my case.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. At Consideration Stage, I argued that we needed to give ourselves some flexibility to deal with these complex and difficult issues while, at the same time, supporting and accepting the case for reform. I also argued that we needed to consider how we could future-proof the legislation.

We should bear in mind that, when the legislation was first mooted, the option that was argued for was a legislative consent motion, and for us simply to go for parity. However, we have added value to the original proposal. This is not the first time that has happened in the Assembly. For instance, the Welfare Reform Bill has been affected by involving the Assembly and allowing Members from the various parties to scrutinise the legislation and involve themselves in researching the options. I think that the general intention behind that was not only to forge a good working relationship between the Executive and the Assembly, but to add value and reflect the particular circumstances and character of the social and economic reality in this region, which is not necessarily contemporaneous with all that applies in Britain.

7.15 pm

There was an attempt by one Member on the opposite Benches — a former Finance Minister — to create a diversion around costing out the arguments for each of the flexibilities that might be considered. We had an amendment to clause 10 accepted at Consideration Stage. In a sense, I regret having had to argue that case, because we were into the whole idea of a self-denying ordinance — that we could not have flexibility or depart, otherwise there would be a cost and an impact on the block grant. Well, there may be circumstances when we consider all that and decide that this is what we are going to do. This idea of putting a price on everything and perhaps not discussing the value of it is really only damaging our own case.

Think about the air passenger duty argument. I saw Members getting excited here about the overall cost if we simply wiped out air passenger duty unilaterally in this region, yet I did not hear one single Member arguing for that. However, there were arguments about taking a look at the possibility of developing individual routes and costing out that type of intervention if it would help us to achieve the objective of growing the economy. In other words, giving ourselves the tools to do the job and the flexibility to approach these issues.

What is reflected in the Bill as a result of the work done already is the fact that the unique circumstances applying to firefighters are recognised. That was not in the first draft, and in a sense I am sorry that it was necessary to demonstrate that there were special circumstances. It would have been better to have given ourselves the flexibility and then to examine the individual circumstances in the light of experience, as it would appear that they are doing at Westminster in any event.

Special circumstances do arise, and in the amendment from Mr Allister that was passed earlier, another special circumstance was identified and the opportunity taken for the Assembly, operating in local circumstances, to take a decision. That is what informs our approach today. The amendments that we offered — Nos 3, 5 , 6 and 12 — give expression to the support that the Assembly gave to our amendment to clause 10. With that done, we are simply in a good-grace way examining how we can add sinew and muscle to that.

It is a matter for individual Ministers and the Minister of Finance to negotiate this out. It is a matter of ensuring, to the best of our ability, that what we do passes the test of affordability as well as the possible impacts on the wider block grant. We may decide or we may not decide to use the power. Having the power and the flexibility does not cost anything. It is when applying that flexibility and power that we have to deal with the holistic argument.

I do not intend to drag this out. All the arguments have been rehearsed. Daithí McKay made our case for the amendments. The amendments add value and reflect the flexibility that we voted for at Consideration Stage, and I hope that Members will find it possible to support those amendments.

Question put, That amendment No 3 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKay and Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 4 proposed: In page 6, line 22, at end insert

"(b) prison officers; or

(c) paramedics and ambulance care attendants".— [Mr Agnew.]

Question put, That amendment No 4 be made.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised by the party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), there is agreement that we can dispense with the three minutes and move straight to a Division.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 41; Noes 47.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Agnew and Mr McKinney.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 5 proposed: In clause 10, page 6, leave out lines 27 and 28 and insert

"specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65".— [Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel).]

Question put, That amendment No 5 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKay and Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 6 not moved.

Amendment No 7 proposed: In clause 10, page 6, line 36, at end insert

"(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—

(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and

(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons is such age as the order may provide.

(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or

representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.

(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure.".— [Mr Attwood.]

Question, That amendment No 7 be made, put and agreed to.

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment Nos 8 and 9 as they are mutually exclusive to amendment No 7, which was made.

Amendment No 10 proposed: In clause 10, page 6, line 36, at end insert

"(5D) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review of the provisions of section 10 as to how such provisions may affect the persons set out in section 1(2)(a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) of this Act, shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly and shall do so in advance of commencement of section 10 (apart from this subsection) further to the relevant commencement provisions at section 36 of the Act.".— [Mr Attwood.]

Question put, That amendment No 10 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 48.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKinney and Mr Rogers.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 11 made: In page 6, line 36, at end insert

"(5E) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review at intervals of not less than every two years following commencement of section 10 of the Act as to how the provisions of the Act affect the persons set out in section 1(2) of the Act and shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly on or before six months following the commencement of the review.".— [Mr Attwood.]

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 12 as neither amendment No 3 nor amendment No 5 was made.

Clause 18 (Restriction of existing pension schemes)

Amendment No 13 made: In page 11, leave out lines 32 to 34 and insert "31 March 2015".— *[Mr Attwood.]*

Clause 28 (Existing local government scheme)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 14 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment No 13.

Amendment No 14 made: In page 16, line 19, leave out "2014" and insert "2015".— *[Mr Attwood.]*

New Clause

Amendment No 15 made: After clause 29 insert

"Police pensions

***29A**.—(1) Regulations C9 and C9A of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Pension Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 (S.R. 1988 No. 374), as substituted by Schedule 1 to the Police Service of Northern Ireland Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, (S.R. 2006 No. 152) (widow's, etc. pension or gratuity to terminate on re-marriage or other event) shall cease to have effect as from the reinstatement date.*

(2) Where any person's entitlement to receive payment on account of a pension or a gratuity under the Regulations of 1988 was terminated by virtue of regulation C9 or C9A, the pension or gratuity shall be reinstated and become payable as from the reinstatement date.

(3) Nothing in this section authorises or requires any payment on account of a pension in respect of any period before the reinstatement date.

(4) For the purposes of this section the reinstatement date is 1 July 2014.".— [Mr Allister.]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Amendment No 16 not moved.

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 17 as it is consequential to amendment No 12, which was not made.

Clause 36 (Commencement)

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 18 as it was consequential to amendment No 10, which was not made.

Amendment No 19 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment No 15.

Amendment No 19 made: In page 21, line 13, at end insert

"( ) section 29A;".— [Mr Allister.]

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 20 as it is consequential to amendment No 10, which was not made.

That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

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

Private Members' Business

Hospital Wards: Nursing Staff Levels

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

Mr Spratt: I beg to move

> *That this Assembly recognises the important role that nurses play across the health service; notes with concern the pressures faced by hospitals and the importance of the health and social care trusts in providing sufficient numbers of nurses on key wards such as critical care; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that appropriate staffing levels are in place.*

I am pleased to move the motion in the House this evening, and I thank the Minister for attending.

I begin by highly commending the very difficult and sterling work carried out by our nurses in the health service. I know only too well of the pressures faced by nurses in our hospitals, particularly in critical care and acute wards, because, on three occasions in the past 22 months, I have had major surgery. Indeed, it is on the back of that care that I bring the motion to the House tonight. On three occasions, I saw the pressure faced at the coalface and made a commitment to a number of our very caring nursing staff, who, on many occasions, were under very extreme pressure in carrying out their caring and record-keeping duties, given how sick many of the patients were.

On at least two of those occasions, after coming back to the ward after days of high-dependency care, I was extremely sick for a number of days. Certainly, no one could question the care, dedication and desire of the nurses in the Belfast City Hospital and, indeed, the Mater Hospital to help patients who are sick. They want to spend time with patients who are extremely sick, but, regrettably, they are unable to do so.

It is highly regrettable that other parties sought to take the focus of the debate away from the provision of a sufficient number of nurses on critical care wards and tried instead to turn it into a debate on the reform of the health service. That certainly was not and is not my intention. I am pleased that the amendments put down initially were not accepted.

I welcome the Minister's comments in his reply to a question for oral answer last month. He stated that the health service has appointed around 500 more nurses. I also welcome his assurances in response to a question for written answer:

> *"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." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 66, pWA123].*

Nursing staff levels are one of the most important issues in the health service. It is vital that nurses are not put in the impossible position of being responsible for the care of more patients than they can reasonably be expected to manage. Not only does that demoralise nurses but it can put patients' lives at risk. Although it is extremely important to get the nurse:patient ratio correct, it is important to ensure that the skill mix — the ratio of registered nurses to nursing support workers — is right, too. Indeed, given that the City Hospital, for instance, is a training hospital, the nursing staff on training from Queen's University etc can carry out a variety of duties, such as changing dressings and monitoring patients' vital signs.

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) recommends a skill mix of a minimum of 65% registered nurses on acute wards.

In May last year, the Safe Staffing Alliance of nurse leaders stated that there should be no more than eight patients per registered nurse during the day on general acute wards and emphasised that eight patients should be the absolute limit, and certainly not a target.

Last year, the RCN carried out a survey of nursing staff. Some 90% said that staffing levels were not always adequate to provide safe patient care. The RCN outlined three major benefits of having higher levels of nursing staff: improved patient outcomes; improved recruitment and retention of nursing staff; and economic benefits for employers and communities.

We all saw the scandal at the Mid Staffordshire National Health Service Foundation Trust. That illustrated an extreme case of what can happen when standards of care fall due to a lack of nursing provision. I do not want to repeat many of the things that happened in that hospital except to say that some of the circumstances were extremely tragic. The 2009 inquiry found that hundreds more people died at Staffordshire hospital between 2005 and 2008 than would normally be expected. That is definitely not something we ever wish to see in any of our hospitals. I am pleased to say that it is not the type of care that exists at any of our hospitals in Northern Ireland.

Inadequate staffing levels are often identified by coroners' reports and inquiries as a key factor. The National Patient Safety Agency recorded more than 30,000 patient safety incidents related to staffing problems in one year. That is a shocking statistic, to say the least. Inadequate staffing levels also impact on the staff themselves. Very often, it can cause stress and other health problems. That, in turn, leads to nurses having to take sick leave, which inevitably means a requirement for more bank and agency staff, and, in the longer term, more nurses are likely to leave the profession.

According to the Royal College of Nursing, on average, wards that have a ratio of no more than six patients per registered nurse on duty rarely or never report that care is compromised due to short-staffing. On the other hand, wards with eight or more patients per registered nurse report that the patient care can be compromised from once or twice a week to every shift. That is extremely worrying and brings the issue into sharper focus for us all.

There is an onus on management to ensure that budgeted posts are filled and that staff are deployed appropriately to ensure that there are safe staffing levels. That can be achieved only through an evidence-based system that takes into account a number of factors such as patient mix,

service demand, current staffing, absences, vacancies, turnover of staff, and evidence of the effectiveness of staffing through the likes of quality patient outcomes and nurse-sensitive indicators.

There is no doubt that having the right number of nurses is critical. However, the ultimate question is this: how many is enough? Not only that, but how many nurses do we need to provide optimum care for patients? My constituency office regularly receives telephone calls and emails from people who believe that the number one health priority is the protection of front line staff, particularly nurses. Health issues affect us all, and, sadly, all of us will require care from the health service at some time during our lives.

8.15 pm

In closing, I will return to my earlier comments about my experience of critical care wards. I reiterate the point that, frequently, nurses were unable to provide the level of care that they, as nurses and health professionals, felt was necessary and appropriate because they had so many patients to look after. Once again, I pay tribute to the staff who cared for me in Belfast City Hospital and, on two occasions, the Belfast Mater Hospital. Our nursing staff, front line staff and critical acute care nurses are professionals who are really dedicated to their jobs. For those of us who have had critical care, they have been and are an extremely great asset for this Province.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat. I welcome and support the motion. It is important that the Assembly sends out a very clear message to the nursing community and wider health providers that the recent criticisms of our service are certainly not directed at the very valuable work they do daily, often in very difficult and trying circumstances. Their work is vital to the health of all our communities.

Equally, it is important that the Assembly sends the message that we want to fix the pressures that they experience. Tonight, as we speak in this debate, we are aware of backup in the A&E department in the Royal. Over an hour ago, 36 people were on trolleys, and staff were trying to remedy the situation. That gives a very clear and stark example of how medical professionals and nursing staff are stretched and under pressure daily.

The Minister announced on 8 July 2013 that he would develop a new workforce plan for nurses and midwives, and that he would lead a review of nursing staff deployed through bands and agencies. Today will tell a tale of what progress has been made on those fronts. The qualified nursing and midwife workforce grew from 13,023 in 2004 to 14,139 in March 2013, which is an increase of 8·6%. Equally and interestingly, the percentage of qualified nurses working full time remained relatively static over that time period, at around 55% or 56%. As at 31 March 2013, there were 390 current qualified nursing vacancies and 155 current nurse support vacancies. It is also worth noting that there are quite stark differences in the numbers of nurses for people with learning disabilities when we look at them per trust, with some 196 in the Belfast Trust, 72 in the Western Trust, 33 in the South Eastern Trust and 26 in the Northern Trust.

On 3 July, as has been commented on, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) produced proposals for hospitals at night and weekends. It said that standards should be agreed for the frequency and timing of drills and major incident plans. It made 29 recommendations. It found that there were differences among hospitals in the availability of services, in staff policies and procedures, in communication arrangements, and in access to information for patients.

Trusts also reported vacancies of doctors. In general medicine, at the time of the review, the Belfast Trust was the only trust to have gaps in the F1 medical role at the Royal, the City and the Mater hospitals. RQIA found that the hospitals were experiencing vacancies in medical staffing at different levels and in different specialities, and that they were, and are, being filled by employing internal and external locums or staff. We know that, this year alone, in the Western Trust the appointment of locums and the replacement of junior doctors has cost a total of £5 million.

Seventy per cent of patient responses to a patient and client survey stated that they did not get enough sleep at night, mainly due to noise. In response to my colleague Sue Ramsey, the Minister stated that, to support doctors and consultants, nursing staff would be allowed to discharge patients. Is this working? Where is it working? What impact is it having?

Reference has been made to the calls from the Royal College of Nursing. I will conclude with a quote from Janice Smyth from the Royal College of Nursing who said in 2012 that:

> *"Struggling with unmanageable caseloads and staff shortages — nurses are either not being heard or are being ignored, as they are left to apologise for a system that is 'not working'."*

That simply needs to change.

Mr McKinney: I echo the appreciation that was expressed in the House today for nurses. I think that that is important. They are an invaluable component of our healthcare system, and their role as primary caregivers cannot be underestimated. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Our nurses do not need just praise, they need answers. Given that their work is so closely linked to the population's wider health, we need those answers too, especially when we hear their representative organisation, the RCN, say that the pressures on the system are unbearable. In its judgement, they render the service as on the brink of being unsustainable. That is not a political debate on the reform of the health service; it is a debate about the health service and what it sees and what we see as a crisis at the heart of it. That is the RCN's view, and that, in our view, reflects a real crisis.

Let us look at what the DHSSPS understands the feelings of nurses and others to be. In its staff survey of last year, in answer to a question that asked whether there are enough staff at the organisation for them to do their job properly, only 27% of nurses were able to reply positively. This is a £4 billion a year business and that level of dissatisfaction among staff is entirely intolerable.

The system is not there to address nurses' concerns solely; it is there to promote good patient outcomes. We know from the National Patient Safety Agency that, where there are pressures on staff and staff numbers, there are

poor outcomes for patients. We must listen to nurses when they tell us of the challenges that they face as a result of understaffing. The first of these is the prevalence of stress and work-related mental anxiety.

A survey of 2,000 nurses from across all sectors of health provision here that was released in September demonstrated that the level of palpable strain on our nurses was alarmingly high. The survey found that 55% of them had been made unwell by stress. It was not that they had experienced stress at the coalface, but they had been made unwell by the levels of stress that they have endured. Eighty-two per cent of them indicated that they had gone into work, despite feeling too ill to do so. So, the combination of those stress levels and an obligation to attend due to staff being overstretched is certainly not a fitting environment for any caregiver. In fact, nurses are telling us that this environment compromises the level of care that they can give.

Nurses are coming off a 12-hour shift so stressed and disorientated that they begin to question their own professional performance, further compounding any mental anxiety that they may suffer and worrying because of something that they may have done or not done. That could risk their registration, and that is a real worry for them.

During the crisis at the Royal Victoria Hospital, onlookers described nurses who were so stressed that they were crying. They had reached breaking point. In our view, that was not a one-off. We have heard the burgeoning statistics in answers last week and the week before about how this crisis had been building up in October, November and December.

What strategic measures have been taken to provide extra care? It is clear that decision-making is once again a concern. Why is it that there is a differential in the number of acute nurses employed across different trusts? How is it that the one with the most demand, the Belfast Trust, has seen the greatest decrease in the number of acute nurses? These are questions that we and nurses need answers to. It is our patient outcome that is at risk.

Our nurses are overworked and have worryingly high levels of stress. They often come into work when they feel unable to do so and feel that their ability to work is being compromised as a result. As I said, we also have fewer acute nurses in Belfast than we did in the past.

It is our view that nurses are suffering because of the inconsistent decision-making of the trusts and the Health and Social Care Board. Nurses have articulated their concerns, and the response has been to allow the number of acute nurses to decline. The pressures continue — in our view, to crisis levels — as do the high levels of stress-related absence, and I hope that the discontent expressed by our nurses is not being ignored. However, I am worried that they are being ignored, and that is being compounded by the bank system, which we hear is not being used as a flexibility tool in the system but as the mainstream recruiting mechanism. I also heard recently how nurses who are called in are doing extra administrative tasks.

We need to know that the Department and the Minister understand that there is a crisis at the centre of the system. If you ignore the problem, it will not be resolved.

Mr Beggs: I also begin by showing my appreciation of the nursing care that I and members of my family have received in recent months and years. Without it, we would certainly have been open to a great deal of suffering. I visited a minor injuries unit and saw not a consultant or a doctor but a nurse who had been upgraded and was capable of carrying out the overall assessment. I had a very positive engagement on that occasion and was very pleased with the treatment that I received. We have to value all our nurses, particularly those who care for the most vulnerable and those who have taken on extra responsibilities and are specialist nurses of one type of another.

The Francis report on the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust public inquiry created a watershed in caring in our hospitals. Why do I say that? For too long, hospital trust managers managed their hospitals by statistics and numbers, and little regard was given to care and how staff felt about the circumstances in which they had to work. As a result of remote governance, patients were not being cared for properly and staff were put in intolerable conditions. Mortality rates also increased, and that is a very important factor that we must not overlook. It is important that we listen to our nurses, the caring profession and other medical staff.

The Secretary of State for Health in England recently indicated that he would require staffing levels in hospitals to be published at ward level. That is a good thing; it is transparency. Let everybody know how our wards are being manned and whether staff are not being replaced because the budget is tight. Let us have transparency about what is happening.

I also noticed that there is talk in England of assessment tools being used to determine staffing levels and that Scotland and Wales have indicated that they are adopting such tools. I have not heard that discussion in Northern Ireland, so it would be helpful if the Minister could make us aware of whether such tools will be used as guidance here.

The Patient and Client Council survey of November 2010, 'The People's Priorities', highlighted that the number one health priority was protecting front line services, particularly nurses. In 2011, a report highlighted the importance of health and social care staffing levels and advocated a greater focus on strengthening the numbers of nurses and medical staff. We must not ignore the public, who can see the level of care provided and the conditions that our health staff have to work under on occasion.

I understand that, between March 2011 and March 2013, there has been an overall increase in the number of nurses in Northern Ireland, and that has to be welcomed. However, let us not forget that there has also been a growing workload during that period — in the order of around 3%, I think. However, as others indicated, there are peculiarities. Although the Belfast Trust had a 4% drop, the other trusts had a slight increase.

8.30 pm

I understand that there has also been a significant decline in community-based nursing such as school nurses, district nurses and health visitors. We need to make sure that we do not create problems and reach a situation where more and more are pushed towards accident and emergency units and the pressures there. As others indicated, when staff levels go down, there tends to be less time to care, and more difficulties arise in hospitals.

I understand that £12 million may be required to get our nursing levels up to the required standards as indicated. I hope that the Minister will confirm that we will be using an assessment tool in Northern Ireland to get staffing levels right. Will he also assure us that he will use the Royal College of Nursing's warning indicators, such as absence levels, staff turnover, the ratio of nurses to patients, the proportion of registered nurses and nursing staff in post —

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

Mr Beggs: — as opposed to those simply indicated as having to be employed?

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the motion and thank Mr Spratt and Paula Bradley for getting it to the Floor of the Assembly. We all well know the pressures that staff throughout the health service consistently fall under. These pressures can be acute from time to time, particularly during the winter months, and we have seen them over recent weeks.

We should always do whatever we can to ease these pressures, and that includes supporting front line staff by whatever measures are at our disposal. You cannot get much more front line than our nurses, and we commend them all for their dedication and devotion to duty over the years. At a time when there is once again a lot of scaremongering around immigration, it is worth emphasising the vital contribution that is made to our health service by nurses from overseas. All are extremely welcome to Northern Ireland, and we appreciate their work at all times.

Nurses serve in a diversity of roles, including many outside a hospital setting. The question is whether we have the appropriate level of staff to do the job. The range and breadth of service is only likely to be extended under the implementation of Transforming Your Care (TYC), and we must respond accordingly.

Returning to hospital provision, there are real concerns at the level of staffing and the deployment of resources. Nursing levels are directly related to perceptions and realities around patient safety and the level and quality of service that can be provided to patients. There is concern at the lack of transparency about numbers on wards at particular times. In responding to that, it is not sufficient merely to make the general point that there are adequate measures to deal with staffing levels; we are talking here about specific moments of pressure or crisis in our health provision.

We also need to have an open debate on whether we need minimum staff:patient ratios for certain critical wards or, indeed, all wards. Looking to the future and the need for proper workforce planning, it is important that we consider how we can best invest in nursing and other front line staff, but this is a much bigger and wider debate than simply investing in additional numbers, although that may in itself play a role.

First, we need to see what we can do to ease pressures on the hospitals. At one level, that means greater focus on better public health prevention and early intervention and patients being directed to the right service in the first place. It also means properly investing in community alternatives to what have been traditionally viewed as hospital-delivered services. That is the broad thrust of Transforming Your Care, but there is increased scepticism about whether community-based alternatives will be properly resourced and are not just a means of quietly running down services. That must not be allowed to happen.

Secondly, we should further explore the options for nurses to deliver more services and to become decision-makers in a greater number of scenarios. At first glance, this could be regarded as passing even more duties onto already overstretched professionals. We need appropriate incentives and rewards to come into the equation. If this could be viewed as a means of addressing pressures elsewhere in the system alongside efforts to better invest in nurses, it could help transform the situation.

Our health service is of paramount importance. We are all very proud of that health service. It is the Assembly's duty to ensure that all activities in that service are adequately funded. We salute all who help to provide such a good health service to all the people in Northern Ireland. I support the motion.

Mr Wells: I join all the other MLAs in paying tribute to the work of the excellent team of nurses that we have throughout Northern Ireland. I was wondering before the debate why it is that we seem to produce such top-level staff. I will suggest a couple of reasons. Many of the nurses who work in our hospitals are local. They are mostly women — of course, there is a sprinkling of men as well — who are from the community and often know the patients whom they are treating. That has to be an important factor that separates us from other parts of the United Kingdom.

I also pay tribute to the talented team of nurses that we have attracted from countries such as the Philippines and India. A few years ago, I visited the Ulster Hospital and was in the personnel department. I noticed that the lady who ran that department very efficiently had on the wall a map of the Philippines and not a map of Northern Ireland. I asked why and she said, "Frankly, I do more recruiting from Manila than from Northern Ireland". She also made the point that, if it had not been for the presence of Filipino nurses in the Ulster Hospital, the hospital would have closed the previous Christmas. It was dependent on the flexibility, hard work and skills of those who had come from afar. We have to be grateful for them.

I have been involved in health for five years now. I remember very clearly the comments of the previous Minister, Mr McGimpsey, who used to sit over on that chair. It always reminded me of the film 'Up Pompeii' in which a soothsayer comes in and says:

"Woe, woe and thrice woe."

The message was that we are doomed. Mr McGimpsey was saying that, under the comprehensive spending review (CSR) announced by the then Finance Minister, Mr Wilson, there would be 4,000 compulsory redundancies among health service staff in Northern Ireland. I am glad to say that the facts do not bear out that prediction of doom. Indeed, the stats for nursing are extremely encouraging. Since the Minister took control, over 500 new nurses have been appointed in Northern Ireland. In the last calendar year alone, 316 extra nurses have been appointed. That is against the backdrop of what anyone would believe to be a very challenging fiscal situation.

It is an indication of the skill with which the Department has used its budget that it has been able to stretch finite resources further and further. You have to remember that, in this CSR period, the Minister had only 1·9% of real-terms growth in his budget, while demand increased by between 5% and 6%. The money had to stretch an awful lot further, but more staffing has been delivered in many aspects of health service provision. I have yet to hear an apology or retraction from Mr McGimpsey, who, I am delighted to say, got it completely wrong.

I will make a couple of other comments about what has been said. I worry when people refer to bank nursing and locums as almost second best provision. Remember that the vast majority of bank nurses in Northern Ireland are nurses who have trained and have many years' experience in the nursing profession, often in the hospital where they work on a part-time, agency basis. In fact, many of them still work in that hospital, maybe on a part-time basis and then —

Mr McKinney: Thank you, Mr Wells. Does the Member accept the RCN's concerns about the additional stresses that are being put on nurses by employment through the bank system and that, while it might give flexibility to the health service, it imposes extra pressures on nursing staff?

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

Mr Wells: I accept entirely that, because of the growth in demand, there will always be limited resources and life will be difficult for nurses. We, as an Assembly, have to have great sympathy for the pressures that they are put under. However, if it were not for the presence and availability of bank nurses and locums, the system would grind to a halt. We have to have flexibility, when there is pregnancy, illness or holidays, to bring in staff, many of whom are aware of the nature of the hospital and, indeed, have worked or maybe still work there. Do not regard locums as second best; regard them as giving the flexibility that is necessary in any system that employs 70,000 people. We are dealing with locals who have a knowledge of their community, unlike other parts of the United Kingdom, where people are perhaps being brought in completely fresh to a hospital.

We sympathise with nurses, but, frankly, society is responsible for putting a lot of pressure on them. I have sat in A&E departments at weekends in hospitals in Northern Ireland, and what I saw and what our staff had to endure was absolutely appalling. I have told this story before, and I will tell it again. I was sitting in Craigavon Area Hospital one Saturday night/Sunday morning at 3.00 am. The A&E was packed to the rafters, and the only two sober people in that room were me and the triage nurse, and both of us were nearly driven to drink by what we saw. It was bedlam. There were people who were intoxicated by drugs and drink, and policemen were sitting on people to restrain them. Is it any wonder, if society treats its medical staff like that, that nurses feel under pressure? That is a disgrace. Some 40% of people in Northern Ireland who are admitted to hospital are there because of lifestyle choices that they, not the nurses, have made, and, until we start to treat those staff with respect, we will continue to be in difficulties.

Finally, we are absolutely nowhere near the Mid Staffordshire situation in Northern Ireland. Please do not compare us with that disastrous scenario in England.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I will avoid the A&E that Mr Wells goes to. I, too, commend the motion and pay tribute to all our medical staff, particularly nurses, who are often overworked and underpaid for the tremendous work that they do. I agree with Mr Spratt that the protection of front line staff is essential.

In the summer of 2013, the Minister asked officials, with the Chief Nursing Officer providing expert opinion, to develop a new workforce plan for nurses and midwives to ensure that those key professionals were best placed to support the delivery of safe and effective care as change takes place into the future. People live longer but not necessarily more healthily, and we need to have the right number of nurses in the right place. It is important that the role of specialist nurses, particularly those working in the community, is maximised. That fits in with the aspirations of TYC. The Minister also announced additional in-year support of £300,000 for post-registration education, and it is important that nurses are given the opportunity to upskill.

RQIA published an independent review of hospitals at nights and weekends. In that review, RQIA found that there were differences between acute hospitals in the availability of services and staffing at nights and weekends. RQIA commended innovative practice in a number of areas, including an emergency nursing team to cover potential gaps in service at night and weekends. It is at weekends that hospitals are extremely busy, particularly A&Es. RQIA also found that there were differences between hospitals in the availability of services, staffing policies and procedures, communication arrangements and access to information for patients. Obviously, there is a need for uniformity to ensure continuing standards of services.

In 2010, Imperial College London reported that there was a higher mortality rate for patients admitted as an emergency at weekends to hospitals in England. There was, on average, a 7% higher mortality rate for those patients than for those admitted between Monday and Friday. That is a worrying statistic. Obviously, people cannot choose when they become ill and require emergency admission to hospital. There has been research examining the relationships between nurse staffing levels and patient outcomes. One study of a large hospital concluded that, when staffing levels of registered nurses fell below target levels, it was associated with increased mortality of patients.

I will now be a wee bit parochial and mention Daisy Hill Hospital. RQIA observers attended a weekend handover at that hospital. The weekend handover was developed as part of a local initiative to plan for the care of medical patients. The handover includes medical staff from across the hospital and is led by a consultant physician. The handover was well attended by consultants and junior doctors. It was very well structured and followed a clear format. It enabled information to be shared on medical patients across the hospital where intervention was required or anticipated at the weekend.

This type of handover is very much an example of good practice and should be followed by other hospitals.

8.45 pm

All trusts have a nurse bank arrangement to enable nurses to be contacted and invited to cover shifts when required. However, bank offices only operate Monday to Friday, usually between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm or 6.00 pm, so if extra staff are required at weekends, there is a problem, and it is often at weekends that hospitals are busiest. The use of bank staff is restricted to situations where a need for cover is known during the weekday period. Also, the training and expertise of bank staff may well restrict the areas that they cover, and the requirement for agency staff at short notice means that they may not have sufficient training or experience to cover a specific hospital or a particular service area.

The RQIA recommended that trusts should explore the costs and benefits of opening nursing bank offices for a period at weekends. The potential for establishing a regional nurse bank for weekends should also be explored. Trusts should consider the establishment of an emergency nursing team that would be available at nights and weekends to facilitate the response to short-term requirements for additional cover.

In June 2012, in an answer to a written question from my colleague, Oliver McMullan, the Health Minister said:

> *"There are no legally imposed staffing levels". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 76, pWA104].*

Perhaps that is something that the Minister could look at. It could be explored and addressed to ensure that nursing staffing levels are maintained in these wards.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on what is a very important matter right across Northern Ireland. I commend my colleagues who brought the motion forward. I will begin by commending the work of nurses across our health service, who play a very important role in ensuring that patient care is of the highest possible level and who work professionally in difficult circumstances, often in a pressurised environment.

I know that the Minister continues to take an active interest in this matter, and I commend him on his work to date in what are very challenging conditions. At present, health and social care costs £4·7 billion a year. That shows that it is not all about money, but about the need for more effective and efficient use of resources. Our staff are the most valuable resource that we have. Staff must feel valued and recognised for the skilled care that they provide. There is clear evidence to show that nurse staffing levels make a difference to patient outcomes, patient experience, quality of care and efficiency and effectiveness of care delivery. This, therefore, highlights the importance of having the right staff levels and structure in place right across our health service.

This is an issue that we as MLAs hear about on a regular basis as we work in our constituency offices. We have also gained the evidence through sessions in the Health Committee. We raised the issue during our recent sessions with John Compton on the Transforming Your Care plan, and we have been assured that these matters will be addressed during the implementation of and changes brought about by TYC.

I am aware of a hospital ward in the Belfast Trust area with a maximum of 18 patients, many of whom have complex needs. This ward operates with reduced staff levels at night, with only four staff, comprising two nurses and two auxiliary staff. Staff tell of having very little time for breaks and of working under stress with a ratio of one nurse to nine patients. In this case, there are not enough staff, as a lot of the work requires one-to-one care with drugs and other support required.

The role of nursing has changed over the years and a one-size-fits-all approach does not always work, particularly in relation to nurse:patient ratios. The demand on nurses is greater than ever, with a larger number of older patients in our wards as people are living longer, many of whom are very sick and require care in a hospital environment. These types of patients are often discharged into a care in the community environment, where medical treatment is limited, and, in many cases, they are soon readmitted to hospital care.

The workload on nurses has also increased, with more use of IV antibiotics. This type of work used to be carried out by doctors and is now being done by nurses, putting additional strain on already overstretched resources. Another factor that is putting stress and increased workload on nurses is the decision to take junior doctors off some wards during the day. Work that would normally have been carried out during the day, such as medical treatments and tests, is now being left to be carried out by others in the hospital at night team.

There have been some positive developments, such as the introduction of hospital at night teams in Northern Ireland. Those provide some support to nurses and doctors on request with very ill patients. We need to ensure that the appropriate staffing levels are in place to ensure that our healthcare service is fit for purpose and that patient outcomes are to the fore. Unfortunately, morale in the nursing workforce across Northern Ireland is low, and many feel that understaffing affects their ability to do their job. They feel that they do not have enough time to deliver quality care to their patients. In closing, I urge the Minister to ensure that we have a modern health service that is able to meet the demands of our population and to ensure that the appropriate staffing levels are in place across the various trusts in Northern Ireland.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to Mr Spratt and Ms Bradley for bringing this very important motion to the House. Effective staffing will play a central role if the health service is to have the ability to care for our population. Like me, the proposer of the motion has plenty of experience of the dedication and hard work of our nursing staff. They go well beyond their contractual duties to make a patient's stay in hospital as comfortable as possible. However, there is a mounting anxiety among our nursing staff. Some are feeling swamped even before they start their shifts. They are increasingly worried about the challenge that they face to provide adequate care for an increasing number of patients. Nurses are working longer and are taking fewer breaks to maintain the required level of care. Morale is low and there is little job satisfaction.

The media are very quick to expose any medical or nursing shortfall, but the focus is always on the nursing staff. It is always an individual nurse who is called to account. It is the nurse who gets disciplined or reported to management, not the person who wrote the off-duty list, not the person who took one nurse off the ward to work on an even worse-staffed ward and certainly not the employer. When

we have the Royal College of Nursing saying that not enough hospitals are adequately staffed and they have the wrong mix of skills, we have a problem. Management needs to walk in the nurses' shoes. Unfortunately, like other public services, these savings delivery plans are having a negative effect on the delivery of services. As I know only too well, when we talk about health, we are talking about life and death.

I will now give the ward perspective. The proposer talked about the skill mix. When I talked to a senior nurse, she said that, when there is only one senior nurse on a shift, in addition to caring for his or her patients and having responsibility for the management of the ward, the senior has to oversee the work of the junior nurses. She said, "As you can imagine, the responsibility and pressure for the senior nurse is immense". They feel that there is a lack of support from management and the head of service. When wards need to be closed down due to a high number of patients and shortage of staff, they feel that they do not receive the necessary support. These are serious concerns for the nursing staff, who know that patients can be at risk. Managers are interested in meeting targets for emptying beds. For example, in maternity wards, nurses are instructed to provide mothers with discharge information as soon as they return from the delivery suite. Mothers who are still under the influence of drugs after labour and exhausted after childbirth should not have to endure that. Beds have been reduced, which means that nurses are constantly under pressure to ask patients to go home early. As a result, babies are readmitted with jaundice and poor feeding, and mothers are readmitted with infections.

I will now turn to the sickness policy. If a nurse is sick on three occasions exceeding seven days within one year, that is deemed an unacceptable level of absence. Nurses are held accountable, even when they are unwell. They are conscious that, when unwell, they are a source of infection to patients who are in their care. The sickness policy as implemented puts nurses under severe stress. In a recent survey, 82% of nurses said that they went to work even when they felt unwell. Management are experts at carrying out audits, but the audits are very selective. Where are the audits of the non-existent nursing breaks or of the hours worked above contractual hours? Where are the audits of the non-nursing duties that nurses are expected to carry out? Where are the audits of wards operating with skeleton staff? Where are the audits of the health and well-being of our nursing staff?

I will finish with the words of a quiet, unrepresented nurse:

> *"We used to have a sense of support on the ward from management. That has been replaced by fear and a sense of being alone."*

I, like Mr Spratt, commend the doctors and nurses that my family and I have had occasion to use in the hospitals of Daisy Hill, Craigavon and Belfast. Minister, you must ensure that these concerns are addressed. We have a superb nursing force. Let us begin treating them as professionals.

Mrs Cameron: I support the motion and thank my colleagues Jimmy Spratt and Paula Bradley for bringing the issue to the House this evening. I also thank Jimmy for sharing, yet again, his personal experience with us.

I wish to add my support and thanks to the nurses who work in the health service, and I recognise the dedication, commitment and care that they offer to all those who depend on them when they are at their most vulnerable. There is no doubt that nurses, like others in the health service, are faced with increased pressures due to the demands placed on them by an ageing population and the fact that more people are in need of inpatient care. To that end, I believe that we owe our nurses not just our words of gratitude but our commitment and dedication in ensuring that the decisions that we make as public representatives and as Health Committee members will benefit them as front line workers and will not make life more difficult for them.

I know that there is a temptation to generalise about hospitals. There is talk of Third World scenes in some cases and of world-class treatment in others. Of course, that is true. We have all witnessed the varying degrees of service for ourselves. However, I would prefer that we stop generalising and instead focus our energy on fixing the bits of our health service that, for one reason or another, are not delivering the levels of service that the public are entitled to.

Nurses are an essential part of that solution, and, perhaps, therein lies the recognition that we need to ensure that good nurses are rewarded and recognised, and we need to listen to what they say. I know that the Minister met the Royal College of Nursing last year and is developing a new workforce plan to include future planning, among other commitments. I trust that whatever views the Minister has heard will be reflected in the RCN report and that ongoing dialogue will continue to help to inform policy.

I also know that, along with the Chief Nursing Officer, the Minister has been monitoring staffing levels to ensure patient safety, and, on the whole, we have seen more nurses in Northern Ireland recruited than ever before. In the past nine years, we have seen the nursing workforce grow by 8·6%, with the number of full-time nurses remaining static at 55% or 56% of the total nursing workforce. Just over half — 8,500 — of the total nursing workforce is based in acute services. So, although numbers of nursing staff appear to be consistent, it would appear that pressure has continued to grow.

A report by the RCN in July 2013 found that the pressures were most apparent at weekends and evenings in acute hospitals, especially when accommodating patients in accident and emergency departments and transferring patients. That perhaps raises questions about how staffing levels are managed to meet the most critical periods of demand. If mandatory staffing levels are a proposed answer, it is essential that levels of staff are targeted to the areas of most need and that managers need to be as flexible and creative as possible.

From my experience, I know nurses who are expected to work a complete night shift with just one other colleague on duty on their ward, with no opportunity for a rest or break. That cannot be good for staff or patients, and it is simply not good enough management in this day and age.

I believe that in progressing the Transforming Your Care policy as a top priority, the Minister is attempting to take difficult decisions and not just accept the status quo, which, clearly, is not working to the satisfaction of everyone. I hope that this will go some way to transforming our health system and bring us into the 21st century,

providing better and more efficient care in the community. I hope that, in turn, that will go some way to ease the pressures on our nurses in acute hospitals as well as pressure overall, which is experienced by patients and their families.

We need to give nurses the opportunity to do what they do best, namely take care of us and our families. For that, we are all in their debt.

I support the motion and join my colleagues in asking the Minister to ensure that appropriate staffing levels are secured and recognition is given to those who deliver front line care.

9.00 pm

Mr G Robinson: I know that the hour is late, so I will be very brief. I give my full support to this worthwhile and timely debate, and congratulate my DUP colleagues Jimmy Spratt and Paula Bradley for bringing it to the Chamber. I am sure that most of us, at some time or other, have had to enter hospital or had nursing care in the community, where our nurses give such excellent care, which we should never take for granted. I sometimes cringe with anger when I hear from time to time that our nurses have been assaulted, particularly in A&E departments. Such treatment is totally disgraceful.

Nowadays, the role of a nurse is challenging and demanding, and nursing administrators throughout our hospitals in Northern Ireland need to make sure that hospitals are fully staffed so that all nurses can do their jobs efficiently and effectively, minimising the risk of undue work overload and stress to a very professional nursing staff.

I commend all our healthcare staff. I also commend the Health Minister for his listening ear and for all the everyday health challenges that he encounters.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the opportunity to respond to this important debate. I pay tribute to our nursing staff for their excellent work across the Province. Having listened to some Members' comments, I think that some circumstances may be difficult, but it would be wrong to paint that as the whole picture of general nursing. It is important that we seek to improve the areas in which people are under undue stress and pressure, but it is also important that we recognise that many nurses are working in good conditions with which they are very happy. I believe that that is indisputable.

A number of issues were raised, which I will deal with at the outset before I get into the main body of my speech. The Chair of the Health Committee raised the issue of nurse-led discharge. That policy is in place in each trust. Nurses facilitate discharge when there is a clear plan from the medical team, which is mainly at weekends. That enhances patient care and ensures timely discharges.

We also recognise that nursing is a stressful career. Dealing with patients who are ill and vulnerable, and often having to give them bad news, is emotionally intensive. All trusts have mechanisms in place through occupational health and care. The RCN also provides support for nurses and is trained to deal with such situations.

I will deal with nursing numbers in the main body of my speech, but ratios were mentioned by Members. As of 31 March 2013, we had a 78:22 ratio of registered and unregistered nurses, and the vacancy rate was 2·6%. Twenty-two per cent of nurses were employed in pay bands 1 to 4, 65% were employed in pay bands 5 to 6, and 13% were employed in pay bands 7 to 9.

I will deal with bank nursing briefly. There is a sense that vacancies are filled promptly, ensuring that staffing levels to support safe and effective person-centred care are maintained. Banking agency usage will always be monitored to ensure reduction as wards improve staffing to meet the appropriate normative staffing range. That will continue to be monitored. Mr Wells quite rightly pointed out that bank nurses are very often nurses who are working in the hospital and are prepared to take on an extra shift or two. That is something that they have the option to do or, indeed, refuse to do if it is not what they wish. They are very well skilled in the jobs that they do and can step into the breach if a nurse is off sick, for example, or another problem arises where a ward is particularly busy.

There is one thing that I wish to clarify with Mr Wells. When he was describing being in hospital, he indicated that he and the triage nurse were the only sober ones. I know that my Policing Board colleagues would be concerned to know whether the officers sitting with the patients at the time were also sober.

Mr Wells: They were, yes.

Mr Poots: I am glad to be able to confirm that with Mr Wells and that a rumour will not start from tonight's events.

I turn to the motion itself. I indicated that nurses play such an important role and are, I believe, the backbone of the service. They are there 24/7. They are there for many joyous and beautiful occasions, such as when people give birth or make good recoveries. However, they are also there when people are at their most vulnerable and, very often, in very difficult circumstances. That commitment needs nurses with real compassion who are committed to delivering safe, effective and person-centred care. That brings a huge responsibility on the profession to continue to transform by taking on new roles, continuously learning new skills and working across new settings.

In March 2013, over 14,000 whole-time equivalent qualified nurses were employed in the HSC. That represents an increase of more than 300 nurses in the previous year and over 1,600 whole-time equivalent nurses in the five years to March 2013. We all know only too well how important it is that we have the right staff to provide care, as we have heard in local news and from across the UK; the example has been quoted of Sir Robert Francis QC's independent inquiry into the failings of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. That highlights the need to have appropriate staffing levels to support effective, person-centred care.

The issue is not just about England. Here in Northern Ireland, the public inquiry into the outbreak of clostridium difficile raised a number of issues in relation to infection prevention and staffing levels. There is an abundance of evidence on the need for appropriate nurse staffing levels and skills mix to appropriately meet patients' needs relating to the severity of the illness of the patient.

As I lead the transformation of change, it is no mistake that my policies, such as Transforming Your Care, are underpinned by the overriding concern for safety and quality. My Quality 2020 policy focuses on safety and

effectiveness and is patient/client focused. It specifically details the need to strengthen the workforce through continuous development of their knowledge and skills, demonstrated through improved outcomes for patients and clients. The Patient and Client Council report, 'The People's Priorities', identifies and reinforces the public view of the need to protect front line staff, particularly nurses, as a top priority.

Significant research has been undertaken into the issue of nurse staff levels and skills mix, so there is a wide literature base to inform us on the number of registered nurses and the quality of patient outcomes. For example, fewer registered nurses with increased workloads can be linked to negative patient outcomes, including increased length of stay and associated cost; falls in hospital; and medication errors on medical-surgical units. A better staffing ratio of patients to nurses is associated with improved patient outcomes, including mortality and patient satisfaction.

As the profile of care changes, staffing levels must not be based on traditional and/or cost constraints rather than patient need and outcomes. We need to be steps ahead of this. For example, in 2013, a local audit in a HSC trust demonstrated that 73% of people in an acute medical ward require intravenous medications (IVs). That means that, in one ward alone, in a 24-hour period, 29 hours of registered nurses' time is now spent in the management and administration of IV drugs. That is a positive indication of nurses taking on roles that previously lay with doctors. It is also a good example of how staffing and workforce planning need to anticipate and meet the changing needs of care provision.

At the Chief Nursing Officer conference in November 2012, I announced a programme of work to develop a framework that would include a suite of tools to support commissioners and trusts to assure the public about nurse staffing across all settings. The rationale for that work lies in the need for consistent, robust workforce planning and decision-making to support the reform and modernisation agenda. The framework, which continues to be developed, is essential to the transformation of services. It will also consider what we need to have in place as more care moves to the community, recognising that those who are in hospital often require more complex care than ever before to be delivered by nursing staff.

It gives me great pleasure to again refer to the framework entitled 'Delivering Care: A Framework for Nursing and Midwifery Workforce Planning to Support Person Centred Care', and update you on progress on that important piece of work. I have just approved the tool that will be used from April 2014 on adult medical and surgical units. As part of that, I have taken the decision to make the ward sister/charge nurse role one that recognises their supervisory duties and provides time to fulfil their ward leadership responsibilities, which are to supervise clinical care; oversee and maintain nursing care standards; teach clinical practice and procedures; oversee the ward environment; and assume high visibility as nurse leader for the ward, patients and relatives.

As the framework continues to be developed across a range of settings, we will monitor its effect on patient experience and outcomes to ensure that quality continues to improve and that care places patients at the centre of delivery. I have also taken the decision not to prescribe staff numbers on every ward at every point in time. The framework will be based on normative ranges that consider the unique and different settings across the system and where professional experience and input is heard to best meet the needs of patients. The role of executive directors of nursing is vital in the framework. It will support them in their responsibility to provide assurance about the quality of nursing care to patients.

Further work is now being progressed in a phased approach to address all areas of clinical practice; for example, district nursing, health visiting and in mental health and learning disability care settings. HSC trusts will take account of the recommended staffing ranges that are contained in the framework in developing proposals to meet the objectives of Transforming Your Care in supporting new proposals for additional resources and when developing efficiency and productivity plans.

Commissioners will be able to use the framework to agree and set consistent ranges for nursing workforce requirements for providers of health and social care in Northern Ireland. I believe that the framework publicly demonstrates my commitment to ensuring that sufficient numbers of nurses with the right skills are in the right place, not only in key areas such as critical care wards, but all areas where nursing care is delivered to patients.

I can assure the Chamber that critical care nurse staffing is based on the British Association of Critical Care Nurses guidelines, which recommend a number of key standards relating to staffing levels for patients in those settings and on infection control, team working, education and use of healthcare assistants. In November 2013, the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine and the Intensive Care Society published new core standards for intensive care units. For example, we now require a higher nurse:patient ratio to support patients with multiple organ failure and for some patients cared for in single rooms. Trusts are now working towards implementation of the new standards and are considering the challenges; for example, during times of absence and maternity leave.

Finally, I turn to concerns about the pressures faced by hospitals. Recently, there has been a particular focus on emergency departments (ED). Nurse staffing in EDs is informed by the Royal College of Nursing faculty of emergency nursing, which, over the past few years, has developed tools to enhance the understanding of the dependency and care demands of patients, such as the Jones dependency tool and the Manchester triage tool. Recently, the faculty has revised its work, and a new tool is being piloted in a number of our trusts.

Emergency care departments are experiencing challenges in maintaining appropriate staffing levels, particularly during the winter months. That is a challenge across the UK. It can be due to seasonal increases, for which non-recurring funding is provided to enable trusts to employ additional staff during winter months. Although this gives the trusts an element of flexibility it is, nevertheless, a challenge, which is the reason why Transforming Your Care is so important; it recognises that difficulties in one area can be symptoms from other area.

9.15 pm

In other words, we need to have the whole system of care right to meet patients' needs, not just one area.

For example, we need to ensure that patients attend ED appropriately; that out-of-hours general practice is responsive; and that those who need to be admitted can be cared for in the right setting and discharged quickly when they are ready into a setting that best meets their needs in the community, be that at home or in supported living for a period of rehabilitation.

It is crucial that we have the right nurses and other professions and services with the right skills across the system to meet the needs. Individual work to transform Health and Social Care cannot sit alone in one area: it would not be effective. We also need to have the right number of nurses across the workforce who can work across the diverse range of settings. In support of that, my Department is reviewing the nursing and midwifery workforce and will provide a workforce plan to ensure that the workforce is fit for purpose over the next five years. That workforce review will provide a detailed profile of the workforce, identify current issues impacting on the profession and make projections on the supply and demand for nurses and midwives for the next five years. I have asked my Chief Nursing Officer to lead that work to ensure that the nursing profession is fully engaged in this vital work. As part of that, she will also examine the use of bank and agency staff to ensure that they are used appropriately in the planning process to ensure that vacancies are filled quickly with the right staff.

Health and Social Care is going through unprecedented change and will continue to do so over the next few years. We will see increasing use of technology and care in the community as the needs of patients change as we move forward. Although there can be times of uncertainty, one thing remains unchanged: we need a nursing workforce in which the public has confidence and one that not only delivers complex care but, most importantly, is a profession that places the patient at the centre.

Small gestures can be powerful, and we need nurses who can realise that in a high-volume setting. The high-pressure atmosphere can stifle compassion and humanity, and that is when patients are at their most vulnerable. The briefest pause can bring out the best in a nurse and do much for a terrified patient.

Ms P Bradley: I thank my colleague Mr Spratt for proposing the motion and join others around the Chamber in commending all of our nurses in all of our hospitals.

For many of us, when we discuss issues around nursing, our immediate thoughts are of hospital care, but their role in providing community care is also invaluable. It allows people who would otherwise be removed from their home surroundings to receive the highest care, which we know maximises the potential for positive outcomes and lowers the cost to the NHS. Nurses in the community also provide a high level of palliative care to those patients who are at end-of-life stage.

Like my colleague Mr Spratt, I have personal reasons for bringing the motion forward today. In the past three months, a member of my household has had reason to receive acute care. I cannot commend highly enough the staff in the Royal Victoria Hospital — I am not embarrassed to say this — for their life-saving work, which is what they truly did. They save lives, and they saved the life of a member of my household. I commend ward 5E orthopaedics, ward 7A infectious diseases and the acute care at hospital team from Whiteabbey Hospital for what they did. In both of those wards and at home, I witnessed the very highest level of care from true professionals.

At the beginning of my speech, I spoke about nursing in the community. Without that specialised acute care, many patients would continue for weeks or even months to be inpatients in the acute wards in our hospitals. I know that acute care at home has many facets, and often depends on forward-thinking hospital consultants using innovative methods and complex drug regimes to facilitate early discharge. That early discharge allows those nurses in key hospital wards to focus on the patients who really need to be hospitalised, so that they receive the best treatment. I know from experience that that is true.

When we talk about nurses, we focus on the impact that they have on patient outcomes. Indeed, research provides us with a positive correlation between nurse staffing levels and patient outcomes. For many patients, a nurse can be a caregiver, a confidante and a link between all the other disciplines in the ward. More importantly, a nurse is a professional doing some of the most intricate and specialised tasks on a ward. It is important for patients, therefore, that the Minister and the Department ensure that appropriate levels of staff are maintained.

I would like to look, as others did, at the impact of nursing on individual nurses. As an Assembly, we often talk about a duty of care to the users of our health service, but we also have a duty of care to look after our staff and ensure that they are valued, supported and are not unnecessarily stressed. For example, nurses working on night shift are at risk of increased fatigue, sleep disturbance and reduced well-being compared with their day-shift counterparts. That has serious consequences for individual nurses and their families, and for patient outcomes. We must, therefore, find ways to minimise those effects.

I believe that having enough nurses is central to addressing these issues. Alongside that, I support measures such as increased training for nurses. I am pleased to note that, in July 2013, the Minister announced an additional £300,000 for post-registration training.

I will not go into detail about everything that everyone said, but I will pick out a few key words. These are some of the key words said here this evening: faults; dissatisfaction; sickness levels; stress; unsafe working; pressurised environment; increased workload; anxiety; low mood; Third World scenes; and emotionally intensive. I think that it was Mr McKinney who said that we cannot ignore those problems, and I agree. We absolutely cannot ignore them. However, I also heard the following words: commend; pay tribute; specialised; selfless; professional; skilled; superb working from nursing force; world class; and we owe them a debt.

Mr Spratt and I got together about this because we know that there are concerns. We all have concerns, and those have been expressed here. We felt that we needed to bring this motion to the House to assure Members that we are not ignoring the concerns.

We, as a society, owe all our NHS staff a high level of gratitude. As most know, I worked for the Northern Trust in a former life, and I have great admiration for those who continue to do so daily. For me, appropriate nursing levels are important for three key reasons. First, to ensure that patients are given the very best quality of care possible

when they are at their most vulnerable. Secondly, for nurses and their families, it is important to prevent burnout and high levels of stress and to promote their own positive mental health. Finally, to reduce the cost on the NHS. If we have enough specialised acute community nurse teams, we can discharge patients as soon as it is safe to do so.

As Mr Spratt said in proposing the motion, by having appropriate staffing levels in key wards and, I add, care in the community, we provide not only a better service for the patient but a better working environment, which, in turn, reduces sickness, and that not only benefits our economy but all our communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly recognises the important role that nurses play across the health service; notes with concern the pressures faced by hospitals and the importance of the health and social care trusts in providing sufficient numbers of nurses on key wards such as critical care; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that appropriate staffing levels are in place.*

Adjourned at 9.23 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 January 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Mivan: Cessation of Trading and Resultant Job Losses

Mr Speaker: Mr Trevor Clarke has been given leave to make a statement on the future of Mivan, resulting in job losses, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place continually. Other Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter. No points of order or any other business will be taken until this piece of business is dealt with. If that is clear, I call Mr Clarke.

Mr Clarke: It is only two weeks since we were here to talk about Mivan. On that occasion, I was fairly optimistic. I am maybe less optimistic today, given the news we had yesterday on the cessation of Mivan. I grew up in that Antrim area, and it is sad that we are going to lose that iconic name. It has employed many people over so many years. I put on record our gratitude to the owner, Ivan McCabrey, for the 40 years in which he brought that business to the Antrim area and acknowledge the difficult trading times he had over that period. It is unfortunate that we are talking, today, about the possibility of more job losses in the Antrim area.

I take some comfort from speaking to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, my colleague Arlene Foster, about the engagement that she has had with the company and the administrators. Although yesterday's news on the job losses is bleak, I am assured from conversations that Mrs Foster has had with the administrators that the work has not ended just yet and that there may be some hope on the horizon for some of the workforce. Some of us know what Mivan had to offer. It is a very skilled workforce; it is not something that anyone can take up at any time. Those people who have been employed in Mivan for many years have gained their skills through their work and the time that they spent with Mivan. So, we are still hopeful at this stage, Mr Speaker, that even though yesterday's news is bleak, there will be placements for those who are currently employed. In closing, I wish the best to the administrators and those looking on at the company. I hope that someone can step in, even at this late stage, to continue that work and keep up the good name and the skills that people in the Antrim area have acquired over the years.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I echo the comments from my colleague Trevor Clarke. I welcome the interest, concern and attendance of the Minister. This is a very significant blow. It is a reminder, if we needed it, that the storm clouds, even in the international market, are still with us and that there may be other challenges ahead.

Although I do not wish to understate the tragedy at a personal level for each of the workers, the company and its workforce were a credit to our regional economy and our skills base. The entrepreneurship of the company and its workers, who were prepared to pack up and travel, go abroad and demonstrate their skills and capacity, is something that we should not lose from our local workforce. I wonder whether, even in the short term, we can offer the possibility of seeding the potential on existing companies as well. It would be an awful tragedy if the skill set that exists from managerial level right down through to the artisan skills were allowed to break up and dissipate. I know that the Minister will use every ounce of imagination and creativity to try to retrieve as much as she can out of this setback to lay the groundwork for a comeback.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I empathise with the comments of colleagues in the House today. It is particularly sad for the employees who find themselves in very difficult circumstances this morning. Many people are trying to keep bread on the table and a roof over their head. These are very difficult and traumatic times, so I am glad that the Minister is here. Perhaps, at some stage, she might choose to come back to us to tell us what is being done by DETI and Invest NI. We could also draw our comments about retraining or skills towards the Employment Minister.

There is one issue that should be put clearly on record today, and that is that although the employees of the firm will inevitably be affected, subcontractors and suppliers may well be affected by the act as well. The firm has really hit the wall. The Patton circumstances were really bad. It was quite clear that the firm was using subcontractors on the base as a prop or a type of banking to keep it going. The other issue that emanated from the Patton experience was that it became apparent that there were public sector contracts with which the firm was involved. It may well be useful — I am sure that the Minister will be listening very intently at this point — for a scoping exercise to be undertaken at Executive level of the various Departments, and possibly even agencies outside or within the remit of the Departments, where work could be ongoing to make sure that the supply chain remains paid. When the firm hits the wall, I know that there will be other elements of claim to be laid to it, but people in that supply chain will inevitably look to the Assembly today to make sure that whatever

protection can be afforded to the payment they require from those schemes is provided to them.

It is unfortunate that we come to the House to talk about these circumstances, but we will do what we possibly and conceivably can as constituency and public representatives.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for providing the opportunity to discuss what is a very difficult situation for many. The company has a worldwide reach. Whether it is working on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, Disneyland Paris or high-specification apartments in London, the company has a high reputation and a highly skilled workforce.

I am absolutely sure that the Minister and other Ministers will be working behind the scenes to ensure the best possible outcome to this tragic situation for a company that has served the community for so many years, and for its employees, not only those working overseas but those right through the greater County Antrim area, from where Mivan draws its employees. It is important that we recognise the company's skills base. Ministers must work very hard to ensure that those skills are either retained in a reformed or reshaped company, if that is possible, or diversified into the community so that they are not lost to Northern Ireland. If that happens, others will be able to draw on the skills and build on the situation.

This is a very difficult time for individual employees, but I know that, whatever the differences in the Chamber, all Ministers and all appropriate Departments will pull together to deliver the best possible service in these difficult circumstances.

Mrs Cameron: I join my Assembly colleagues in showing my support for those who have been affected by the devastating job losses for Mivan in Antrim. We appreciate the ripple effect and how that may affect many more people. We can take a small comfort, as we have heard today, from the fact that my colleague Arlene Foster's Department and Invest NI are working with administrators for Mivan. We can have at least some small hope at this stage that there may be a more positive outcome in the near future. However, at this time, I want to let the people know that our thoughts are with them and their families, who are affected by what is a truly devastating loss to Antrim and the surrounding areas.

Mr Allister: Many were quite shocked when, a couple of weeks ago, Mivan, which has always been regarded as very much a signature Northern Ireland company, with a very high reputation across the world, suddenly hit the buffers. At that time, considerable optimism was expressed that much might be salvaged. It therefore came as a further blow yesterday to hear of the full-scale redundancies. I express some disappointment that the administrator moved so swiftly to full-scale redundancies and that such efforts as one thought might have been made to find buyers seem to have been terminated at a relatively early stage.

There are for many of us echoes here of what happened with Patton's, where another primary company suddenly collapsed, leaving in its wake a great trail of devastation among long-serving, loyal, hard-working workers. Its collapse also left a trail of subcontractors. It may be that Mivan, with much of its foreign work, had many subcontractors outside the jurisdiction, but it certainly had suppliers and subcontractors here, and one feels very strongly for them. As in the case of Patton, it was the hapless, blameless subcontractors who ended up paying a huge price, and who themselves had perhaps subcontracted some work. They had bills to pay but had nothing coming in from their main contractor. That is what puts the subcontractor in such a hapless and hopeless situation. I fear that, in the coming weeks and months, we may find the aftershocks of Mivan continuing to work through. The impact on County Antrim will, I fear, be considerable.

I trust that, in those circumstances, the administrator and Invest Northern Ireland are doing all that can be done and that we will see more manifestation of that through a successful outcome than we have seen evidenced in the past two weeks by virtue of yesterday's disappointing news.

10.45 am

Executive Committee Business

Carrier Bags Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark Durkan, to move the Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]

Mr Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of amendments. The single debate will be on amendment Nos1, 2, 3 and 4.

Amendment No 1 deals with the date of implementation of phase 2 charging for carrier bags and the definition of carrier bags subject to the levy. It also exempts bags costing 20p or more as well as multiple reuse bags and bags for life. The group also includes an additional review provision and two miscellaneous and consequential amendments.

Once the debate on the group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

No amendments have been tabled to clauses 1 to 8. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group these clauses for the Question on stand part.

Clauses 1 to 8 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Mr Speaker: We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4. Members will note that amendment No 4 is consequential to amendment No 1.

I call the Minister of the Environment, Mr Durkan, to move amendment No 1 and address the other amendments in the group.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move amendment No 1: After clause 8 insert

"Amendments of the 2013 Regulations

8A.*—(1) The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 ('the 2013 Regulations') are amended as follows.*

(2) For regulation 3 substitute—

'Meaning of "carrier bag"

3. In these Regulations "carrier bag" means a bag of any material supplied or designed for the purpose of enabling goods to be taken away or delivered.'.

(3) Except in regulation 1(1) (citation) and regulation 3 (meaning of 'single use carrier bag'—

(a) for 'single use carrier bag' (wherever occurring) substitute 'carrier bag';

(b) for 'single use carrier bags' (wherever occurring) substitute 'carrier bags'.

(4) In regulation 6, for the words from 'for the purpose' to the end substitute 'at a place where goods are sold'.

(5) In paragraph 1 of Schedule 1 (exemptions)—

(a) in sub-paragraph (1), after head (k) add—

'(l) bags which are sold to customers for a price of not less than 20 pence each;

(m) multiple reuse plastic bags that are issued as free replacements for a corresponding number of worn out multiple reuse plastic bags.';

(b) in sub-paragraph (3), after the definition of 'medicinal product' insert—

'"multiple reuse plastic bags" means bags which—

(a) are made wholly or mainly from plastic;

(b) have either maximum dimensions of 404 mm (both width and height) or a maximum dimension of 439 mm (either width or height);

(c) are manufactured from material which is greater than 49 microns in thickness;

(d) are purchased by the customer; and

(e) when worn out are returnable to the seller from whom they were purchased to be replaced free of charge;'.

(6) This section comes into operation on 19th January 2015.

(7) Nothing in this section affects any power to amend or revoke the 2013 Regulations.".

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 9, page 3, line 21, leave out "Act" and insert "section".*— [Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]*

No 3: In clause 9, page 3, line 30, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

"(4) Subsections (1) and (2) do not affect the generality of subsection (5).

(5) The Department may at any time review whether any description of carrier bag should attract the requirement to charge.

(6) Expressions used in subsection (5) and in the charging provisions have the same meaning in that subsection as in those provisions.

(7) In this section—

"charging provisions" means section 77 of and Schedule 6 to the 2008 Act and any regulations made under those provisions;

"the Department" means the Department of the Environment.".— [Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]

No 4: In the long title, after "bags;" insert

"to amend the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013;".— [Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]

Mr Durkan: Amendment No 1 introduces a new clause 8A and arises from a recommendation made by the Environment Committee. Before outlining the detail of the amendment, I want to express my appreciation for the work that Committee members have done and for the timely manner of their consideration of the Bill.

Turning to the amendment, I can confirm that the effect of the new clause is that the Bill will become the key legislative vehicle that provides for the commencement of the second phase of carrier bag charging without the need for subsequent subordinate legislation.

After hearing evidence from stakeholders, the Environment Committee recommended in its report that the Department should consider deferring the commencement of the legislation from its planned implementation date of April 2014 until January 2015. The main reasons for the suggestion were to ensure a longer lead-in time to allow retailers to prepare for the extension of the levy and to ensure that the public were fully informed of the changes to the current charging arrangements.

I remain committed to extending the levy to low-cost reusable bags as quickly as possible; there is a clear environmental rationale for doing so. However, I also recognise the need to give retailers a reasonable period of legislative certainty to allow them to make final plans for implementation. For that reason, and with the agreement of the Environment Committee and the Executive, I have decided to delay the introduction of the extended levy until January 2015 in line with the wishes of the Committee and the representations received from retail groups. However, I appreciate the need for early confirmation of the precise implementation date. That is the main driver behind new clause 8A. The clause provides for a small number of critical changes to the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013. The regulations provide for the current charging regime of a 5p levy on single-use bags that has been in force since 8 April 2013.

Essentially, the amendment will amend the regulations to extend their scope from single-use carrier bags to carrier bags and amend the existing exemptions provision to add two additional exemptions for bags with a retail price of 20p or more and those that are issued as free replacements for bags for life. The amendment also specifies that phase 2 of carrier bag charging will commence on 19 January 2015.

I want to outline the reason for this amendment and, indeed, the Bill. From an early stage, the Department's modelling work suggested that the relatively low price of low-cost reusable bags would lead some people to treat them as single-use bags and discard them prematurely. As low-cost reusable bags are usually of a higher gauge, that would cause even greater harm than discarded single-use bags.

The Department had forecast that the 5p levy on single-use bags would generate a 70% increase in sales of low-cost reusable bags. It appears, based on a sample of retailers, that the increase is more in the region of 800%. Although the increased sales of such bags are expected and welcome, such figures indicate that it is unlikely that customers are reusing such bags to their full potential. Such a view is strengthened by a recent local survey showing that only 56% of shoppers in Northern Ireland regularly reuse their carrier bags. This suggests that there is significant room for improvement by discouraging purchases of new bags in favour of greater levels of reuse.

This amendment provides for the extension of charging to reusable bags by providing that the 5p levy will apply to any carrier bag costing less than 20p. However, retailers may, if they choose to do so, continue to operate schemes in which they can replace worn out plastic carrier bags free of charge. Only the initial purchase would be subject to the levy. This should reinforce positive environmental behaviour.

I can confirm that the Department will still introduce carrier bag regulations in due course. The purpose of these will be to provide further clarity and deliver a number of non-critical amendments.

I now want to deal with the remaining amendments, which relate to clause 9 —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Allister: Before the Minister moves off amendment No 1, I have always struggled, I have to confess, with the approach that now evinces itself in the definition of carrier bag that he introduces, in which it means a bag of any material supplied. Where is the logic in moving from where the debate about plastic bags started out to including biodegradable bags in the definition of carrier bags? Why is it that we find it necessary to impose a levy on biodegradable bags? What is the simple answer?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Allister for his intervention. Although paper bags, as the Member points out, are biodegradable, there is still an environmental impact from having them in circulation. Obviously, the damage that they do to the environment is not as great as that done by plastic bags. However, there is still an impact. We do not want paper bags or plastic bags littering our streets or strewn in our hedgerows. Paper bags still have a negative environmental impact, albeit not on the same scale as plastic bags. I appreciate the Member's point, which he and retailers have raised before.

I now want to deal with the remaining amendments, which relate to clause 9 and the long title. Clause 9 requires the Department to prepare a report on the operation of the carrier bag charging arrangements. The review must assess the effectiveness of charging and whether any amendments need to be made. The Bill requires that the review be carried out within three years of the Act coming into operation. It also requires the Department to publish the report and lay it before the Assembly.

I see this provision as a statutory commitment to undertake a very wide-ranging review assessing the success of the policy, whether there are problems and whether the legislation needs to be amended. The amendment that I am bringing forward supplements the existing commitment to review the legislation. In response to an issue raised by the First Minister, this amendment provides for an additional ad hoc review of exemptions from the charging requirement. Indeed, that might further answer Mr Allister's question.

The Department will, at any time, be able to assess whether the existing list of exemptions remains fit for purpose or whether new evidence has emerged, including any evidence provided by stakeholders that justifies amendment to that list. The objective of the amendment

is to ensure that the legislative provision is sufficiently flexible to provide for early review of exemptions from the charging requirement. My officials have engaged with the Environment Committee on that issue, and I understand that the Committee is content with the proposal.

Amendment No 3 is a very minor drafting amendment to clause 9. It is being made on the advice of the Office of the Legislative Counsel. Amendment No 4 relates to the long title of the Bill and is a direct consequence of clause 8A.

Those are all the amendments in the group. I should also advise Members that I have sought and received the Minister of Finance and Personnel's recommendation under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in relation to these amendments.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): On behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome the Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill. The Bill was referred to the Committee on 12 June 2013. To ensure that there was enough time to scrutinise the Bill fully and effectively, the Committee sought an extension of the Committee Stage to 30 November 2013.

There were nine written submissions to the Committee's call for evidence on the Bill. Members agreed to take oral evidence from the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association and the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, as well as the Northern Ireland Local Government Association and Northern Ireland Environment Link. I would like to place on record the Committee's thanks and appreciation to those who responded in writing and those who provided oral briefings to the Committee.

The Committee reported on the Bill on 26 November 2013 and welcomes the Department's response to its recommendations, which are largely reflected in the amendments before us today. Amendment No 1 introduces a new clause, which will delay implementation of the second phase of charging for carrier bags to 19 January 2015. During its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee was greatly concerned about the proposed timing of the extension of charging to low-cost reusable carrier bags, following so closely the introduction of charges for single-use bags.

The Committee found a lack of hard evidence on how the first phase of the levy on carrier bags has impacted on consumer behaviour. Since the charge had been in place for less than three months when the Bill was initially referred to the Committee, neither the Department nor witnesses were able to provide definitive evidence on how the levy has impacted on retailers, particularly smaller retailers, the environment, or on people's shopping habits.

Consequently, Committee members were concerned that the Department's original implementation date for the second phase of charging, April 2014, was too soon. They felt that it did not give the Department enough time to assess the impact of the first phase and to instigate a widespread communication campaign so that consumers are aware of the introduction of the new charging arrangements. Representatives of the major supermarkets also told the Committee that a proper lead-in period would give them more time to put in place the new IT systems and staff training necessary to implement the new arrangements.

Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I welcome the amendment, which will delay further charges until 19 January 2015. I hope that the later implementation date will give the Department time to deliver a clear communication strategy to the public. The last thing we want is for shoppers to be confused. They need clear, straightforward information on exactly which bags will be subject to the levy and what they will cost at the checkout.

11.00 am

The Committee has no issues with amendment No 2, which is merely a technical amendment.

The Committee also supports amendment No 3. During its scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee asked the Department for its rationale for choosing a three-year review period. The Department advised that it was to allow more time for an evidence base to be built up and to allow the Department time to react to carrier bag charging being implemented in Scotland and England. The Committee was content with that approach. However, the Committee also supported the introduction of a provision for an ad hoc review, particularly as the commencement of charging for carrier bags is a comparatively recent development and problems may yet emerge. The amendment will allow the Department to react to issues as they arise and, for that reason, is welcomed by the Committee.

Amendment No 4 reflects the mechanism used by the Department to implement the Committee's recommendation that a definitive date should be specified for the implementation of the second phase of charging. The Committee has considered that approach to amending the Bill and is content that it provides certainty for consumers and retailers. Consequently, the Committee is happy to support the amendment.

Mr Speaker, with your indulgence, there are a few other things that I would like to put on record in relation to the Bill. I will be very brief. The Committee felt that there was a need for a widespread and effective communications campaign by the Department to ensure that the existing support from consumers is underpinned by an understanding that bags for life should be reused as long as possible and that they will be replaced by retailers free of charge. Members urge the Department to make best use of the additional time now available to it before the extension of the levy to ensure that its communication activities are timely and are appropriately focused.

The wider environmental implications of the continued use of plastic carrier bags of all types were not taken into account in the Bill. We know that the European Union has recently adopted proposals requiring member states to reduce their use of lightweight plastic carrier bags, and those proposals recognise the introduction of an outright ban under certain conditions. Other suggestions included a move towards biodegradable bags and the use of a grading system similar to the system currently in use to specify the energy efficiency rating of domestic appliances that would indicate the environmental impact of the plastic carrier bags available from retail outlets. The Committee believes that the Department should give further consideration to those options in the future.

The Committee also welcomed the Minister's announcement on 16 October 2013 that he had allocated a significant portion of the proceeds from the carrier bags

levy to the Challenge Fund to enable communities and organisations to deliver new local environmental projects across Northern Ireland. It is vital that the proceeds from charging for carrier bags continue to be used to support local environmental projects.

I was at an NI Environment Link event to celebrate the Challenge Fund a couple of years ago, and I was really impressed by the many innovative and effective programmes that the scheme supported. However, given the anticipated much-reduced receipts from the carrier bag levy, I would like an assurance from the Minister that the shortfall from the £4 million that DFP took out of DOE's budget is now addressed.

In conclusion, I welcome all the amendments on behalf of the Committee, and I urge the House to support them.

Mrs Cameron: I support the amendments at the Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill. Many people have been more than aware of the Bill and of its outworkings, which came into effect in April last year. Specifically, most, if not all, of us will be aware of the carrier bag levy, which has dramatically changed how we shop from day to day. The Bill brought into effect a 5p levy on all bags for single use, with the exception of those distributed by pharmacists, for example, for medicine or by butchers for meat and poultry purchases. Those are just two examples of the exemptions.

The Bill forms part of the process initiated in the previous Assembly term and is a method of drastically reducing the number of plastic bags that are or were in circulation. Many bags, as we know, ended up in landfill or littering the countryside and our rivers. Apart from being an eyesore, these bags are a dangerous hazard to wildlife and fish. I hope that we will eventually see the end of them completely.

It is clear that the legislation has been very successful, with early reports indicating an 80% reduction in single-use bags in some parts. While the levy could be regarded as an additional means of raising tax, that is, in fact, not the purpose, and the Minister has assured us that any moneys raised are to be used to fund environmental projects in the community. One example of that is an eco-club in Fairview Primary School in Ballyclare in my constituency of South Antrim. I have had the opportunity to see at first hand how the eco-clubs work and how effective they are. Indeed, I think that we can safely rely on our children to teach us a thing or two about managing waste. Fairview Primary School won the Eco-committee of the Year Award in 2013 and was the first of just two schools in Northern Ireland to achieve zero waste, meaning that it sent absolutely no waste — nothing — to landfill. Unsurprisingly, Fairview Primary School is very proud of its pupils and their achievements, and I am glad that the Environment Minister will have the opportunity in the coming days to see for himself just how the children have managed to achieve that status.

When the Committee began its investigations and the Department brought forward the amendments, it was clear that there were concerns that the heavier plastic bags that were still being sold for a relatively small amount could become the new throwaway bags. That is why the second phase of the legislation is important. I commend the large retailers that have sought to address the problem by offering the sale of bags for life, which might be better termed "reusable bags". They are sold for as little as 6p and, once damaged or worn out, can be exchanged for free at those participating stores. It is a very good initiative that responsibly considers the environment and the cost implications to customers.

The Bill, through amendment No 1, will extend the 5p levy to bags that are being sold for 20p or less, making it less attractive to consumers to purchase those bags, which have a relatively short life. The hope is that it will encourage the reuse of bags in general.

The amendments to the Carrier Bags Bill will benefit the environment and will enhance the sentiment and purpose behind the original Bill. I welcome that the Minister has, after pressure from the Committee, agreed to delay the implementation of the amendments and the 20p benchmark from April 2014 until 19 January 2015. This is a direct response to representations made by the retail trade, which asked for more time before amendments were brought into existence. It allows a generous amount of time for IT systems to be updated and, of course, time for Department and retailer alike to embark on an awareness campaign. I therefore welcome the amendments and support the Bill's passage.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar leasuithe uimhir 1, 2, 3, agus 4. I will speak in favour of all four amendments. I welcome this Carrier Bags Bill.

With your indulgence Mr Speaker, I will go back to the original legislation. I think that the public have embraced the first part of the legislation on single-use carrier bags. I did have some concerns when we decided to go down the route of introducing this reusable charge, but, clearly, we went into Committee Stage and got a definition of exactly what we were talking about. Mr Allister asked about biodegradable bags. The whole idea of this is to reduce the number of single-use plastic bags. In Committee, we found out that plastic bags that are classed as inferior bags and for which 6p, 7p, 8p, 9p and 10p is charged have now floated onto the market. They are being discarded, and that is defeating the purpose. To my knowledge, some of the figures showed that the public had embraced the original measures, with an 80% reduction over a certain time. That is to be welcomed, but we should learn from other examples, especially that of the Twenty-six Counties, where the reduction of single-use bags led to overuse of another type of bag. In the discussions, we found out that the energy required to make biodegradable bags is as detrimental to the environment as the bag itself. We need to take that into consideration.

I turn specifically to the amendments, and I want to talk about the review period set out in amendment No 3, which the Minister mentioned. Amendment No 1 allows for the introduction of the charge, which we welcomed in Committee. The issue for us was not only how it would impact on the public but how it would impact on retailers. It is to be welcomed that the introduction of this will be delayed until January 2015 to allow the retail industry to adapt and adjust. Obviously, the amendment covers the issue of "single use" and defines "carrier bag". Other Members have indicated exactly what the amendment intends to do, so I will not rehash that argument. We are well aware of what that is. Amendment No 2 is a technical amendment.

I move on to amendment No 3. The Minister has indicated that there would be a review. That is to be welcomed, but a review should not only be on pricing but have a wider scope to cover the types of bag and their composition. Although the Bill indicates what that is, we need to look at the usage and maybe take some ideas from the public and the retail industry to ensure that, over the next three years, we get it right, that there is a reduction in these bags, that it is environmentally friendly and that whatever moneys are generated definitely go back to environmental projects. As you said, amendment No 4 is consequential to amendment No 1.

The key element to selling all of this is communication and the public awareness programme. In the Minister's finishing remarks, I would like him to touch on how he proposes to sell this to the public. As I said in my introduction, the public have embraced this issue, and this is the second phase of it. I would like to think that we will do a good public awareness campaign to bring those people on board and to assist the retail industry. I support the amendments.

Mr Eastwood: I am glad to support the Bill. I congratulate the Minister in particular and the Committee on the way that they have approached this legislation. We have all known for a long time that plastic bags in particular have had a real detrimental effect on our environment. For years, we tried to deal with that through education solely, and, unfortunately, that did not work.

We needed to bring legislation to ensure that people were educated through their pockets to deal with this very serious issue, and evidence from around the world shows that that works.

11.15 am

The evidence that we have to date has shown that the impact on our shopping habits has been very significant. People have changed the way in which they shop and the way in which they view the bags that they leave the shop with. All legislators and Ministers should be prepared to make improvements to legislation when required and when the evidence shows that there may be another impact in respect of the usage of other bags that maybe was not foreseen. The Minister has responded and the Committee has said — and, I think, this House will say — "Let us change the legislation further to ensure that we can deal with the other issue." That is what today is about.

Many of our communities have benefited from the challenge fund, with over £2 million raised for environmental projects in the community. That is very welcome, but we want to get to the stage where not a lot of money will be raised and people will not be continually buying reusable bags. That is what this legislation is about.

I welcome the Minister's commitment and flexibility in working with the Committee as a response to conversations that the Committee had with retailers and the need that was illustrated for the implementation of the legislation to be delayed until January 2015 to allow not only retailers to prepare but for us to prepare shoppers and to communicate with the general public on how the legislation will work. That is essential, and I know that other Members have said this already, but we need to ensure that we communicate to the general public what this is about and how it will work, because all of us have to go to supermarkets and other retailers, unfortunately, at different times. So, I think that it is important that people are aware of how the legislation will work.

Anna Lo spoke about going into schools, as did other Members, and seeing how far children are ahead of us. Children can lead the way and have led the way with Eco-Schools and other projects, and it is good that the Minister is able to support those projects. In implementing this legislation, we have finally caught up with the younger generation. That says a lot.

Some of us might have doubts about global warming, but we have a real concern about it and about the impacts of environmental damage on our future and on our children's future. This is one radical, useful and practical way of dealing with that, and I commend the Minister for all that he has done in that regard. With that, Mr Speaker, I am very glad to say that the SDLP supports the amendments. I am sure that you will not be surprised at that. I congratulate the Minister and the Environment Committee for their continued good work on the issue, and I am sure that it will be a continued success going forward.

Mr Elliott: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I, too, welcome the amendments and welcome the development of the Bill. This highlights a good reaction, a good interaction and good cooperation between the Minister, his Department and the Committee, but, more importantly, even though the Committee may feel important in all this, it is vital that there was good communication and cooperation with the retail sector. It has to implement the legislation, and it will bear the brunt of it, along with the consumers, and its views were, by and large, taken on board. So, I welcome that cooperation with the wider public.

I know that the earlier suggestion was that reusable bags up to the cost of 40p would have the levy. Clearly, that put a shock into the system. Whether that was done deliberately to put a shock into the system and then reduce it, as some political representatives may often do, I do not know. We will hear from the Minister whether that was the policy at the time or whether there was a genuine attempt to introduce the 40p levy. Anyway, we are now down to the 20p levy, which is much more realistic.

I know that when the single-use carrier bag levy came in there was a huge reduction in the number of such bags being sold by retailers. However, what we have not heard is that there was a huge increase in sales of types of bin liners. I understand that sales increased by over 100%, so there was obviously a knock-on effect that the wider public may not have been aware of and that we did not hear about at the time. It is right to take cognisance of that.

I also support the Committee Chair's view that it is important to build a review into the process, because we do not know what will happen 12 months after the legislation's introduction. You could see a massive increase in sales of some other type of bag, so we need to look at that issue as it comes up. The single-use bag levy has not been in place for too long, so I suppose that it is difficult to get fairly accurate results at this stage. However, I do know that the Committee has been informed of some factors.

It is also important to recognise where the retailers are coming from. I know that impulse shopping has been a concern, whereby people purchase just a loaf of bread and a pint or litre of milk as opposed to maybe buying more items if they could put them in bag — now they seem to buy just what they can carry. Small, independent retailers

were complaining significantly at the start of the process that they were finding a huge reduction in their sales to those impulse buyers. I do not know whether that has levelled out. I think that the Department indicated that there was some levelling-out of that, but I do not know the situation at the moment. We need to keep that issue under consideration so that the smaller, independent retailers are protected as far as is reasonably possible.

I do not want to delay the Bill. I support the amendments. I emphasise once again that I support the cooperation that there has been between the Minister and his Department, the Committee and retailers.

Mr Weir: At this stage in the debate, it is not so much an issue of having reusable bags as whether we are going to have reusable speeches, because I suspect that a lot of recycling is going on. I do not intend to disappoint the House by introducing much in the way of novel concepts into my remarks.

For those of us who were here when the initial legislation on single-use carrier bags went through, that Bill, to be fair, was highlighted as not being a full stop but a comma. It was meant to be stage one of a process, and I think that the amendments before us are another step in that broader process. I welcome the amendments. There are two amendments of particular substance: amendment Nos 1 and 3. Amendment No 2, as indicated, is largely a technical amendment, while amendment No 4 is a consequential one.

A number of genuine concerns were shared by not only the Committee but the wider retail industry. The Committee stretched itself to try to facilitate a level of discussion between the retail sector and the Department, which, I am glad to say, was largely successful. However, the Committee even did its own exploration of the issue. Indeed, I remember that one member, who will remain nameless, was so keen on doing research that he or she requested that we bring a range of carrier bags to the Committee to test them out. I suspect that the member probably does not do a great deal of shopping. To preserve anonymity, I will not name him or her. As a result, we have seen a certain number of changes to the legislation.

It was mentioned that, when the original legislation went through, no one could doubt the dramatic impact in the reduction of the number of single-use carrier bags bought. To that extent, it has been a major boon to the environment.

With the Bill, there should a slight note of caution in that assessing and predicting the impact has been very difficult. As the Minister said, it was predicted, even by the Department, that there would be a certain amount of switching to low-cost reusable bags. The scale of that was massively out of proportion to what had been modelled, which shows that it is difficult to interpret consumer behaviour precisely. When it comes to the broad thrust of the Bill, that is one caveat, which is why amendment No 3 provides for the flexibility of a review.

At Committee Stage, there was conflicting evidence. Logic says that there has been a substitution effect on consumer behaviour. The switch has tempted people from single-use bags to cheap reusable bags, which has led to a massive increase in that sector. Common sense dictates that cheap reusable bags, which, by definition, will be used a number of times, are better than single-use bags. There is empirical evidence to suggest that people tend to treat cheap reusable bags differently to more expensive bags for life, so there is a danger that people use the cheap bags a few times and then discard them. That impacts on the environment.

Concern was expressed about the uncertainty surrounding how a shift towards cheap reusable bags will impact on consumer behaviour. For most consumers, it is logical to switch to a bag that costs more than 20p, which will be a bag for life. That is economically sensible and prudent. The Minister for Social Development, who is sitting beside me, is well known for his thrift. If he had to face the prospect of going shopping, he would be very much attracted to the notion of paying a one-off 20p rather than spending 10p over and over again. I suspect that thrift is not confined only to the Minister. Although that is the logical reaction, concerns were expressed about the danger of people going for the middle option — cheap reusable bags. If that is made a lot less attractive, the shift in consumer behaviour, for most people, will be towards the more expensive bag for life, but there is a danger that some people will simply shift to the very cheap bags. That is why it is appropriate that a review mechanism be put in place. We can see a useful direction of travel, but none of us can have absolute certainty of the impact on consumer behaviour. Consequently, amendment No 3 is important.

I echo the remarks of others that it has not simply been a question of Committee members raising concerns, the Committee as a whole listening to those concerns and the Department listening to the Committee. The concerns initially came largely from retailer groups, and cognisance was given to consumer concerns. I commend the Department for listening. The amendments contain three direct changes. The original plan was for a 10p levy. A decision was taken to restrict that to 5p, which is to be welcomed. As Mr Elliott mentioned, the original proposal was for the levy to apply to all bags below 40p, and there is a distinction here. The Committee felt strongly that that was pitched far too high. There is an argument that people may well regard an 8p, 10p or 12p bag, even if it is classified as reusable, as one to be used on only a few occasions. However, beyond 20p, people start to see a bag as being of much higher quality and one that they are prepared to use long term. Therefore, from the point of view of retailers and consumers, moving the levy threshold down to 20p is useful.

11.30 am

Perhaps the most significant change is to the timescale. There are three reasons for that. First, it has been mentioned that we are moving slightly into the unknown. Consequently, having a bit of breathing space to monitor how the new system is going is useful. Therefore, as the Chair and others have said, the change to the date is helpful.

Secondly, we received strong representation from retailers that the original idea, which was to have a change of that nature at the beginning of autumn, would, from a practical point of view, be very difficult for them to implement: for example, the disruption that would hit them in the run-up to Christmas was considered very problematical. There have actually been two shifts from the original date. To be fair, first, the Department agreed to shift the date until after Christmas. Then, particular concern was raised that that would hit the January sales directly. There was commendable flexibility from the Department in agreeing

to put the date back to 19 January, which gives retailers reasonable lead-in time. Make no mistake: a lot of retailers would say that they do not want it at all, but they are grateful that their views on the timescale were taken very much into account.

The third and final reason is the impact on consumers. The Minister referred to the initial purpose being simply to shift away from single-use carrier bags to reusable or biodegradable bags. A concern was expressed at Committee that, from a public presentational point of view, this amendment could be seen as counter-intuitive: people can accept very easily that moving away from single-use carrier bags benefits the environment; explaining that moving away from very cheap reusable bags needs to happen as well is a more difficult message to sell. Consequently, it is important that the bit of additional time that has been put in place — we are virtually a year to the day away from its implementation — is a good opportunity for the Department to try to get the message across to consumers. It simply cannot be ignored by the Department. The message has to be clear, and the amendment creates time to allow that to happen. All of those changes in amendment No 1 in particular put the Bill on a much more sensible and practical footing. I suspect that few of us will agree to it with 100% warmth in our heart, but we believe that it makes things better.

The overall thrust of the Bill has been designed to and directed at improving the environment, which we should all embrace. With that in mind, I commend the amendments to the House.

Mr Allister: As I made clear in my intervention, my issue of dissent relates to the all-embracing, indiscriminate definition of a carrier bag that is now to be introduced to include a bag that is made of any material, which immediately includes biodegradable bags. That seems to me to be overkill. A process that started out legitimately to deal with the mischief of plastic bags has ended up dealing with something well outside that ambit and not the same mischief at all. That is over-legislating with no regard to the economic consequences.

Members may come to the House and persuade themselves that they are making a great contribution to saving the planet or something such as that. They are going to put into liquidation a small company in my constituency, for example, that makes paper bags for hardware stores and home bakeries, because someone somewhere at Stormont thinks that it is right that, when a shopper goes into a home bakery to buy an apple turnover, they dare not be given it in a paper bag because Members are going to save the planet. It is preposterous to extend plastic bag policy to include biodegradable bags. Of course paper bags should not be discarded, but it is not the discarding of paper bags that is scarring the landscape and our countryside; it is the discarding of plastic bags. That is the mischief. I really do fail to understand why it is necessary to over-legislate beyond plastic bags and embrace inoffensive and non-destructive things that do not do any damage, such as paper bags.

The Sinn Féin contributor to the debate told us that other bags had to be included because the process by which they were produced was harmful to the environment. I am sure that you could say that, to some degree, about every manufacturing process that you could imagine. Of course there is bound to be some incidental impact on the environment from any manufacturing process, but to really stretch the point and over-legislate beyond plastic bags to inoffensive paper bags, driving some people out of work, is overkill by the Assembly, and a wrong step to take.

Mr Durkan: I thank Members for the questions and issues that they have raised during the debate on the amendments. I wish to comment on a number of points that have been made. The first Member to speak was Ms Anna Lo, Chairperson of the Environment Committee, and I take this opportunity to reiterate my gratitude to the Committee for its cooperation and, indeed, guidance on the legislation. Ms Lo spoke about the positive environmental impact of the carrier bag levy. Despite me earlier lamenting the underuse of reusable bags, we must not forget that the legislation has helped to change and shape our shopping behaviour in a very positive way.

Ms Lo stressed the need for a robust communications campaign, and that is very important. The Department conducted a comprehensive communications campaign in the run-up to the introduction of the levy on single-use bags last April. That generated a high level of interest and awareness of the new arrangements. Communication activity is ongoing, mainly through visits to retailers by staff from the carrier bag levy team. A communications campaign is being planned for phase 2. The Department fully accepts the need to communicate the reasons for extending the levy to low-cost reusable bags and will consider how best that can be achieved. The communications campaign will include extensive use of social media and, where appropriate, the Department will seek to develop partnership agreements with other organisations to maximise the reach of the phase 2 campaign and deliver a value-for-money outcome.

The Committee Chair identified a number of possible adjustments that might be made in the future. I will, of course, continue to keep all aspects of charging under review. Indeed, the Bill already requires me to do so, and today's amendments further strengthen that position.

Pam Cameron spoke of the importance of money generated through the levy being allocated to projects that will benefit the environment. I reaffirm my commitment to ensuring that that will be the case. She identified a project in her constituency; I think that all of us will have seen innovative and imaginative projects across our constituencies receive money from the challenge fund, which has funded 251 projects in total. I look forward to visiting Fairview Primary School with Mrs Cameron in the very near future, as well.

Cathal Boylan expressed his initial concern about the extension of the levy to low-cost reusable bags but said how those concerns were allayed or addressed as he learned more about the rationale for the extension of the levy, which I think again underlines the importance of a good communications strategy. I expect that to be the case across all of society.

Mr Boylan also said that the public have embraced the issue. I think it is fair to say — indeed, Mr Eastwood did say — that, in many ways, the public were ahead of the Government on the issue, and we have caught up with them. Mr Boylan emphasised the need for a comprehensive and wide-ranging review. I am committed to doing that. Indeed, the legislation commits me to doing

so. Today's amendment, which provides for a review of exemptions, is simply a further —

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for giving way. You heard Mr Allister refer today to potential job losses as a result of this. I would like to know what consideration his Department has given to the likelihood of job losses as a result of the legislation. Furthermore, when summing up and making his final contribution, will the Minister comment on whether there was another way to deal the enforcement of this? Is he entirely happy and content that all degrees of enforcement around the irresponsible disposal of plastic bags have happened? Does he intend to take any new steps in the future to ensure that? There is one issue that is causing great concern right across the whole Province, and that is the irresponsible disposal of litter, which seems to be in all our towns, streets and villages and in the countryside. We believe that his Department maybe needs a new initiative to deal with that pressing matter.

Mr Durkan: I thank Lord Morrow for his intervention. In my summing up, I was going to make some of these points in response to Mr Allister. Certainly, it is not my or my Department's objective — nor, dare I say, the objective of anyone in the House — to threaten the livelihoods of legitimate businesses and individuals. Unfortunately, as a result and consequence of the legislation, there will be reduced demand for carrier bags. There will, therefore, be reduced labour required to produce them. This has not come about overnight. Those manufacturers will have seen this coming and been well informed. I sympathise with those who have faced difficulty as a result. To offset against that, though, jobs have been created through the establishment of the carrier bag levy team and through the funding of some projects and posts through the challenge fund.

Obviously, enforcement continues to be a huge issue. Unfortunately, it is not just carrier bags that people discard at the sides of our streets. Figures show that, since the introduction of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 a couple of years ago, there has been a huge increase in the number of penalty notices and enforcement actions taken by councils right across the North in direct retaliation or response to those who continue to litter.

I firmly believe that that enforcement should be continued and strengthened.

11.45 am

Mr Elliott suggested that the reduction in the levy threshold for reusable bags from 40p to 20p might be some kind of a tactical manoeuvre. I assure him that that was not the case; it was a genuine response to representations from stakeholders and, of course, the Environment Committee, of which he is an established member.

Mr Elliott also mentioned the potential for an increase in the sales of other plastic bags, such as bin liners. The Department always anticipated that bin bag consumption would rise with the introduction of the levy, and some retailers have reported increases. However, those increases are from a much, much, much smaller base. Data from Wales that refer to carrier bags plus bin bags indicate that the 5p minimum bag charge has delivered a substantial net reduction in total bag consumption, and the same outcome is anticipated here. This will, of course, be kept under review, as will all other elements of the levy, including any differential impact on different types of retailers.

Peter Weir outlined once more the rationale behind the amendments and the legislation. He expressed concern that increasing the price of a reusable bag might drive shoppers back to using single-use bags. We do not believe that that will happen to any great extent. For example, a shopper might need 10 low-cost reusable bags to do their weekly shopping, which would currently cost 60p in total —

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that, and I can see the logic in it, but people do not always act entirely logically. As with any product, if you knock out or make much less attractive the mid-range model, there is a tendency for a section of consumers to go back to the lowest-cost model, even if that does not make rational economic sense in the long run. That is why I am glad that you have the review mechanism in amendment No 3. The Minister may well say, "We do not anticipate that this will happen." However, with respect, the problem is that the economic modelling on this is very difficult to predict. That is shown by the fact that, as the Minister indicated, there was an anticipated 70% rise in the sale of low-cost reusable bags yet the actual rise turned out to be 800%. That suggests that there is a lack of robustness, maybe by necessity, in the economic modelling of this. That is why it is vital to see whether this works rather than simply believing that everything will be perfect with it.

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Weir for that intervention. This is difficult to predict, which emphasises the importance of having a review mechanism built in. The Department believes that shoppers will choose to reuse their carrier bags on a more frequent basis, rather than reverting to single-use bags. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the environmental benefits from reduced reusable bag sales will more than offset any minor increase in the sales of single-use bags.

Mr Allister raised the issue of biodegradable bags again, particularly the impact that their inclusion in the legislation has had on a business in his constituency. As I outlined to Lord Morrow, that was certainly not an intended consequence of the legislation; however, it may have become an inevitable consequence.

I addressed the issue around —

Lord Morrow: I thank you for giving way, Minister. That is an interesting point. You say that it is not the intended way. Are you saying, "It was never intended, but now we know that it is happening"? You also said that your Department will continue to monitor the impact on retailers. You might want to tell us how you propose to do that. You might want to also tell us what the end result has been in your monitoring to date. What have you been able to report to the House today? There is little doubt that there is considerable concern among not only retailers but shoppers, who might go for a day's shopping and then discover that they cannot have a bag. Many of our big shopping centres have an open plan whereby shoppers move from store A to stores B, C and D, right round, without, as the saying is, emerging outside. Have you any concern that this may also encourage theft, sometimes inadvertently? That, too, has been brought to my attention.

Mr Durkan: The Department will continue to review the situation. The feedback from retailers is that the first stage has been tremendously positive, and we will continue to monitor that as we move into phase 2. The issue of theft has been raised in the House previously by a party colleague of Lord Morrow. There is no evidence to suggest that there has been an increase in shoplifting or theft as a result of phase 1. I know that, when similar legislation was brought into the Republic of Ireland, there was an initial spike in such incidents. However, that soon levelled out and it went back to how it had been. Unfortunately, I cannot legislate against theft. That might be within the remit of the Department of Justice. I think that we are going to see, regrettably, an increase in the incidence of theft as a result of an increase in poverty, and that is something that we might want to keep an eye on, particularly as the draconian cuts of welfare reform loom large. That is something that, I believe, can only increase.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all Members for their contribution.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Durkan: Certainly.

Mr Allister: In trying to follow what the Minister has said in response to my point about job losses, I am trying to understand what to tell the gentleman from Ballymena who came and sat in my office and explained that, through hard work, he had built up a small business where he was manufacturing bags and now found, courtesy of the Department of the Environment, that his business was to be liquidated. Am I to tell him that that is all right because the Minister says that there are some new jobs created in administering the bag tax? Is that really the depth of the Minister's concern in respect of people who are losing their jobs needlessly because of the needless inclusion in this legislation of paper bags? Surely, it is time that the Department got a grip and realised that it should address the mischief caused by plastic bags and only that mischief, and it should leave that which is not a problem alone and the jobs alone.

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Allister for his intervention. I reaffirm the fact that this was not an intention of the legislation, and I regret that this is now a reality. In his contribution, Cathal Boylan outlined the fact that there is an environmental impact in the production of paper bags. I have undertaken to keep the exemptions list under review, and I also give the Member a commitment to meet his constituent and discuss the matter further with him. So, I am happy to further that with the Member hereafter.

In conclusion, I thank everyone for their contribution to the debate and for their support for the amendments.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 (Review)

Amendment No 2 made: In clause 9, page 3, line 21, leave out "Act" and insert "section".— *[Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]*

Amendment No 3 made: In clause 9, page 3, line 30, leave out subsection (4) and insert—

> *"(4) Subsections (1) and (2) do not affect the generality of subsection (5).*
>
> *(5) The Department may at any time review whether any description of carrier bag should attract the requirement to charge.*
>
> *(6) Expressions used in subsection (5) and in the charging provisions have the same meaning in that subsection as in those provisions.*
>
> *(7) In this section—*
>
> *"charging provisions" means section 77 of and Schedule 6 to the 2008 Act and any regulations made under those provisions;*
>
> *"the Department" means the Department of the Environment.".— [Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]*

Clause 9, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 10 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 4 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment No 1. Amendment No 4 made: In the long title, after "bags;" insert

> *"to amend the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013;".— [Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment).]*

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I ask the House to take its ease as we move into the next item of business.

Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been selected, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at its Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

We updated the regulations last year with the introduction of the jobseeker's allowance domestic violence easement, which recognised the challenge that the victims of domestic violence face when making the decision to flee a perpetrator. The easement made provision for jobseeker's allowance claimants who are victims of actual or threatened domestic violence by a partner, a former partner or a family member to be exempt from job-seeking conditions and the requirements to be actively looking for employment for an initial four-week period, which can extend to a total of 13 weeks, where relevant evidence is provided. The period allows those affected by domestic violence the time to focus on important priorities, such as organising new accommodation or arranging alternative schooling for dependent children, without also having to focus on meeting their job-seeking conditions.

Those regulations amend regulation 14A of the Jobseeker's Allowance Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 to widen the definition of domestic violence to specifically include controlling and coercive behaviour. Previously, domestic violence was limited to specific types of abuse, and we need to ensure that we incorporate the new definition in full. Through our existing regulations, we give as much weight to a single incident of domestic violence as we do to multiple incidents, and we already include 16- and 17-year-olds under regulation 14A.

By extending the definition, we will send a clear message to victims about what constitutes domestic violence and abuse. That makes it clear that domestic violence can be many things, and certainly broader than physical violence alone. We know that the first incident reported to the police or other agencies is rarely the first to occur. Often, people have been subjected to abuse on multiple occasions before they seek help. The promotion of the definition should assist victims in coming forward and seeking help.

12.00 noon

Information taken from the Police Service of Northern Ireland's annual bulletin reveals that 11,160 crimes were recorded with a domestic abuse motivation in 2012-13 and that 27,190 domestic abuse incidents were recorded during the same period. Not all the crimes recorded will involve claimants in receipt of jobseeker's allowance. I am sure that you will agree that the changes are worthwhile and necessary to ensure a clear message about what constitutes domestic violence. They make it easier for all to understand, which will help those who support victims, as well as victims themselves, to understand what support they are entitled to. The regulations are a significant improvement to the help that we can offer victims of domestic violence.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Committee for Social Development

considered the proposed amendment to the legislation at its meeting on 12 September 2013 and subsequently endorsed the proposed regulations at our meeting on 7 November 2013. As the Minister indicated, the rule came into operation on 29 October 2013. The Assembly is simply being asked to confirm that. Following its formal consideration of a report by the Examiner of Statutory Rules, the Committee recommends the rule to the Assembly.

As the Minister said, the rule will amend the Jobseekers Order 1995 domestic violence easement regulation to broaden the definition of the term "domestic violence". The inclusion of "controlling behaviour" and "coercive behaviour" in the definition is a particularly important development. Members will know that, unfortunately, domestic violence need not necessarily be only physical and that other forms of domestic abuse can and do have a very serious impact on people, particularly on their health and well-being. By widening the definition of domestic violence, in this case to include coercive and controlling behaviour, such as actions that make victims subordinate or dependent by isolating them from sources of support or depriving them of the means needed for independence, we begin to send a very clear message to perpetrators that that type of behaviour is absolutely unacceptable and will not be tolerated. More importantly, we will send the message to victims that we will support them in the system. The Committee therefore welcomes the rule and the additional protection that it will afford victims of domestic abuse.

On behalf of the Committee for Social Development, I ask the Assembly to confirm the regulations.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome any recognition of the dreadful consequences of domestic violence. It remains at far too high a level in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister explain whether people who have been victims of domestic violence are required to have reported it to the police and have followed through with a prosecution to have recognition under the legislation?

Mr Copeland: I support the statutory rule. The rationale for regulation 14A was clear when the Assembly adopted it. People in an abusive relationship, be it actual or threatened, find themselves under a great deal of pressure, so they are often not in a position to focus on finding employment. The exemption in the regulation therefore gave jobseekers who experienced abuse a period of flexibility for four weeks, which, as has been said, can be extended to up to 13 weeks.

Of course, it is important that people are not overlooked when determining who has been a victim of abuse. Today's amendments to the Jobseeker's Allowance Regulations will further expand the definition of abuse, broadening it out to include coercive behaviour and controlling behaviour, which are very common features in relationship and other breakdowns.

The numbers of people in abusive relationships would shock and sadden you. The victims do not bear only physical scars. Emotional abuse is designed to shoot to bits their self-esteem and sense of identity. By using controlling behaviour, as others said, the perpetrators often seek to isolate their intended victims from their natural network of support, which is their family and their wider circle of friends. Emotional abuse can often have just as lasting an impact on victims of domestic abuse — importantly, both men and women. It is important that the protections that we have in place are extensive and even-handed. I support the statutory rule as, in my view, it will only strengthen the protections that have been in place for victims of domestic abuse.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for bringing the motion to the House. The figures that he quoted are sadly only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to domestic abuse. This recognition of the wider definition and the ability to take away at least one burden in applying for a particular range of benefits is, in itself, beneficial, and we are delighted to support this change in regulations.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased at the consensus of support across the Assembly for the regulations and thank the Chair, Mr Maskey, and the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which they have dealt with them.

The only question was raised by Mrs Kelly about whether a person had to have gone through the courts before the regulations could come into effect. The position is very simple: victims need to leave a home shared with the perpetrator before they access easement from jobseeker's allowance. We have widened the situations covered by this support for victims, but we considered it sensible to continue to support those who had taken steps to leave an abusive relationship.

The regulations allow victims of domestic violence to access the exemption from jobseeking conditions for an initial period of four weeks. We would consider that exemption only if the incident took place within the 26 weeks before the claimant notifies the jobs and benefits office or the Social Security Agency about it and provided the claimant is not living at the same address as the perpetrator at the time of notification. At the end of the four-week period, as long as there is written evidence of the kind required by the regulations, the period can be extended to 13 weeks. However, if a case were being taken to court, that could be quite a long drawn-out matter, and such a situation is covered.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.*

Private Members' Business

Accident and Emergency Departments: Crisis Conditions

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has allowed 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 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 are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McKinney: I beg to move

> *That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis conditions recently experienced by patients at the accident and emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this, and other occurrences where accident and emergency departments have been overstretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times.*

It is important to reflect on how we got here by way of some important background information. Some years ago, we stood four-square behind unions and staff when we rejected major budget cuts that we said would affect people, and they have affected people. As a party, we rejected what we saw as the privatisation agenda at the heart of Transforming Your Care (TYC). We acknowledge that there is a need for change in the health service, but not in the way proposed in Transforming Your Care. We made it clear that this would adversely affect patients, staff and front line services, and, in the build-up to what we say is a crisis in the Royal and Craigavon hospitals, we say that they have.

The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) conducted research into Transforming Your Care that found a number of things. If the analysis did anything, it underscored that there was a lack of confidence in A&E services and community care. What did it do? It tried to deal with both at the same time by taking money out of front line services and hoping that it could privatise the community side. What has, in fact, happened is that it has pressured front line services and failed to provide adequately for community services. We argue that that has exacerbated the problem.

They identified what they saw as a problem and, in fact, made it worse. That is the background to what we are dealing with today. Dealing with the two issues in tandem was always going to produce further crises. We predicted that and it happened.

The aim of the amendment is to play down the extent of the problem and pretend that, instead of a systemic problem, we simply had a pressure. Tell that to the unions that have been complaining for months, not about single pressures but burgeoning pressures. Tell that to the nurses who describe those pressures as unbearable. In the Royal College of Nursing's (RCN's) judgement — I checked with it again yesterday, and it remains its judgement — the conditions and pressures are tantamount to a crisis that renders the service on the brink of being unsustainable.

We accept that the RCN is there to promote its members, but when an organisation as valued as the RCN says what it has said, we, the Minister and the Department have to listen. Tell patients who regularly wait for hours at A&Es that there is no crisis. On Friday night, my daughter had to wait at A&E for seven hours. That is just unacceptable. Tell others who cannot get a GP appointment for weeks. Tell the thousands of people who had their consultant's appointment cancelled by the consultant, yet the health service has conducted no analysis of why that is the case. The budget cutbacks and fault lines in decision-making are the underlying problems.

Last week, we met the unions and heard painful stories about some of the particular issues. One of them was about patients on trolleys that nurses could not reach, and we now hear last night that there was further major waiting on trolleys in the RVH. We heard other stories about nurses leaving work crying and worrying that they had or had not done something that could lead to them being struck off.

At this stage, as we have done in various debates this week, I want to praise the efforts of the staff. It is important to take their efforts into consideration in the debate. They are working in very stressful circumstances, and it is those stressful circumstances that we are trying to address. When they go home in the evening, they worry that something that they may or may not have done could lead to them being struck off. That is a crisis for them.

I do not know who is hiding behind whom, but it is has to be very worrying when a health trust tells the Minister that it is shutting a vital, strategic A&E service, and he claims that he opposes the closure. That is a subsidiary body telling a ruling body what to do, and that is a crisis at the heart of the health service. That is what happened with the Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals, and we know that many people from Lagan Valley came to the Royal Victoria Hospital and added to the numbers that provoked the circumstances of Wednesday fortnight ago.

Let us now focus on the Belfast/Craigavon situation and use some of the evidence that the nurses provided to us. They have been experiencing pressures for months, if not years. Their work patterns and employment conditions are stressed because of the strategic direction that the Health and Social Care Board wants to go in. Nurses now see the bank system, which should be an instrument for putting some flexibility into the system, being used as a major employment mechanism for nurses in the health service. According to the RCN, it is a mechanism for temporary contracts, a cost-control measure and leaves nurses vulnerable to being put into unfamiliar situations and circumstances. For the RCN, that is not a pressure; it is a crisis.

I have a sad illustration of strategic failure from a patient's perspective. A woman goes to the Royal Victoria Hospital's A&E because she cannot get a GP appointment for three weeks. She is forced to go to A&E, adding to the numbers putting pressure on the system, for something that could be dealt with by a doctor. She goes to A&E, which is employing a doctor at an astronomical cost per shift to weed out the doctor cases from the emergency cases, and

who is the doctor at A&E? It is her doctor. That is a crisis and failure at the heart of the health service.

Let us look at the Royal Victoria Hospital. The Minister might deny it and say that the incident at the Royal Victoria Hospital was a one-off spike. However, it was no one-off; it was a crisis waiting to happen. Figures issued last week show that burgeoning numbers were building up from October right through Christmas, but the Minister, the Department and the Trust say no and that everybody was dealt with within 12 hours. He ignores the spikes elsewhere. Are they all spikes? I do not think so. There is a pattern. Their collective nature adds up to a real crisis in the health service, predicated by budget cuts, exacerbated by failed strategic thinking and a TYC document that is inherently flawed. That is the depth of the crisis.

12.15 pm

We know that the public is concerned. For them, it is a crisis of confidence, a crisis of management, a financial crisis in some cases — a crisis a day. We are not dealing with a simple matter of a different perspective but a failure of a Department and a Minister to recognise that there is a problem. That is the worst sort of failure. Not to see the problem or to pretend that it does not exist means there is a real chance that nothing will be done about it. For us, that is the issue. We have to examine the nature of the problem, accept that there is a problem and, by virtue of that, do something about it.

There is mounting evidence. Just take yesterday's Question Time to the Health Minister. It is clear that there is not enough money for invest-to-save options in Transforming Your Care, and not enough was released through the January monitoring round. The two figures from last year and this year add up to well short of what is needed. We were told yesterday that 50% of emergency department posts were unfilled and we cannot now access Commonwealth trained doctors because of EU regulations. Those are mounting problems that contribute to the overall problem. That is all on top of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust's unilateral decision to shut its emergency operations at Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals because of a shortage of middle-grade doctors. The Minister tells us that he was opposed to that decision.

You have to hand it to the writers of the amendment in their praise of "operational escalation procedures" implemented at the Royal. It was their major incident plan. If anything identifies that there is a crisis, it is when you implement your major incident plan. Of course we should praise the staff for their efforts; that goes without saying. However, those staff are facing demands on an ongoing basis, and praise wears thin when you keep the pressure on.

A review of what happened at the Royal without looking at the wider context and background will be worthless. For that reason, and given the background that we sketched out, it is clear that we cannot support that. The situation calls for a much wider strategic investigation.

The health service is a £4 billion a year business. We need better outcomes and achieved targets to underscore that type of investment. Issues such as this collectively amount to more than just a pressure. They amount to a strategic problem that promotes crisis conditions. Together, they represent a crisis for the health service. We know that the Minister's approach has been to deny that and to attribute blame to a range of people, including journalists, the media and politicians. For us, this is a classic case of issue avoidance. The Assembly has an opportunity today to send out a public message that it is concerned that a failure to deal with the underlying causes will mean that the problem will not disappear, but will, in fact, remain.

Mrs Cameron: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "concern" and insert

> *"the pressures recently experienced at the accident and emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast and their impact on patients; notes that the operational escalation procedures invoked worked effectively, and expresses gratitude for the dedication and efforts of healthcare staff who can often work long hours in challenging environments; further notes that the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are reviewing the Royal Victoria Hospital incident to see whether refinement in Health and Social Care business continuity planning is required; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this and other occurrences where accident and emergency departments have been overstretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times."*

I am aware that, however our views come across about whether the incident was a crisis or a concern, our arguments will be of little comfort to those who were personally caught up in that series of events. Rather than labour over definitions, it is more important to examine what happened, why it happened, the explanations that were given and, most importantly, what lessons have been learned.

The truth of these matters is reflected by the facts, and I took note of what the chief executive officer of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust had to say when a major incident occurred some weeks ago at the Royal Victoria Hospital. It was standard practice and was responded to when operational escalation procedures were invoked, and proven to work effectively, with much credit going to staff who responded. Thanks to their efforts, the situation at the A&E department was resolved within hours. That does not make everything all right, but it is reassuring that the backup plan worked. Had there been no plan, the consequences do not bear thinking about but, thankfully, that was not the case.

Statistics show that attendances at emergency departments since 2008-09 have decreased. Although the incidents mentioned in the motion are deeply regrettable, incidents such as that are rare and infrequent. We therefore have to express our gratitude to the healthcare staff for their dedication and efforts in responding to such incidents. Without them, we would undoubtedly be talking about a crisis — indeed, perhaps more than one.

I genuinely feel for anyone sitting waiting to be seen in accident and emergency, especially as it is a very busy and stressful environment. I am sure that we have all been there at some time or another; I certainly have. However, recent figures show that most patients are seen within the four-hour target. While these figures are not perfect — not all patients are seen within this time frame — they do reflect a relatively efficient environment. I concede that

these figures, facts and information may not offer much comfort — in fact, probably none at all — to the patients and the families who are waiting, worried and concerned for their loved ones. However, I want improvements to be made and trust that the Minister is working to ensure that improvements are made by continuing engagement with the board and relevant trusts.

Equally, in this age of 24-hour news, I understand the ease with which press statements create dramatic headlines. However, statements will not resolve the pressures faced in our hospitals or do anything for the morale of those who work there. This is the nature of health and social care. Coupled with the fact that the system is free from the point of entry, that means that there will always be competing pressures, unpredictability and times of seriously high demand, with emergency procedures being adopted.

For our part, as the public using these services, there is a responsibility on all of us to ensure that emergency services are sought only for emergencies and that we get to know the services of our local medical centres and out-of-hours practices and see what they have on offer. In many cases, those services are able to deal with a range of ailments and injuries. That was reiterated by the Minister on a recent visit to Dalriada urgent care facility in Ballymena, which provides out-of-hours GP services to a population of 459,000 in the Northern Trust area. The Minister said that he was committed to ensuring that services are fit for purpose and that people choose wisely which services they access. Some people visit emergency departments for healthcare issues that could be dealt with at home, by a GP or by phoning out-of-hours services. That puts pressure on our services. Out-of-hours GPs are central to helping the public choose the appropriate care.

As we have said often in the Chamber, Transforming Your Care is a recognition that our health service is under stress. It seeks to correct the problems by bringing us into the 21st century. The nature of the expertise and experience of acute hospitals like the Royal Victoria Hospital or Craigavon Area Hospital means that they will, at times, face heavy demand for their services. That is recognised, and I trust that the Minister will continue his efforts to ensure that those facilities are given all the support that they need.

Of course, the system is not perfect. Many aspects of it require attention, and Transforming Your Care seeks to achieve that. However, it will take time to get the balance right. Members should therefore get behind the strategy rather than criticise on the back of headlines. This is our health service, not the Minister's or the Department's. It is therefore up to all of us to see its future secured and maintained.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cameron: Go ahead.

Mrs D Kelly: I have listened carefully to what the Member has had to say. However, she has so far failed to recognise the budgetary constraints under which accident and emergency and, indeed, the entire health service is operating. Will she not concede that there are severe financial constraints on the delivery of services, particularly those in A&E?

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for her intervention. I will leave it to the Minister to answer the queries regarding the budget.

I believe that our health service is safe to use. I have confidence in the service. As stated in the amendment, both the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are undertaking a review of the incident at the Royal Victoria Hospital and of their business contingency plans to ensure the safety of all. I am sure that whatever recommendations they make will have support if the patients are at the centre of them.

The amendment further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate these issues, along with other occurrences of accident and emergency departments being overstretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times. That expands ever so slightly on the original motion to ensure that other incidents are not missed and are investigated accordingly. I ask Members to support the amendment.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. First, I apologise to the proposer of the motion for missing the initial comments. I speak as a member of the Health Committee in support of the motion.

It is important to reflect on the facts and that on 8 January, 42 patients were on trolleys at 9.00 pm in the Royal Victoria Hospital and a major incident plan was declared. Last night, we had an incident where 32 people were on trolleys, and I acknowledge that staff worked diligently. Nonetheless, it highlights how serious, ongoing and daily the issue is for our staff in emergency departments across the Six Counties. The announcement of a major incident plan would suggest to any observer that something is badly wrong. That view is held among staff, medical professionals and the public, and they struggle when an incident of that nature is described as an "exceptional circumstance".

The current ministerial target for emergency care waiting times in 2013-14 is that 95% of patients are treated, admitted or discharged within four hours. However, in the quarter up to September 2013, it was very clear that the four- and 12-hour targets fell short of ministerial targets. There were 424 people waiting over 12 hours, and there were 320 breaches in the Ulster Hospital alone. Therefore, there clearly needs to be a ministerial focus and a strategy to tackle that.

The model of Transforming Your Care is much heralded and is presented as a strategic and significant shift in the delivery of health services, which, indeed, it is. However, what impact will shifting £83 million from acute to community and primary care without addressing the crisis in our emergency departments have?

In November 2013, the College of Emergency Medicine produced a report that stated that the current system is neither safe nor sustainable. It produced 11 recommendations, and, in response to a recent question from Gerry Kelly MLA, the Health Minister indicated that an action plan is in place to implement the recommendations. So, I hope that, in his response, the Minister will indicate what action has been taken and what progress has been made.

Cuts to 24-hour A&E provision in south Down have recently been described by a community health nurse as:

> *"the failing of the Minister and his officials to successfully implement appropriate workforce planning."*

Figures suggest that, as predicted, the failure of workforce planning and the closure of other facilities has brought additional stress to current facilities, particularly in the Belfast area. It has been noted that up to 60 people who attended the Royal during the major incident were from other parts. That suggests, therefore, that closures converged and put pressures on Belfast.

The trade union movement has called on the Minister to start staffing up and to stop closing beds. The Royal College of Nursing says that we need to review our service and to identify the gaps. We hear much about connected health and health at home, but it remains the case that unacceptable numbers of elderly people are being admitted to hospital because of the wrong medication.

Recruitment is also an issue that cannot and should not be ignored or avoided. A response to me from the Medical and Dental Training Agency on 17 December 2013 stated that:

> *"currently there are 85 vacant training posts in all specialities and levels which are spread across the 5 HSC trusts."*

In core surgery programmes, we were left in August 2013 with 21 gaps in a programme containing 91 posts. Due to resignations and other career choices, that number will increase to 26 posts from February.

12.30 pm

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

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Staffing up will require the Minister to address these issues. I fully support the motion.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after 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 debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Justice System: Delays

1. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice what steps will he put in place to ensure that tackling processing delays in the criminal justice system will result in a faster and fairer justice system. *(AQO 5395/11-15)*

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I am personally overseeing an ambitious and far-reaching programme of work to transform the performance of the system. This includes a range of procedural, legislative and structural reforms that, in some cases, represent a fundamental shift in the operation of our system. My officials have been reporting progress to the Justice Committee every six months. Although some improvements have been made, I am clear that we need to go further. The draft Justice Bill, which I propose to introduce in the first half of this year, will include provisions to reform the committal process, to encourage earlier guilty pleas, to introduce prosecutorial fines as an alternative to court, to introduce new statutory rules around how cases must be managed and to reform the summons process. We are also working with justice partners to improve the timeliness of forensic evidence, to make better use of live links and to expedite cases where there is likely to be a guilty plea.

Finally, I have given particular focus to cases involving young people. I am currently consulting on the introduction of statutory time limits to the youth court and on an equality impact assessment of youth engagement clinics, a new process to support young people in making better informed and earlier decisions about their cases. This is a difficult and complex problem, but, given the commitment of senior leaders in the criminal justice agencies, I am confident that we will succeed in delivering a faster, fairer justice system.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the latest findings on delays in court proceedings, does the Minister agree that the continuing unacceptable delays undermine confidence in the judicial system delivering faster, fairer justice?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr Brady that there are concerns that, if we are failing to deliver justice quickly and efficiently, there are dangers to the justice system. That is why we are looking at areas such as committal reform; summons reform; statutory case management, where the Lord Chief Justice has given a particular lead to his colleagues; and measures to encourage earlier guilty pleas where a guilty plea will be made anyway. I believe that those measures, as indeed the allocation of an additional judge to the Belfast Crown Court has seen significant progress in cases being put through that court, are enhancing confidence in the system.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. Obviously, there is an allegation that there is a piecemeal system

regarding efficiencies, particularly targeting financial savings. Can the Minister point to any specifics where there have been real financial savings and efficiency savings?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Elliott for the question. The answers that I have just given to Mr Brady, giving the detail of some of the work that has been done, are all about enhancing efficiency and improving the speed with which things go through the system, thereby ensuring that we get the best possible value for money. The Member may be hinting at the issue of the cost of legal aid: that issue also has to be addressed, but it is not the sole way by which we seek to reform the system.

Mr A Maginness: I agree with the Minister that there is a real need to manage the whole system in a more efficient and effective manner. Does he agree that statutory time limits are desirable to bring about the better management of the system?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for that point, and I agree entirely that statutory time limits are important. I believe that it is in fact the case that the consultation on statutory time limits for the youth court is already encouraging and enhancing the progress that was under way. There is no doubt that we could not have introduced statutory time limits at a very early stage, because there was a danger that we could not live up to them. However, as part of the reform package, they underpin the good work that is being done by a number of agencies across the system.

Animal Cruelty: Convictions

2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the sentencing options available following convictions for animal cruelty. *(AQO 5396/11-15)*

10. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the conviction rate of people involved in animal cruelty. *(AQO 5404/11-15)*

Mr Ford: Principal Deputy Speaker, with permission, I will take questions 2 and 10 together.

Acts of animal cruelty, such as those witnessed recently in east Belfast, are abhorrent and are to be utterly condemned. There is no justification or place for this sort of appalling treatment of any animals. Animal cruelty and welfare are the policy responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development; my role as Justice Minister is to ensure that proposals for offences and penalties, from any Minister or any Department, sit comfortably within our legislative framework.

The Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 was taken through the Assembly by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. I agree that the offences and penalties that the Act created are appropriate within the framework of criminal law. The Act increased the maximum penalty for offences relating to breaches of animal welfare. In the Crown Court, for the most serious offences, the maximum penalty is two years' imprisonment, an unlimited fine or both. In the Magistrates' Court, the maximum penalty is six months' imprisonment, a fine of up to £5,000 or both. The Act also provides for the disqualification of people from owning or keeping animals.

Under the previous legislation, for the last five years for which figures are available, 90 people were convicted of various offences, which in some cases led to a custodial sentence. In the first two years of the new legislation, initial figures indicate that there have been 34 convictions for causing unnecessary suffering to animals or for animal fighting and 49 disqualifications from keeping animals.

Prosecution and sentencing in individual cases are matters for the independent prosecuting authorities and the judiciary. I know, however, that sentencing guidelines for the 2011 Act have been produced for the Magistrates' Court, in accordance with the Lord Chief Justice's programme for action.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer. There is widespread concern among those who hear about the many horrific crimes, either in the media or in print, at the very few convictions secured and, indeed, at the sentences that are given to those who commit the most heinous of crimes. Society demands more than what virtually amounts to a slap on the wrist. Why are we not getting the response that society demands?

Mr Ford: Although I agree with the general thrust of what Mr Newton says, I fear that I need to be careful not to stray into discussing sentencing in individual cases. As I understand it, in the five years of the previous legislation before the current legislation was introduced, there were six custodial sentences among the 90 convictions. In the past two years, there has been only one custodial sentence out of the 34 convictions. As I said in my principal answer, the issue is being addressed by the Lord Chief Justice in his sentencing guidelines, but individual cases must remain the responsibility of individual members of the judiciary. I have absolutely no doubt that there is widespread concern at the level of animal cruelty on the part of small numbers of people in this society and a concern that that should be followed by very significant sentencing.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to come to their question as quickly as possible, especially when asking supplementary questions.

Mrs Cameron: The Minister will be aware of the recent events at Massereene Golf Club in Antrim, where the swan was found. That was quite distressing for most people to hear. I know that he will agree that, as of 2011, we have very good legislation in place to deal with animal cruelty, but is it meaningless without the adequate staff in place to enforce it?

Mr Ford: The issue is not only about the relevant police staff being in place to carry out investigations but about information being supplied by any member of the public who can assist.

I agree with my constituency colleague about the horrendous nature of that offence in Antrim. Anybody who has information on any such offence has a duty to report it. It is the responsibility of all of us with information to report criminal offences and to assist the police and the prosecution service.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. What preventative measures can be taken to eliminate or deal with the types of obscene cruelty that were recently highlighted in the media?

Mr Ford: Again, although I agree that Ms McCorley has a point, I fear that I would be straying into the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development's territory if I were to

go too far into that. There is clearly an issue of education and of ensuring that the widespread public abhorrence is carried through to the small number of people who would carry out such acts. That, in part, is done by those who are willing to provide information to assist the police and the Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to follow through on potential reports of cruelty. However, it is an issue that, in policy terms, lies with the Member's party colleague. I am happy to see that the justice agencies cooperate with DARD on anything that is relevant for us.

Mr Beggs: Animal cruelty investigations generally find that a large number of cases are being reported but there is a low level of prosecution. Will the Minister advise how he has networked with the other members of the justice family and other relevant agencies to ensure that animal cruelty issues are given the significant interest and efforts required?

Mr Ford: I am sure that Mr Beggs is aware that there is a specific unit in the PSNI responsible for animal and wildlife crime issues. It is, of course, also a matter for all neighbourhood policing. It is an issue not just of the justice agencies joining together but of the responsibilities that lie with local councils for pets, in particular, and the wider policy responsibilities that lie with DARD for farm animals. There is a need for significant joining up. There is also the issue that it may well be seen to be appropriate at a local level by, for example, PCSPs, if they believe that they have a particular problem in their area. As ever, it is an issue of the partnership of a variety of agencies and the wider community.

Mr Agnew: Obviously, sentencing can occur only where perpetrators are caught. What is being done to improve the rates of detection, given that what has been reported in the media is merely the tip of the iceberg?

Mr Ford: I can only repeat to Mr Agnew the points I have just made. There are clearly issues that are widespread across a number of agencies, but, as in the case of any offence, the key issue is to ensure that information is provided to the police, local councils or DARD where appropriate. That is the best way in which we will deal with those issues, at the same time as we address the widespread issue of education. It is not simply a matter that the police can carry out on their own; it really requires that joined-up approach and a recognition — I think this was exacerbated in the minds of many people by what we saw on television last week — of the horrendous nature of some of the cruelty and the important issue of taking action against it.

Drugs: Prison Procedures

3. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister of Justice what procedures are in place to deal with prisoners who have been found in possession of illicit drugs. *(AQO 5397/11-15)*

Mr Ford: A range of measures is in place to prevent illicit drugs coming into prison, including the use of passive drugs dogs, regular cell searches, visitor and staff searches and mandatory drug testing. At all three prisons, revised intelligence-led searching strategies have also been developed to improve performance. The vigilance of staff is also a key factor in the discovery of illicit drugs. Recently, that vigilance resulted in the life of a prisoner who had taken drugs being saved.

Anyone found in possession of or testing positive for illicit drugs will be considered for referral to the police and subject to prison disciplinary action. The Prison Service also continues to work in close partnership with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which has lead responsibility for the delivery of healthcare in prisons, to minimise abuse of drugs and to educate and support prisoners who have addiction issues. The trust ensures that relevant and robust measures are in place for the management of in-possession medication and support is in place through alcohol and drug treatment, counselling services, multidisciplinary case reviews and drug awareness sessions.

A joint initiative involving the Prison Service, the Police Service and other partners to reduce the drug supply and demand in Maghaberry prison is under way. Already, during that initiative, there have been 98 drug seizures, seven visitors have been arrested and 51 cases are being investigated by police with a view to prosecution. The Prison Service will continue to work closely with the police to share and act on intelligence relating to drugs.

Mrs McKevitt: Will the Minister indicate what classes of drugs have been found in the past six months in the prison system?

Mr Ford: The simple answer to Ms McKevitt's question is "Almost every class of drug". That has included, unfortunately, properly issued medication in the possession of prisoners who do not have right to it. That is one of the other issues that need to be addressed. For example, the South Eastern Trust is looking at issues of supervised swallowing for some of the particularly dangerous medication to ensure that it is not traded within the prison. Other than that, we see a variety of drugs being smuggled into prison and attempts to smuggle them in.

2.15 pm

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his answer. Although an emphasis can rightly be placed on what people call illicit drugs, we all know that a high number of prisoners are dependent on prescription drugs. Will the Minister outline some of the programmes that are in place to deal with that and how the success of those programmes is measured?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney. As I just said to Mrs McKevitt, the key issue is to ensure that, where prescription medication is supplied, it is supplied and used by the individual to whom it is supplied. That is why, where there are particular concerns about the six most tradable drugs, they are largely dealt with by supervised swallow to ensure that vulnerable prisoners are not put under pressure to trade them. At the same time, there are wider issues of education, but those are principally the responsibility of the South Eastern Trust in its healthcare dealings, rather than the Prison Service. Obviously, prison staff have a role in supporting the trust staff's work.

Mr Humphrey: Recently, I wrote to the Minister on this issue. He came back with statistics pointing out that a project that was started on 7 October last year saw that there were 53 drugs seizures in Maghaberry, six visitors to the prison were arrested for the possession of drugs and

40 prisoners are being investigated for drugs offences. I welcome the proactive approach and the initiative that is in place, but will he assure the House that that will be rolled out across the prison estate in Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I did not quite catch the numbers that Mr Humphrey gave, but I think that I updated the numbers in my main answer. However, given that it was started as a pilot project in Maghaberry, the scale of seizures and the number of people who were intercepted means that we have decided to continue the process in Maghaberry. Obviously, we will look further at the other two prisons after that, but it certainly was not a pilot project that was to be run for a short time and then stopped. Work continues at Maghaberry, and we will review how it then applies to the other two institutions.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his responses on a subject that concerns all of us. What steps have been taken to ensure that contact between prisoners and visitors will not facilitate the exchange of illicit drugs?

Mr Ford: Mr Cree correctly highlighted that, in many cases, we are talking about visitors who attempt to smuggle drugs in. That is why visitors are subjected to, for example, a passive drug-dog search as they go into the prison, although we accept that that is not 100% guaranteed. Clearly, the great majority of visits take place in open circumstances but under a degree of supervision. Where there are specific concerns, visits happen on a closed basis where there is no physical contact between individuals. That is all done on the basis of an intelligence-led process. The reality is that we have actually seen more seizures with fewer searches in recent months because of the use of that intelligence-led process, rather than with a blanket process. I believe that that is part of the lesson that needs to be learnt.

Rural Crime: Convictions

4. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the conviction rates for rural agricultural-related crime. *(AQO 5398/11-15)*

Mr Ford: In Northern Ireland, as in other jurisdictions, there is no specific offence of rural crime or agricultural crime under criminal law. Conviction data are recorded for generic offences, such as theft, robbery or criminal damage. It is not currently possible to identify from the data whether a conviction relates to rural or agricultural-related crime. However, reducing opportunities to commit crime and to make rural communities safer is a key strand of the community safety strategy.

A business and rural crime action plan is in place, a key outcome of which was the establishment of the rural crime unit. That initiative is supported by my Department, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the NFU Mutual insurance society and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. The unit provides a dedicated resource to identify trends and patterns in agricrime to assist the targeting of resources and initiatives accordingly. The outcome of the work was recently evidenced when the Agriculture Minister, Michelle O'Neill, and I announced a funding package to encourage farmers in theft hotspots to fit security devices to their machinery. At a local level, policing and community safety partnerships have developed action plans to address local community concerns, which include the development of tailored solutions to address rural crime.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he accept the criticism that, between the Police Service and his Department, insufficient resources are being allocated to tackle the problem? A recent case in point is that of a County Armagh farmer who was forced to undertake his own investigations in order to recover his stolen farmyard machinery.

Mr Ford: Most Members know that, if I started to stray into the discussion of operational issues concerning one particular crime, I really would be treading on the Chief Constable's toes. The issue of resourcing is for the Chief Constable. The deployment of those resources in an individual district is the responsibility of the district commander. None of that is an issue for the Minister of Justice.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Given the Department's cooperation with DARD in the rural crime unit and, in particular, with the animal and public health information system, what improvement has there been in detection rates of those responsible for livestock theft?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Rogers for his question. Unfortunately, I do not have specific information on livestock theft at present. Certainly, the rural crime unit's target is to see a reduction of 3% in agricrime generally in the first year of operation. The PSNI statistics branch is working on developing the necessary figures to distinguish between rural crime and specific agricultural crime, particularly looking at things such as livestock theft and machinery theft, which has exercised a number of people recently. The work of the data analyst in the rural crime unit will enable us to better measure how that works in coming years.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister tell us whether he is satisfied with investigative procedures and related outcomes on agriculture-related crime?

Mr Ford: The answer is that, until crime is reduced to zero, I, like Mrs Overend and I suspect everybody else in the Chamber, will never be satisfied. To give a specific assessment on how the police are dealing with it is, as I said to Mr McMullan, beyond my remit or role as Minister.

Haass Proposals

5. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the implications for his Department if the Haass proposals on dealing with the past are not implemented. *(AQO 5399/11-15)*

Mr Ford: The main implication of not dealing with the past is that we retain the status quo, with a number of bodies across the justice system — the PSNI, the Historical Enquiries Team (HET), the Police Ombudsman and the Coroners Service — dealing with Troubles-related cases. The individual bodies, or the system as a whole, are often the subject of criticism. I can assure Members that my Department and the criminal justice bodies take seriously their responsibilities in relation to the past and continue to dedicate significant resources to dealing with it. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the status quo is not sustainable. The needs and expectations of victims and their families are not always being met.

Criminal Justice Inspection estimates that costs will exceed £187 million over the next five years. It set out in its recent report the impact that dealing with the past has on the justice system and its capacity to deliver an effective present-day service.

More broadly, the toxic legacy of our past continues to hamper our work to build confidence and foster improved community relations in interface areas. The PSNI continues to devote significant resources to dealing with public order issues resulting from parades, flags and related protests. We simply cannot afford not to deal with our past. It is clear that we need a more encompassing and strategic approach to dealing with the past across the justice system, wider government and society.

Mr McCarthy: I very much welcome the response from the Minister. Does he agree that the need for truth and justice for victims is a priority and, indeed, that there is a legal and moral obligation on any state, particularly the Northern Ireland Executive, to seek justice and truth for victims right across Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr McCarthy. Of course, we know that, for some people, it will not be possible to have both justice and truth. That is why I believe that the proposals that emerged during the talks that were chaired by Dr Richard Haass for the establishment of both the historical investigations unit and the independent commissioner for information retrieval provide the opportunity for, where possible, justice to be obtained and, where that is not possible and victims wish it, information to be obtained that will give them some measure of comfort. Those key issues are currently before the five party leaders in talks. There is a vital necessity on moral grounds to deal with those issues of the past, meet the needs and concerns of victims, ensure that we are able to deal with that inclusively and enable the criminal justice system to operate for the needs of today.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that the Haass proposals, in their final form, should be implemented?

Mr Ford: I fear that I am straying slightly into the partisan role. However, as far as those elements of the past that fall to the Department of Justice are concerned, I believe that the proposals in the final document from Dr Haass are very close to what is required, and I am certainly committed to ensuring that the Department of Justice plays its part, both in the interests of ensuring that the system works properly and in the moral issues that I have just highlighted in my reply to Mr McCarthy.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister mentioned the cost of dealing with the past. Given the British Secretary of State's recent comments in Westminster about the fact that no additional money would be given to that, has the Minister made any representation to the Secretary of State and the British Government about their responsibilities for dealing with the past and assisting with the cost of dealing with the past?

Mr Ford: I thank Mrs Kelly for that fairly pertinent question. I am not sure that the Minister of Justice has ever made any case to the Secretary of State for the need for the British Government to supply any funding towards dealing with the past. The leader of the Alliance Party most certainly has.

If we proceed through to establish the institutions recommended by the Haass report, or close to those recommended by the Haass report, then, as Minister of Justice, I believe that it will be important that both Governments — the British Government and the Irish Government — but principally the British Government, should step up to their responsibilities for dealing with the past and not exclusively pay, but help with the funding for that to enable the budget that the DOJ has to deal with the issues of the present, while the past is dealt with in a comprehensive way.

Mr Nesbitt: To follow on from Mrs Kelly's question to the Minister and his response to Mr Lynch when he said that the Haass seven proposals for dealing with the past are close to what is required, what are the cost implications for his Department?

Mr Ford: The Department has not done an assessment of the cost implications, because we do not have the full worked-out arrangements agreed by the five parties to know what it is possible to implement. However, it is absolutely clear that very significant costs for the past are falling on the Department of Justice at present, which are creating a very significant burden on the institutions in the justice system dealing with the needs of the present. That is why it is so vital that we deal with the past on economic grounds at the same time as we deal with the past on moral grounds.

Youth Justice Review

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the youth justice review. *(AQO 5400/11-15)*

Mr Ford: When I accepted the large majority of the recommendations in the youth justice review report in October 2012, I published an implementation plan setting out how they would be taken forward. Updates to the plan were issued in January and June 2013; a further update is now due and will be published shortly. It will be made available on the Department's website.

Successes have included the roll-out of police discretion, which has helped to deliver on the recommendation around a proportionate response to low-level offending by children that does not unnecessarily invoke the weight of the justice system; a renewed focus on efficiency and more appropriate outcomes, with the proposed introduction of statutory time limits and the piloting of youth engagement clinics; the removal of under-18-year-olds from prison custody, and a public consultation on custody arrangements for children to inform the development of the necessary legislative changes to underpin that position; and enhanced communication with children through the development by the Public Prosecution Service of new letter templates and revised guidelines for the operation of the youth court. Those are all now in place. The review has, therefore, provided a coherent agenda to assist in the reform of our youth justice system, and I am committed to seeing it through.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As a follow-on to points raised in question 1 by my colleague Mickey Brady, is it not high time to introduce statutory time limits in youth justice cases?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McElduff for his question. I fear that he was not necessarily listening to my answers when I

answered question 1, because I made it clear that the consultation is out on statutory time limits — time limits that I believe will underpin the good work being done across the justice system. They could not have been introduced prematurely, but I believe that the time is now right, and I look forward with interest to see the responses that I get from the various elements that have been consulted.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We will now move on to topical questions.

Chief Constable: Appointment

1. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice to comment on his intervention to change the legislative stipulation on the criteria for the appointment of a new Chief Constable and whether he thinks that it is appropriate to do so as he did not discuss it with the Policing Board, and to outline the implications of his intervention now that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have forced him to take it to the Executive. *(AQT 621/11-15)*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that one question is sufficient.

Mr Brady: I am trying to do my best here, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am not sure whether the Minister got the end of that, but hopefully he did.

Mr Ford: I am sure that Mr Brady's comments will be picked up by his colleagues if I fail to answer them adequately at this stage. I must, first of all, correct his suggestion that I did not consult the Policing Board. The Policing Board raised the issue with me in May last year.

Given the significant interest in this issue over the past 24 hours, I hope, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, that you will allow me to take a little longer than I usually take to answer questions to set out my position, because it is important that the issues are properly understood and that debate and comments are informed by the facts. I fear that we have heard a number of public comments reflecting a lack of understanding about the process and the implications of my decision.

The post of Chief Constable is a vital one, and my sole intention has been to ensure that the process for appointing a Chief Constable is governed by fairness, common sense and equality. I have no agenda beyond that. Indeed, my decision gives me as Minister less control over the process and gives the Policing Board more control. It might be helpful if I outline, first of all, my powers in this area, which are set out in regulation 11 of the Police Service of Northern Ireland Regulations 2005. The regulation states:

> *"no person shall be appointed as Chief Constable of the police service unless he holds or has held such rank, in such force and for such period,"*

— as the Minister —

> *"shall determine in respect of such an appointment."*

I have made clear my intention to change the arrangements. A determination by me would issue in accordance with regulation 46 of the 2005 regulations. No other legislative process is required, so the decision will not delay the process of appointment.

It is also essential to understand the board's role and, indeed, primacy in the appointment of a Chief Constable, which is enshrined in section 35 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. The section clearly states:

> *"The Board shall, subject to the approval of"*

— the Minister —

> *"appoint the Chief Constable."*

My intentions are aimed solely at enabling the board to have more latitude, and I remain entirely respectful of the board's primacy.

Let me summarise how the matter has been dealt with. Criteria for the appointment of a Chief Constable in England and Wales were amended in 2012 to remove the criterion relating to experience gained outside the current force. In May 2013, the Policing Board made contact with my Department to ask that the matter be raised with me, pointing out concerns about the current arrangements. I was clear in my response that I wished to know what level of support changes might receive from the board.

As required by legislation, and to take the issue forward, I launched a wider consultation exercise, going beyond the bodies that I am required to consult. I consulted the Police Advisory Board for Northern Ireland, on which the Policing Board, the Chief Constable and staff associations are represented. I also sought the view of the Equality Commission and the Justice Committee.

It has become clear from correspondence with the Policing Board and from the Justice Committee appearance that agreed positions have not been reached. It falls to me, therefore, in accordance with my powers in the Regulations, to reach a view and issue a determination. I announced yesterday my intentions and I welcome the opportunity to set out now the benefits of the changes.

As things stand, and as originally pointed out — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. Let the Minister finish his statement.

Mr Ford: I am sorry, Principal Deputy Speaker; I understood that you were allowing me to take longer than normal. Thank you.

Mr McNarry: How did you get that? Did you ask for it?

Ms Lo: Yes.

Mr Ford: As things stand, and as originally pointed out by the Policing Board in May 2013, it may be anomalous to retain a provision that is no longer applicable in other forces. Specifically, the requirement for two years' service outside Northern Ireland may impact unfairly on certain groups; for example, females or those with dependants or a disability. The Equality Commission tends to the view that the provision could constitute indirect discrimination. I am keen, therefore, that we remove any such unnecessary barriers to the widest and fairest candidate pool, while retaining the board's power to decide itself on the best criteria.

This is not a question of balance. It is perfectly possible, in my view, to achieve both aims, simply by removing the current mandatory requirement for service outside

Northern Ireland. I am asking the board to consider outside service to be desirable, as a minimum, but not essential. It is then entirely open for the board to decide whether that outside service is essential in the forthcoming competition.

In summary, my intention is to further empower the board to define its requirements for Chief Constable.

I am aware that there has been some comment to the effect that I have intervened in the middle of a recruitment process. Mr Brady made that point, but that is not my intention and nor has it been the case. The board is at the earliest stage of responding to Matt Baggott's recent decision, and the recruitment process is absolutely not under way. I hope that all involved can at least agree the changes that I intend to make as that will clearly aid the board in constructing and delivering its own way forward.

I am grateful for this opportunity.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Speaker's Office was contacted and informed that the Minister might need some additional time to set out his position. That was agreed.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his extensive answer. The Deputy Chief Constable gave the two-year rule as one of the reasons for her retirement, and the Minister's announcement has come some weeks later. Has he been in touch to apologise? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Ford: I have no reason to apologise to the Deputy Chief Constable for a process that began with correspondence between the Department and the Policing Board in May last year, of which the Deputy Chief Constable was aware. My changes would enable the Deputy Chief Constable to be appointed Chief Constable. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order, order.

Sentencing

2. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice, given the shock in Ahoghill and Portglenone after a man was convicted of loyalist pipe bomb attacks on a primary school, a community hall and a number of GAA clubs and received only community service, whether he believes that the sentence is a suitable deterrent for such violent sectarian crimes and whether he agrees with the Director of Public Prosecutions that it was unduly lenient. *(AQT 622/11-15)*

Mr Ford: First of all, I am not aware of the specific case. Secondly, if I was aware of it, it would be inappropriate for me to discuss the sentencing decisions of a judge in a particular case. Thirdly, Mr McKay correctly highlighted that referral for undue leniency is for the Director of Public Prosecutions and not for me. That is where the matter should rest.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am not satisfied with that answer. In the past, cases have been brought up here and you have agreed to review sentencing guidelines. This case deserves some degree of attention. Does the Minister agree that there should be a review of sentencing in the case that I outlined, which he is now aware of, and does he recognise that the communities affected by this kind of crime believe that such sentencing will not deter others from carrying out such attacks in the future?

Mr Ford: I agree with Mr McKay that there are concerns in the community about such attacks. However, he has confused an individual's specific sentence in one case with the wider responsibilities that I have to set sentencing guidelines, aided by this Assembly through legislation. That is the fundamental difference and that is why I cannot go into the detail of any individual case.

OFMDFM Interventions

3. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Justice whether he can give an assurance that he is in control, given that he will be aware that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has now intervened in the affairs of the Minister of the Environment and the Minister for Regional Development. *(AQT 623/11-15)*

I am sure that the Minister will forgive me for returning to the subject of the first question.

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Dallat for the question. The issue is related to the power of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to call in procedures to the full Executive and the proportionality of their doing that.

I am absolutely certain that my decision was correct. It was appropriate, proportionate and has not created the difficulties that were highlighted by a number of people who were ill informed about the circumstances. On that basis, I would be very happy to go to the Executive meeting on Thursday to explain for the benefit of Ministers the details of what has been done, why it is appropriate and why it is my role as Justice Minister to carry that out. I will also be putting that explanation in an Executive paper over the next day or so

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer. When he goes to the Executive, will he explain to them in the impassioned way that he can that an awful lot has been done to take politics out of policing? Now that we are back in the quagmire, will he do everything that he can to minimise the damage that has been done by this row?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Dallat for making the point. I certainly have no intention of creating any damage to policing through this row. I did not start it; I carried out my statutory duties in a way that was entirely appropriate in order to enhance the role of the board in carrying out its statutory duties. I will certainly explain that to the Executive. I am not sure that I will do it in an "impassioned" way, as he described; I will explain it in as level and straightforward a way as I can, as indeed the Principal Deputy Speaker allowed me to do in the House just now. We will see how other Ministers respond when presented with the facts rather than some of the ill-informed comments that we have heard recently.

Hearing Loss Claims

4. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Justice for his reaction to the recent assessment by a legal representative that up to 50% of the legal costs associated with the RUC hearing loss cases could have potentially been saved had those cases been dealt with in a more pragmatic fashion and disposed of upon receipt of sufficient medical evidence rather than the vast majority of them being contested at the front doors of the court then settled at huge cost.
(AQT 624/11-15)

Mr Ford: I accept that there has been some concern about the amount paid in legal costs. However, it is certainly not the view of the Chief Constable, or indeed the Crown Solicitor's Office that advises him and his lawyers, that dealing with it in a way that did not incur those legal expenses would necessarily have resulted in any cheaper solutions. That was the advice that he was given, that is my understanding of how he carried it out, and that is the issue that I have to leave with him.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister is on top form in avoiding answering questions today. Does he not agree that the public will now believe that the gusto with which he pursues trying to cut legal aid and the cost of family law matters is in stark contrast to the apparent gravy train approach to the legal costs of the cases that I mentioned?

Mr Ford: It is fine for Mr Flanagan to make cheap jibes about avoiding answering questions. However, I am really surprised to hear members of Sinn Féin expecting me to take political views on policing matters. I thought that, in the policing reforms of recent years, they were opposed to that. The reality is that I have given a straight answer. How those matters are handled falls to the Chief Constable. I have separate and distinct responsibilities in managing the legal aid budget, which involve looking at the overall cost of legal aid as part of the overall cost of the justice system, given the difficult economic circumstances that we are in.

Prisons: Training Contracts

5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Justice, following the recent awarding of interim contracts to provide learning and skills training to prisoners in the North, whether he will outline the criteria against which the success or otherwise of those contracts will be assessed. *(AQT 625/11-15)*

Mr Ford: I do not have the criteria for the work done by the Prison Service on the learning and skills contracts before me. If Mr McAleer wants to write to me about any specific aspect of that, I will be very happy to respond.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he give any indication of how he intends to ensure appropriate value for money in the delivery of any of the prospective programmes?

Mr Ford: I assure Mr McAleer and the House as a whole that those issues were tested by the Prison Service in how it sought and awarded tenders for what are currently short-term contracts. There is a real issue in managing a number of services within the Prison Service. We have all seen the different benefits from the outsourcing of prison healthcare to the South Eastern Trust. By the same process, learning and skills are not an area in which the Prison Service has particular expertise. There were clear benefits in outsourcing it to those who run that kind of project. That was the basis on which the contracts were awarded and on which further, longer-term contracts will be awarded later this year.

Chief Constable: Appointment

6. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Justice whether he thought it was appropriate not to bring the significant and controversial issue of the changing of the requirement regarding the appointment of the Chief Constable to the Executive and whether he will accept the Executive's decision on the matter. *(AQT 626/11-15)*

Mr Ford: It was a narrowing of my role to enhance that of the Policing Board. Making a very modest change — the changing of a particular criterion from "essential" to "desirable" — is not, in my opinion, relevant for referral to the Executive. It is not controversial, except in the minds of some people recently; it is not a cross-cutting issue; and it is a matter that, in statute, is clearly the responsibility of the Minister of Justice.

2.45 pm

Regional Development

Northern Ireland Water: Legal Costs

1. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the costs incurred to date resulting from the legal action taken against his Department by the former director of Northern Ireland Water. *(AQO 5410/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): That legal action related to a decision made by my predecessor Conor Murphy to remove an individual from the post of non-executive director of Northern Ireland Water (NIW) in March 2010. The terms of the settlement were that the Department would agree to pay the former director's reasonable legal costs and all other legal fees. So far, the total legal fees have not been finalised, as one final fee invoice remains outstanding, but I am able to confirm that the total costs to date are £80,964·70. That includes irrecoverable VAT on the claimant's legal costs. The final total legal costs are expected to be close to £90,000.

My Department is endeavouring to complete matters as quickly as possible, and I have stated before to the Member, in response to a question for written answer, that I will undertake to write to him when the details of the final legal fees incurred in this case are available.

Mr Wells: Does the Minister accept that £80,000 is a shocking figure? I accept that Mr Gormley was extremely poorly treated by the Minister's predecessor Mr Conor Murphy, but, when the Minister came to office, he must have realised how shabbily Mr Gormley had been treated, and he could have settled immediately, but he held on, incurring further costs. Why did he not give the apology and pay his costs immediately when he came to office?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I can assure the Member and, indeed, the House that the fees have been, and will continue to be, closely scrutinised. The Member will know that I made final decisions in respect of the case, and I believe that I took those decisions for the right reasons, at the right time and in the public interest.

Mr Dallat: I am sure that Declan Gormley appreciates the fact that he has had his good name cleared of any wrongdoing. Can the Minister suggest what the costs might have been had his predecessor Conor Murphy acted in the way that he should have and agreed to the reasonable settlement that Declan Gormley asked for?

Mr Kennedy: Again, I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I have no doubt that had my predecessor acted differently, I would not be dealing with this case and the legal costs might not have arisen at all. However, those matters were outside my control. When I inherited this case, I took the time to look at it objectively and fairly; I came to my conclusions and did so very much in the public interest.

Mr Kinahan: I apologise for probably giving the Minister a crick neck. Will the Minister confirm that in settling this case he and his Department acted wholly in the public interest?

Mr Kennedy: I absolutely confirm that that is the case. I gave serious consideration to all of the factors in the case, and I concluded that it would not be in the public interest to incur significant further legal costs when there was an opportunity to settle the case on the basis of the terms outlined in the written statement. I did indeed act in the public interest in deciding that the case should be settled.

Cycle Lanes: Connswater

2. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to upgrade the existing cycle lanes along the Connswater Community Greenway route in order to complement other pedestrian and cycling routes. *(AQO 5411/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: I have outlined my ambition to give increased focus and priority to the needs of cyclists and to encourage greater participation in this healthy and sustainable form of transport. That is why I have established a cycling unit in my Department and asked that that unit, as a priority, brings forward a cycling strategy for Northern Ireland, building on the active travel strategy. I am keen to ensure that, in the context of that cycling strategy, work will be undertaken to increase the network of cycle and walking routes in Belfast and across Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that the plans for the Connswater Community Greenway will play a significant part in that network as it opens up the potential for more sustainable modes of transport, such as walking and cycling.

At present, the opportunities are there. The Member will know that we are hosting the start of the Giro d'Italia in Northern Ireland later this year. I very much think that the time for cycling, walking and sustainable travel options is with us now. I am very excited that there are a number of proposals, including the Connswater Community Greenway, that could work very well and become landmark projects in not only Belfast but all over Northern Ireland.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure that he will be aware that part of the scheme — the Knock river at Orangefield — was rerouted this morning. I am sure that that is one rerouting that he agrees with.

Will he look at the linkages between schools and the Connswater Community Greenway cycle tracks? The greenway has something like 23 schools and colleges affiliated to it.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I will set aside the issue of rerouting, because I am naturally cautious of it.

I recognise the work that the Member has done on walking and cycling in his constituency. It is very important that walking and cycling infrastructure be properly integrated into the existing infrastructure and that it provides good connections to current facilities, especially routes to school. That is one of the things that I have asked my new cycling unit to look at. I expect it to liaise with the relevant stakeholders in the Connswater Community Greenway project.

Mr Lyttle: What action will the Minister take to integrate cycling into other sustainable forms of transport and our public transport network, given the positive news that we received today that passenger numbers on our trains have increased in the past year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and for his acknowledgement of the success of rail and bus public transport. It is very significant and exciting news. The increased usage of the rail network and the improved Metro bus network services and other services are offering a very viable alternative to the use of private transport, particularly in the Belfast area. I want to build on that with sustainable travel, such as cycling and walking. The Member is the chair of the all-party group on cycling. I look forward to liaising and working with it. I hope that the Member does not endure as many punctures as I understand he has recently endured.

I very much see the cycling unit as being able to identify opportunities to improve the infrastructure for cycling, and indeed walking, as we plan future schemes and seek to improve the existing network.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Minister, in comparison with cycle lanes in other regions, how much has been delivered across the North of Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: The cycling unit has only been created. We are keen to identify a programme of work for it. I know that it will want to meet the Committee for Regional Development, of which the Member is the Deputy Chairman.

Before the end of this financial year, Roads Service plans to provide 180 metres of contraflow cycle lane in Bridge Street, Lisburn; to provide over 170 hoop-type stands for cycles at various locations across greater Belfast; and to procure almost £30,000 of traditional Sheffield cycle stands. It is ongoing work, to which there are many facets. I know that the work will have the support of not only the Member and the Regional Development Committee but the entire House.

Parking Fines

3. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's management of parking fines. *(AQO 5412/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: My Department has robust processes in place to manage parking fines. When a penalty charge notice (PCN) is issued, a driver has a choice to either pay the fine or challenge it. PCNs can be paid over the phone, online or by post. Details on how to pay a PCN are displayed on the rear of the ticket and online on the NI Direct website. The parking enforcement processing unit, based in Omagh and Coleraine, has 37 staff members and manages both payments and challenges.

If a driver believes that they were incorrectly issued with a PCN, they may challenge it by writing to Roads Service.

Details of how to do so are, again, provided on the reverse of the ticket and online. Staff in the parking enforcement processing unit will consider the challenge in line with the parking enforcement protocol, which I published in October 2012. The appellant will be informed in writing of the results and the next steps available. Ultimately, the driver has the right to submit an appeal to the Northern Ireland traffic penalty tribunal, which is managed by the Department of Justice.

Mr D McIlveen: Can the Minister indicate what he is planning to do with the dichotomy that currently exists between users of his Department's charging points for electric cars? In some areas, drivers have been faced with the situation where they have been fined for parking for more than one hour even though it takes, in some cases, at least eight hours to charge an electric car.

Mr Kennedy: I am aware of the example that the Member raises, and I have asked officials to investigate that in order to see how improvements can be made to that service and the full understanding of it communicated to the general public, particularly those who avail themselves of our charging network.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Has the Minister identified any regional disparities in the management system across the North?

Mr Kennedy: I am encouraged by the fact that, since I came to office, we have seen a reduction in penalty charge notices. I welcome that. In 2011, the figure was something like 125,000. That was reduced in 2012 to 112,000, and now, in 2013, to 108,000, so it shows a decline, and that is very much good news. I think that most people will welcome that. I can confirm that these charges and penalty notices are not put in place simply to raise finance for the Department, because, frankly, the management of parking and all the associated costs still had a cost to my Department this year of over £3 million, and that is not just a cost to the Department but to the taxpayer.

Mr Eastwood: What efforts is the Minister's Department making to stop the misuse of the very limited number of disabled parking bays that we have across the North?

Mr Kennedy: Unfortunately, a small number of people continue to abuse the parking situation and blue-badges, and prevent the genuine users from using the available spaces. We will continue to bear down as far as we can on those who are irresponsible and who do not show attitudes of good neighbourliness. I think that it is selfish and wrong, and where there are instances where we can take action against individuals who flagrantly break the rules of parking, most people will see that as justified.

Mr Cree: The Minister has touched on my question, but I wonder whether he can provide details of the calendar-year figures for last year in full, perhaps including any money raised, if he knows where that has gone?

Mr Kennedy: As I indicated, the figure has gone down. There were 108,558 penalty charges issued. That represented a reduction of some 4%.

3.00 pm

Our figures are encouraging, I think. There is no reason to be complacent, and, indeed, we are not. Of course, the use of common sense by those who park and those who apply the penalty notices is an important feature. I know that the Member would agree with me that the application of common sense would go a long way to helping everyone.

Winter Resilience Procedures

4. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether a public consultation will form part of the review of winter resilience procedures. *(AQO 5413/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: To avoid any misunderstanding on the Member's part, it might be helpful if I clarified the comments that I made to the House on Monday 13 January 2014 during my statement about the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council.

My comments were in response to the gritting actions that Roads Service carried out on the evening of 12 January and morning of 13 January 2013. I informed the House that I had asked for a full review of Roads Service's gritting actions during that period. Essentially, that is an internal review by senior officials of information that is received from the Met Office and made available to decision-makers, as well as a review of the decisions that were taken. As such, it will not include a public consultation. I have met with my permanent secretary to consider the report and its recommendations, together with the development of an action plan to implement them.

It is important that there is not only transparency in the decisions that are taken but confidence in future decisions. I again make my position very clear: this is an issue of public safety and not resources, and where there is any doubt in any decision to grit or not to grit, I expect decision-makers to err on the side of caution and grit.

I have not, however, asked for a full review of Roads Service's winter service activities. At my request, the National Winter Service Research Group carried out an independent review following the severe weather in January and March of last year. The report of that review, which was published in October 2013, was a comprehensive examination of every aspect of the winter service programme. I am encouraged that the independent review was generally positive and praised the experience and professionalism of DRD staff. In addition, the review concluded that our winter service policies are well-considered and consistent.

Mrs McKevitt: Given the unfortunate rise in road fatalities this year, I welcome the Minister's announcement this month to review the decisions that were made on road gritting. I acknowledge the Minister's common-sense approach and his view that it is an issue of public safety and not resources. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of the Environment to see how the two Departments can work together to help to reduce the number of fatalities on our roads?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. Indeed, I join her in extending my sincere condolences to all those who were impacted and affected by road deaths in the early part of this year. Those are real tragedies for families to have to come to terms with, and they must be enormously difficult. I know that the sympathy of the entire House will be extended to them.

The Member will know that her party colleague the Minister of the Environment, Minister Durkan, and other Ministers,

including the Minister of Justice, and I meet on a regular basis to discuss road safety issues. We will continue to do that and will very much continue to work together. Our respective Departments and agencies will also continue to work together to seek to improve road safety as best we possibly can. I think that that is incumbent on us all, and it is also incumbent on us all to encourage people who use the roads in any shape or capacity to proceed with the utmost care at all times.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I also thank him for the review that he directed into one specific incident on 12 and 13 January. I will also put on record the Committee's thanks for DRD staff's hard work on the winter service programme.

The Minister indicated that he discussed the report with the permanent secretary: will he discuss it at the earliest opportunity with the Regional Development Committee?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and his comments about Roads Service and the associated agencies on the important work that they carry out from October right through to April in providing winter services. Sometimes, that work is easy to overlook, but I do not take it at all for granted. I acknowledge, thank and encourage all the staff involved in that.

I am happy to indicate to the Member that it is my intention to make a copy of the report available in the Assembly Library for Members' full consideration. I hope that that will give him some reassurance that we take these important issues seriously.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh math agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers. Has anything been learned from the March storms of last year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. The Member will have heard me, in my initial answer to the Member for South Down Mrs McKevitt, refer to the independent review that was undertaken by the National Winter Service Research Group. That was an independent report and a comprehensive examination. As I indicated, the review was generally positive, and 14 recommendations arose from it. We have carried those forward and are seeking to implement them as speedily as possible.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister outline the procedures and issues that determine whether gritting is initiated on any evening so that road safety is protected as far as possible and the economy continues to operate?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He raises an important issue that is worthy of serious consideration and reflection by all Members. Decision-makers receive information from a number of sources before embarking on a salting exercise. They receive direct localised and ongoing information from the Met Office on matters such as temperature and dampness. Even when temperatures are low, the potential for the formation of ice is dependent on whether we have dry conditions.

Fixed temperature gauges are present on a number of roads across Northern Ireland and are used to assist with the assessment of the Met Office forecast. Staff are deployed on the ground to report back to decision-makers on dampness and readings from further temperature probes. That information is regularly reported directly back to the Met Office for further consideration. Decisions are then taken on the basis of all the evidence available and on the most up-to-date information and Met Office assessments. For me, the importance of the review is what occurs when conditions rapidly depart from forecasts after a decision is made. I am moving forward with reforms to strengthen that element of the decision-making process.

TaxSmart

5. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on TaxSmart travel cards for rail passengers. *(AQO 5414/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: The TaxSmart scheme applies only to bus travel because of the determination of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on the matter. It enables individuals to purchase an annual bus travel card through an employer salary sacrifice scheme, subject to certain conditions laid down by HMRC. The Northern Ireland Civil Service has signed up to the scheme, but it is open to any employer.

I understand that the Republic of Ireland operates a tax incentive scheme covering bus and rail travel, and I am keen to explore the opportunity to extend the scheme here to rail users. I believe that a case can be made that extending it to rail users in Northern Ireland is justified in our circumstances. However, the Member will be aware that tax schemes are a reserved matter and can be amended only by Westminster.

HMRC seems to take the view that there is not a general tax exemption across all forms of public transport currently because:

> *"The cost of providing a general tax exemption ... would be very significant."*

I am doubtful that HMRC has considered the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland in that regard. I believe strongly that there is a case for helping rail users by introducing this incentive. Someone travelling from Ballymena to Belfast on an annual rail ticket could benefit by nearly £350 a year. The Member is a fella from north Antrim, and his eyes have nearly popped out. It is a real incentive for savings in these difficult economic times. I have therefore written to the Minister of Finance and Personnel to seek his agreement to engage directly with the Treasury, and I await his response.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he reassure rail passengers not only that he has improved services and frozen fares but that he will continue to press the Finance Minister on this issue, as it could bring about a fare reduction for the many regular users of our train services?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I share his enthusiasm. The figures for increased rail usage that have gone into the public domain confirm how popular rail travel is now. It is increasingly an option, and a great many people use it. The new trains that have been brought online are part of that. The better services that we have provided, including Wi-Fi and associated comforts, benefit it. There are also the improvements that we are making to railway stations, including Antrim and Portadown. All of that combines to create very positive news. We can continue to build on

that, if we can convince HMRC that the TaxSmart scheme could and should apply to Northern Ireland. I very much hope that the Finance Minister will give me the green light to positively pursue these issues with HMRC so that we can further benefit rail users throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will be more than aware that the people of mid-Ulster are standing for a long time waiting for their train to arrive. I am sure that it will be as long yet. I welcome what the Minister is bringing forward, but what consideration has he given to ensuring that people who live in rural Northern Ireland are not treated unequally in this? Are there any other schemes that he can bring forward to help those people?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I have no difficulty in saying that I would like to see the further development of rail services to other parts of Northern Ireland, including the area between Portadown and Armagh in my constituency. There is now a significant lobby of support for that, including in a recent public consultation on railways leading into the future. There is public support for that. Of course, it will be very much down to the financial situation that we find ourselves in.

I am happy to work with the Member and with the Finance Minister and other Executive colleagues to see if we can get further expenditure for public transport particularly and extension of the rail network. There is a very real issue for people in the rural community. I represent a mostly rural constituency, and I understand their problems with travelling to and fro. I am very supportive of measures. There is no ceiling on my ambition for the extension of public transport in Northern Ireland, both rural and urban.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer, and we will now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Illegal Parking

1. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister for Regional Development what can be done to assist residents of inner Belfast to live normal lives given that communities are invaded every morning by hundreds of illegally parked vehicles that make their lives miserable and place the lives of their children in danger. *(AQT 631/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for the question. Indeed, he has raised the issue with me recently and in the past. To be fair, a lot of the parking has perhaps been inconsiderate rather than illegal, and there are remedies for illegal parking, as we touched on earlier, such as penalty charge notices and enforcement procedures. The Member and other Members will know that I am keen on the residents' parking schemes that we have been trying to negotiate with local communities and bring into being in areas of Belfast. I am happy to continue that work. So far, all our efforts have been unsuccessful, but that is not a reason to stop trying to give easement to communities that feel strongly about these matters.

Mr F McCann: I thank the Minister for his answer. In places such as Hamill Street and John Street, cars are parked five abreast. That stops ambulances getting through to people who are ill to take them to hospital, and it makes it difficult for parents to get to schools with their children. There is a serious problem, and I know that your predecessor was at a very advanced stage with a residents' parking scheme in that community and was talking about a pilot scheme. There were some teething problems. Can that be dusted down to allow that community to see what way a pilot scheme would work?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. I can assure him that, rather than simply dusting it down, that work is ongoing, and officials will seek to make progress on it. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, progress has been slow on residents' parking schemes. There were issues with affordability and permits, and those issues were overcome. However, there are practical issues because to every action there is a reaction, and, when creating a residents' parking area, we have to consider the impact on neighbouring streets. Some of those have been features of the difficulties that have been presented to us, but I assure the Member that I will pursue the issue in the area that he mentioned, and hopefully we can make progress as quickly as we can.

Flags: DRD Property

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Regional Development what impact he thinks that the illegal and disrespectful displaying of flags on Department for Regional Development property has on community relations and what action he has taken to address that manifestation of sectarianism on the streets, especially given that, to his credit, he recently invested in building bridges to connect people and places. *(AQT 632/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. Indeed, the potential bridge building that he refers to is, of course, the Ormeau bridge for pedestrians and cyclists, which has enormous potential in linking and in bridge building, literally, between south and east Belfast. I very much hope that people will take an active interest in that and engage in the public consultation, and I hope that we can bring the project forward.

The Member was part of the lengthy discussions with Richard Haass and Meghan O'Sullivan, so he knows about the issues that were part of that. Although I acknowledge that those issues are not yet resolved, I have to say that there are illegal monuments in certain places across Northern Ireland that cause me huge offence and that I would prefer not to be there. However, we are still in a context in which I would be asking my departmental staff to remove any of those things without being assured of their personal safety. Difficult though it is, we have to continue to work through and resolve the issues. I am not sure that they can be solved by easy sound bites or, indeed, quick questions.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree, in principle at least, that some form of regulatory approach that includes his Department and the other agencies necessary to provide the relevant security and facilitates the open, transparent, time-bound and respectful display of flags and emblems is urgently needed and that he has a leadership role on the issue?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. I have acknowledged that the Haass discussions are, at present, considered the best avenue for making progress on these issues. They will be challenging, and, although I have a departmental interest, as other Departments do, I also have a political interest, as

the Member does. We will seek to make progress as best, as easily and as sensibly as we can.

Flooding: Response

3. **Mrs McKevitt** asked the Minister for Regional Development for his evaluation of the effectiveness of the multi-agency group that was set up to deal with the flooding along coastal routes during the recent storms. *(AQT 633/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her question. Roads Service was part of a multi-agency team that coordinated the interagency response during the recent storms. It was present in the local silver command, which is at the Ardmore PSNI base in the Newry and Mourne area, throughout the event. I took the opportunity to keep in contact and attend, on some occasions, the gold command, which is under the chairmanship of Assistant Chief Constable Stephen Martin.

In general terms, the work of the gold and silver commands throughout Northern Ireland made an important contribution to dealing with what could have been cataclysmic conditions. I was pleased to see at first hand the joint working by government agencies and the emergency services. That extended to the Newry and Mourne area and, I know, to other areas. Roads Service provided and delivered approximately 3,500 sandbags to locations in that area, and staff and contractors for Roads Service's other agencies worked throughout the event and responded to a large number of flooding calls throughout the period.

Of course, we will not take things for granted. We will continue to look at lessons that we can learn. A debrief for the local silver command is due to take place on Friday 30 January and will be followed by a structured debrief and workshop on the event on 24 February.

Mrs McKevitt: I would like to take the opportunity to recognise the great work carried out by the silver command unit operating in Newry and Mourne, particularly in south Down. All over Christmas, we got a quare battering along the coast, and the unit was more than good to every one of the elected representatives and, indeed, members of the public who were there to help. What assessments of the real risk to flood plains have been carried out, and what preventative measures are in place to protect those areas?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question and her comments. She will know that a lot of flood management issues are dealt with by Rivers Agency, which is under the auspices of Minister O'Neill in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, there has been good cooperation and collaboration between the agencies, and the Member will know that a performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) report was commissioned following the storms of the past couple of years. It concluded that it might be better if all the agencies were to feature in a single Department so that responses could be better coordinated. That remains an outstanding issue and is not resolved, but I am very satisfied in the current circumstances that significant cooperation and collaboration took place between all the agencies, including Roads Service, Rivers Agency, Water Service, NIE, PSNI, emergency services, ambulances etc and health provision. All the agencies worked together very well, and I appreciate all those things.

Foyle Bridge: Safety Measures

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has had any discussions with the Public Health Agency about the installation of preventative or safety measures that could deter people jumping off Foyle Bridge. *(AQT 634/11-15)*

Mr P Ramsey: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, we both live in a city that is grieving and is saddened by the case of the young man Andrew Quigley, who has been missing for almost two weeks after jumping off Foyle Bridge into the River Foyle. We know of the despair and heartache shown by his mother, Colette Quigley. There is a high loss of life in the city because of incidents such as this.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. I was very moved last night by the interviews given by Mrs Quigley and by the worry, concern and obvious trauma that present circumstances in that family are causing. I offer my prayers and good wishes at this very difficult time to that lady and that family and to their friends and associates. I hear the Member's point, and I will reflect on it. If he wishes to write to me directly, perhaps to set out some initiatives, I will be pleased to respond.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's answer, and I am sure that the family will take great comfort from his words. We all hope that we will soon have the return of Andrew, the son, to enable some type of burial.

Further to that, in light of the Minister's cooperation and his support for some type of initiative, is he minded to meet Foyle Search and Rescue, one of the leading emergency services that helps to prevent loss of life, and me to discuss some initiatives, small measures that might be helpful and, in the long term, could save someone's life?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, and I understand entirely his sentiments and his desire to see progress made on all these issues. I am happy to engage in a multi-agency approach. Clearly, there may be even more significant players as far as Departments and agencies are concerned than those under my responsibility, but we are happy to examine issues where we can make progress.

Buses: Audiovisual Aids

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he can outline if or when the pilot initiative involving audiovisual aids on buses and at bus stops that is under way in the Braniel area of Belfast will be rolled out to other areas. *(AQT 635/11-15)*

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question and, indeed, his interest in the matter. I am aware of the pilot scheme that he mentioned. He may also be aware that we have submitted a bid to OFMDFM for funding for an audiovisual programme that would further extend the opportunities. We see it very much as having the potential to make a positive difference for people who suffer from audio and visual problems. I recently met a group of users, and we discussed at some length and in some detail the problems that they experience. I have huge sympathy for some of the circumstances that they find themselves in and huge admiration for the way in which they seek to overcome their difficulties, but it is an issue on which I would like to see further progress.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Accident and Emergency Departments: Crisis Conditions

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

> *That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis conditions recently experienced by patients at the accident and emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this, and other occurrences where accident and emergency departments have been overstretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times. — [Mr McKinney.]*

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "concern" and insert

> *"the pressures recently experienced at the accident and emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast and their impact on patients; notes that the operational escalation procedures invoked worked effectively, and expresses gratitude for the dedication and efforts of healthcare staff who can often work long hours in challenging environments; further notes that the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are reviewing the Royal Victoria Hospital incident to see whether refinement in Health and Social Care business continuity planning is required; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this and other occurrences where accident and emergency departments have been overstretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times." — [Mrs Cameron.]*

Mr Beggs: I thank Fearghal McKinney and his colleague Dolores Kelly for tabling this timely motion. I must put on record my personal thanks and that of my family to the emergency ambulance service and the staff of the Antrim emergency department for the highly professional and caring manner in which they dealt with a close family member just before Christmas. Regrettably, that is not the experience of everyone, as, too frequently, staff in our A&Es can be overwhelmed.

Several Members have spoken of the crisis that occurred on 8 January at the A&E at the Royal, which left patients describing the situation as being like a scene from a natural disaster. Indeed, I picked up on the comment that staff are

> *"fed up of seeing nurses cry",*

such is the pressure that they are having to work under. Staff were overwhelmed, with 42 patients left on trolleys, which resulted in the major incident plan being put into action. A major incident plan is there for a major incident, normally a very significant crisis such as a natural disaster or an accident on our motorways that requires significant additional staff to deal with it or perhaps an outbreak of a particular disease. That is not what happened here. It has to be recognised that there is a crisis at the Royal, and implementing the major incident plan is probably the most obvious means of spotting that there was a crisis. Although the amendment rightly praises front line staff, why does it attempt to remove the word "crisis"? It is just one of several crises that have happened. Two days earlier, there was a crisis at Craigavon Area Hospital, where ambulances had to be diverted to Enniskillen and Newry. However, the peak winter pressures on our health service normally occur in February and March, so we do not know what is still to come. We must ask ourselves what has led to the crisis conditions in our accident and emergency departments.

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

When you look at the evidence — particularly in the Royal, where the figures for December show that 62·4% of patients were seen within four hours, against the target of 95% — it is clear that there were already significant pressures. The City Hospital's A&E has been closed, and, on top of that, the Downe and Lagan Valley accident and emergency units have been further reduced at this time of winter pressures. That has obviously added further pressure.

The reason given by the South Eastern Trust for the closures was "critical medical staffing issues" in the hospitals. Dr Sean McGovern, who is vice-chair of the College of Emergency Medicine concluded in a recent report that 56 A&E consultants is half the number that we require in Northern Ireland. In an interesting comparison, he noted that that is around half the number of politicians in the Northern Ireland Assembly. They are looking after all our A&E units on a 24/7 basis. That is scary. There are many vacancies, and that puts significant pressure on not only our nurses but senior staff. It has to be asked what the Minister and other devolved Ministers, along with the trusts and the royal colleges, are doing to address the shortage of A&E medical staff in particular. Has the training budget been increased in conjunction with other Ministers? Are additional staff being trained to ensure that the positions will be filled?

There are physical issues for a number of our hospitals. That work is ongoing, particularly at the Ulster Hospital, and we need the new unit at the Royal. It has to be noted that improvements to Antrim Area Hospital are, in my opinion, a combination of a new state-of-the-art facility with better patient flow, an additional 20 nurses and management keeping a much closer eye on day-to-day issues. However, there are still significant pressures. Each year we hear talk of service improving during the summer, but, when you look at the actual figures, you can see that in 2010-11 the average figure was 82% of patients seen within four hours. The following year there was a drop to 80·2% —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Beggs: In 2012-13, it was 78·5%. Regrettably, the figures have been going downwards and, Minister, we need to do better.

Mr McCarthy: I support the motion and want to put on record our thanks to Mrs Kelly and Mr McKinney for bringing such an important motion to the Chamber this afternoon. I have some concerns that an amendment

has been tabled by the Minister's party colleagues. It is important that we have a catch-all perspective on all potential approaches to addressing the crisis in our A&E services, beyond just noting that the Health and Social Care Board and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are reviewing the Royal Victoria Hospital incident to see whether refinement in health and social care business and continuity planning is required.

There have unfortunately been ongoing and consistent concerns at the challenges faced by all our accident and emergency services right across Northern Ireland. Far too often we hear horror stories. I must say that I am grateful to the local media for alerting us to emergencies and to how our services struggle to function beyond their capacity. People face excessive waits on trolleys and very long waits for treatment, in particular over the 12-hour threshold. That is not acceptable.

It is surely a watershed moment when emergency procedures have to be invoked at the Royal because of a combination of the number of those attending and the number requiring admission. I recognise the very hard work of a wide range of staff through some very difficult circumstances that are not of their making. Those staff members deserve better, and I appeal for positive action to support them. Indeed, they often have to put up with abusive patients and visitors to their A&E department and some very challenging cases. The time for talking is long since gone.

The focus of the motion is on the recent situation at the Royal and Craigavon hospitals, but that only serves to highlight some wider structural problems in the health sector, accident and emergency services in particular. There are consistent problems in our A&E services in general, including at a number of specific hospitals like the Royal and Craigavon, as well as Antrim and, in particular, the Ulster Hospital. Of course, the reduction at the Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals has already been mentioned.

There is a wide chasm between the target for being treated at A&E facilities and the reality of the waiting times that people are regularly exposed to. We have seen a growth in the number of breaches of the targets with respect to both the four-hour waiting time and the 12-hour waiting time. We are, indeed, going backwards on the 95% target in relation to four hours and further from meeting the zero target with respect to 12 hours. The four hospitals that I have named are the most consistent examples of those problems. We already know some of the measures that would begin to address the situation.

At the heart of it lies directing those who do not really need to attend A&E to make better use of alternatives. In that respect, we should make better use of out-of-hours GP services. While people seem to be more familiar with those, there is no significant increase in usage. There are also increasing frustrations for some patients in getting ready access to a regular GP service, and, too often, A&E becomes an alternative to that. We also have the increased availability of minor injury units, but those are less well understood as a viable alternative. Sometimes their opening hours do not coincide with the peak periods of demand for A&E. We should also consider whether other forms of decision-making could be introduced to A&E to process certain cases quicker.

Finally, we also need to look at staffing issues. It is clear that working in A&E is not an attractive option for doctors or nurses relative to their specialities. The Minister needs to consider what incentives can be introduced locally in Northern Ireland to combat that internal resource breakdown.

As I did yesterday, I record my gratitude to all staff in our health service and commend them all for the sterling work performed, despite the conditions that they have to face, particularly in our A&Es. I hope that the Health Minister acknowledges the crisis in our A&Es and responds appropriately.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion on what is a very important and timely issue affecting everyone across Northern Ireland.

Our accident and emergency services are extremely important. I commend all the staff, who work so hard in what can be difficult conditions on the front line of our health service. There is no doubt that our A&E services are currently under severe pressure and have to deal with a significant number of patients in what can be very trying conditions. Over 715,000 people were treated at A&Es in 2012-13, and 642,000 of those were new attendees and 73,000 were review attendees. The fact that our main A&Es are open all hours with free access to everyone results in huge demands on the service. More needs to be done to divert patients away from looking at A&Es as a first port of call. This is an issue that, we have been assured, will be addressed through Transforming Your Care, which has been covered extensively in the work of the Health Committee.

We need to ensure that our GPs actively play their part in easing the burden on our hospitals. Some GPs operate with limited opening hours, with some even closing at lunchtime. Other GPs operate the very costly 0844 phone numbers. All those things make our A&Es a more desirable destination for patients. At a recent meeting with my local GP in Bangor, I discussed many of these issues. They indicated that they, too, are under extreme pressure to cope with demands, which includes evening surgeries.

The minor injury units have a key role to play in easing the burden. The Bangor minor injury unit is a very valuable and well-used facility serving approximately 10,000 people. The neighbouring Ards minor injury unit serves 9,000 —

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: OK.

Mr McKinney: Thank you. Does the Member accept that the evidence that he has presented to the House so far from his constituency and wider afield suggests, in fact, that this did not lead to a singular pressure at the Royal and that there is a constant and growing pressure on accident and emergency services that approximates to a crisis?

Mr Dunne: I think that we all recognise the extent of the workload and the demand on our A&Es across the Province. I, too, see the need for change. We hope that, under Transforming Your Care, there will be change, and I believe that the Minister is addressing that.

As I said, the Ards minor injuries unit has had 9,000 patients through its doors. That shows the excellent work that it is doing. In many ways, both those minor injuries units, in seeing over 20,000 patients throughout the year,

relieve the pressure on the Ulster Hospital. The out-of-hours GP service and pharmacies also have a role to play in dealing with minor ailments and treatments and in making our health service more efficient and effective.

As a North Down representative, I know that there are genuine concerns locally about the additional pressures faced at the Ulster Hospital, especially given the recent closure of the City Hospital A&E. Recent figures show that 80,217 new patients were seen there last year, while 86,000 were seen at the Royal. Those figures are alarming and show the extent of pressure that there now is at the Ulster Hospital. They show clear evidence of an increase in numbers, especially with patients from across Belfast now using the Ulster as their main hospital of choice. There are genuine concerns about the limited space at the A&E site at the Ulster. As you are aware, the newbuild programme is not due to commence until 2018.

3.45 pm

We must continue to monitor patient flows in hospitals and actively look at ways to improve efficiencies in our health service. I commend the Minister on his action to date in dealing with what is a very difficult issue for everyone. I know that he will continue to do what is right for our population and ensure that the health service is made fit for purpose.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, rise to support the motion. I do not think that it is unreasonable to suggest that, in the vast majority of cases, A&E departments in all our hospitals are continually busy and, often, resources are overstretched, particularly at weekends. The recent incident at the RVH in Belfast, when a midweek emergency was called and, in a major incident scenario, off-duty staff had to be called in, brought the A&E situation there very much into focus.

The Department recently published statistics on emergency care departments. In September 2013, 76·4% of patients attending type 1 emergency care departments were either treated and discharged or admitted within four hours. A type 1 emergency care department is a consultant-led service with designated accommodation for the reception of emergency care patients, providing emergency medicine and emergency surgical services around the clock. In September 2013, 0·1% of a total of 58,120 attendees at emergency care departments waited longer than 12 hours to be either treated and discharged or admitted.

Over the past while, there has been much discussion about waiting times at the Health Committee. Numerous statistics have been provided. There is no doubt that, across trusts, efforts have been made to reduce waiting times. However, the problem continues to grow. New and innovative measures to deal with the problem are continually required.

Acute care includes unscheduled care. That includes such services as accident and emergency, emergency surgery, intensive care, coronary care, stroke services, urgent care and medical admissions. Unscheduled care is delivered via 10 accident and emergency departments, nine of which are consultant led, 24/7; eight minor-injury units; and 19 GP out-of-hours facilities.

In 2005, an independent review of health and social care here conducted by Professor John Appleby indicated that the level of A&E attendances per head of population in the North was 31% higher than in England. He recommended that demands on certain aspects of the hospital system, particularly A&E, should be contained or reduced. In 2007, an independent review of emergency care activity suggested that nearly one quarter, 24%, of A&E attendances were inappropriate and could be addressed by alternative healthcare services, such as minor-injuries units.

The review also highlighted the fact that some people attend A&E when they cannot get an appointment with their GP. Those inappropriate attendances are a major part of the problem. People sometimes attend A&E units with the most innocuous problems because they think that it is the place to go. A major rethink is required on information and education in that respect, and, of course, on the provision of alternative services, such as out-of-hours etc.

For people who present at A&E with mental health issues, the service that is provided is not always appropriate or beneficial. There should be some way in which those people, some of whom are suicidal, can be dealt with sensitively and effectively. That may require some sort of filtering system. That is absolutely necessary to ensure that the best possible service is provided.

I know that the emphasis is on services in Belfast. However, in my constituency — I make no apologies for being parochial — Daisy Hill Hospital has a very good record of dealing with people in A&E. Recently, new facilities have been provided that have proven very beneficial. For instance, for people who present at A&E with strokes, Daisy Hill has a very good record — second to none — in providing thrombolysis to patients when that treatment is appropriate.

The nature of A&E departments will always be problematic because it is so difficult to legislate for and control the number of people who present there. Obviously, resources will always be under extreme pressure. A&E staff do a tremendous job, often under very difficult circumstances. At weekends, many people who are drunk present at A&E for treatment for alcohol-related problems, injuries from falls, fights etc. Staff are often subjected to abusive behaviour for which there is absolutely no excuse. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that those front line staff get the resources and protection that they need and deserve. I call on the Minister to ensure that adequate resources are in place to ensure that every patient is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times and that the safety of staff is paramount.

Mr D McIlveen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I believe that the intention and the spirit behind the motion are correct and good. However, I have concerns, and I allowed my name to go towards the amendment because I believe that there are flaws in the way that the motion was worded. The sentiments behind it were perhaps a little bit misguided. I will explain what I mean by that.

First, my concern is that the motion ignores the work that has already started at the request of the Minister. To suggest that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should investigate this and other occurrences indicates to me that an accusation is being made that nothing has been done. I am sure that, when we hear the Minister's response to the motion, we will all be left in no doubt that that most certainly has not been the case.

Secondly, the wording "crisis conditions" is somewhat misjudged, and I will explain a little further on that

also. I do not believe that what was experienced in this particularly high profile pressure was a crisis, and that is because those were the words of the chief executives of the trusts and of a number of staff who were spoken to. At no time did any of those accident and emergency departments stop taking in patients; they were open at all times for admissions.

Indeed, I welcome the words that the chief executive of the Southern Trust said in commending her staff. Again, I felt that that was another flaw in the motion, because it makes no recognition of the tremendous work that the staff on the front line of our accident and emergency departments and, indeed, all of our health service experience. Mairead McAlinden said that her staff continued to go the extra mile in recent days and that everyone is working together to make sure that patients get the treatment they need while in hospital and are safely discharged with appropriate support when fit and ready to go.

I pay tribute to the tremendous work that our healthcare professionals do throughout all our trusts and constituencies. I pay tribute to them in the strongest possible terms. I accept that, at times, they are under extreme pressure as a result of the environment that they find themselves in, particularly in accident and emergency. By its very nature, accident and emergency medicine is high pressure and is constantly evolving. Indeed, at many times it can be subject to sudden changes in demand.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way, and I commend his train of thought. Does he agree that those who, for political reasons and to score points, use the word "crisis" undermine the very professionalism of those staff, both professional and medical, who, at no point, were out of control, which is what the word "crisis" infers, and that that was not the case?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree wholeheartedly with that. I believe that crisis is a very loaded word, and it insinuates that the staff who were working in the hospital were unable to cope, when they very clearly were.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member accept an intervention?

Mr D McIlveen: I will.

Mr McKinney: Does the Member accept that the language that has been used in this debate, particularly around the word "crisis", is not emanating from political parties but is, in fact, emanating from staff, unions and nurses, including the RCN, which said that the situation is making the service unsustainable? Is that not a crisis?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his intervention. No, I do not agree with that, because, to me, a crisis would occur if the hospitals in question on the evening were unable to take in patients. There was not a crisis to the extent that our accident and emergency departments were closed on that night. It is for that very reason that accident and emergency departments have operational escalation procedures to follow at times when there are such spikes in admissions. That is what the crux of the motion fails to grasp and understand. I come back to my initial words: I do not believe that the motion was motivated for anything other than the right reasons, although I take on board the points that my colleague raised. However, I believe that the wording is highly emotive and perhaps a little bit ill thought out.

Our amendment takes nothing away from the spirit of the motion. I therefore ask the House to support the motion as amended, because it pays tribute to the front line staff who work day and daily in that, at times, highly pressured environment. I believe that the amendment is better worded and enhances the motion. It does not take anything whatsoever away from the motion. It just makes it a little bit better.

Mr Rogers: I want to praise the tireless work of front line healthcare staff. Without their dedication and professionalism, this critical situation could be much worse. Recent debates highlight how our hospital staff work well beyond their call of duty. However, you have to ask this question: did the closure of weekend and night-time A&E services at Lagan Valley and the Downe have a knock-on effect on the crises at the Royal Victoria and Craigavon?

The proposer of the amendment does not believe that there was a crisis. However, that really depends on where you are coming from in your interpretation. Just ask the patients who were in the Royal Victoria that night or a constituent of mine who was in another ward and was shifted off in an ambulance to free up a bed. That lady told me about the panic at the nurses' station, which was not the fault of the nurses on duty that night but the management. Even here on the Floor of the House, not everyone recognises that there is a crisis in accident and emergency.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that, at the time, one of the senior directors in the Belfast Trust apologised for that very incident, namely having to remove a very senior person at all hours of the night?

Mr Rogers: Thank you for your intervention. I agree wholeheartedly.

If we do not acknowledge that there is a problem, how can we get a solution? We cannot look at the issues in the Royal Victoria and Craigavon in isolation, because they have a knock-on effect on other patients, nursing staff and hospitals. We cannot look at an issue in an A&E department without looking at how it affects the rest of the hospital.

Let me quote the wife of a patient:

> *"My husband was due to have a hernia operation in the Mater this morning at 7.30 am, but he received a call from them at 9.00 pm the night before to inform him that it had been cancelled due to the pressure of A&E overflow that had been caused by the closing of the Downe A&E at 8.00 pm. Now he has to wait on another appointment."*

That is more than an inconvenience. Imagine getting psyched up for an operation and then discovering that it is not happening. That certainly is a crisis for that patient and his family.

Let us look at the impact on other services. In a question for written answer, I asked the Minister to give me an assurance that the radiology service at the Downe Hospital will be maintained at the current operating level. He answered:

> *"The operating times of the Emergency Department have recently been reduced at night and at weekends.*

I am advised that no significant changes have been made to the radiology service in the Downe".

Minister, that is not reassuring for me, for the patients of the Downe or for the radiology staff. In fact, I had call from staff in Lagan Valley who are in a similar position.

Ask the people of Downpatrick and district whether there is a crisis. Even the trust acknowledged before Christmas that there was a crisis. Is it not a crisis situation when you have to close an A&E at night and at weekends? Ask anyone living in rural areas such as south Down whether there is a crisis. There certainly is a crisis if you need the attention of a major trauma centre in Belfast. The first problem is getting an ambulance, and the next problem is getting to Belfast. That issue has been well documented in earlier debates. Any partial closure or watering down of the A&E service at the Downe Hospital will no doubt pressurise other hospitals and A&E departments across the North.

What about the human cost? I want to refer to the case of an elderly woman who arrived by ambulance at the Downe yesterday. She lives alone and has no dependants. She has chest complications and could not breathe. She had been checked for heart problems.

Then, there appeared to be a problem with bed shortages at the Downe. She was not admitted but sent by ambulance to the Ulster at 8.00 pm. That lady is now an inpatient, and her sister and nieces have to make a 60-mile round trip at considerable expense to see her and provide support.

4.00 pm

John Compton's words were about building:

"a system of health and social care which would place the individual, family and community that use it at the heart of how things are done."

Those words ring very hollow with that family and the whole community.

Minister, your Department cannot look at A&E departments in the Royal Victoria and Craigavon hospitals in isolation. When looking strategically at the provision of A&E services across the North, air ambulance provision must also be included.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way on that point. Those of us who live west of the Bann have seen huge tracts of land stripped of A&E services in almost the same pattern. I hope that the Minister is able to do something to retrieve these services, but we have practical experience west of the Bann of vital services being stripped.

Mr Rogers: Thanks for the intervention.

I congratulate the midwifery-led unit and its team leader at the Downe. Recently, the unit won a national award. That shows that, with the right level of funding and expertise, the Downe can deliver for the people of south Down.

Mr Dunne mentioned 40% of Belfast Trust people going to the hospital in Dundonald. I have to ask questions about the funding for the South Eastern Trust. Minister, these are not isolated cases.

In conclusion, the Downe must be part of an A&E strategy. Where I differ from the proposers of the amendment is that I believe that where the curtailing of services is proving to be part of the problem, their restoration must be part of the solution.

Mr B McCrea: A number of interesting things have come out in the debate. First, the amendment seems to focus on shifting blame and trying to deny responsibility. In fact, some are asking, "Crisis? What crisis?"

Mr McIlveen took up that issue and asked who had used the word "crisis". It may not have been used in this particular case, but I will give an example it being used about this matter. The chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners was talking about the Health Secretary's position when he said:

"This speech will not end the crisis in general practice."

That crisis is, I think, the same crisis as we are facing. The real issue is that too many people go to A&E when they should go elsewhere. Some Members mentioned that we have all, at one time or another, ended up in an A&E department. When there is an emergency, you ask, "Where do I go now?" Knowing that it is serious, you get into the car and drive to get to a place where you think that you will be helped. Perhaps we have to do a bit more to give people information about where to go instead.

I would be interested to hear from the Minister how he is progressing, or how the discussions are going, on rewriting the GP contract. Part of the problem is that most of our A&E admissions happen over the weekend, which is when there are not as many staff elsewhere. So perhaps there is some way of moving the demand to another place. That would require a complete reworking of the GP contract. It seems strange to me that Northern Ireland trails England on that issue — perhaps the Minister will illuminate.

The Member who moved the amendment, Mrs Cameron, said that — I think I quote her correctly — the four-hour target is being approached and that is an example of a "relatively efficient" system. I do not think that it is. If you go to A&E with an emergency and have to sit there for four hours, at the very best, you will say, "This is not the type of system that I pay my taxes for." It may well be that this is the best we can do in the current circumstances. I am sure that the Minister will come up with some way for us to remove the issue.

So, you have a challenge in this debate, where people have tried to play a certain amount of political ping-pong. Perhaps that is inevitable, given that elections are forthcoming. However, I think that we owe it to the people of Northern Ireland to explain why things do not work, why they should go elsewhere or what should be done, rather than playing the blame game. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity not to duck his responsibilities in this but to tell us what the plan is for making A&E an acceptable service and what resources he needs. If he is short of resources, perhaps he will explain that to the Assembly, and we will see whether we can find some more.

In the meantime, it comes down to where you go if you have an accident in your house. My mother-in-law fell, and we thought that she had perhaps cracked her hip. We were not sure. Where did we go? We went to the closest A&E, because we thought it the appropriate place. It turned out that there was not a problem, but we were worried about it. If A&E is not the appropriate place to go, where should we go? An information service is required.

Answers to questions about how we deal with the health service in general are about how we change people's perceptions. For what it is worth, I think that we should be putting more resources towards primary care but that the grander strategy is about prevention rather than cure. However, we have a situation where, when it happens to you, when you have an emergency, you want to go somewhere quickly, and, if you are left waiting for four hours or longer, you will not think that the service is acceptable. It is no wonder that people in A&E and other departments talk about a crisis of morale or a feeling that they are not being heard, because they are trying to work under insufferable conditions. And that is for the Minister to resolve.

Mr G Robinson: This is a timely and appropriate topic for the Assembly to debate. First, I wish to commend and pay tribute to the excellent staff who work in our emergency departments in Northern Ireland. Emergency A&E staff deserve great credit for doing a job under very difficult and sometimes personally dangerous conditions. The care and attention that they give to patients and their families is greatly appreciated and carried out at what is a difficult time. It is therefore no surprise that staff experience very extreme workloads which they work through very diligently. I also note that, despite the press hyping the recent situation at the Royal, the procedures put in place to cope with such events worked. That is something that is wrongly overlooked, and it ignores the dedication of the additional staff who responded to the call for staff.

The Health Minister has the most difficult and most criticised job in the Executive, and his patience and willingness to ensure change must be welcomed. He has worked to try to better the number of staff on duty in A&Es, but it will never be enough for some political opponents.

I must also stress that the public themselves have a critical role in overseeing improvements to the A&Es of our hospitals. There are times — mainly evenings and weekends — when people attend A&E with very minor injuries that could wait for a GP to deal with. In fact, the Minister has advocated the setting up of medical hubs which could care for minor injury and other medical problems out of hours. That could help to alleviate pressures on A&E services. I would ask everyone to consider whether they really need to attend A&E, as that could help prevent the waiting times recently experienced. Obviously, urgent cases must be seen and dealt with, but this is one way in which everyone can help to ensure that waiting times are reduced. I stress again that we can all contribute to reducing the pressures that our A&E units are under, but that will be in conjunction with the Department and the plan for the way forward.

Our Minister has shown his commitment to change, and I urge all Members to support him in the unenviable task that he has in front of him. I support the amendment.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank Mrs Kelly and Mr McKinney for bringing the debate to the House, albeit the motion is quite poorly worded. We have seen some evidence today that lip service has been paid by parties across the Chamber to the excellent work carried out by staff, but there was an opportunity to place that in writing, but that has failed, and failed miserably, as a result of those who proposed the motion. That is recognised and identified.

We need to be very careful in these debates that we do not damage staff morale and act in a way that takes away from the good work that they do, because Northern Ireland is a safe place to get emergency medicine; it is a safe place to have medical care. Yes, mistakes are made on occasion. When you have 70,000 employees, some people will make mistakes on occasion. As somewhere that you would identify against other countries across the world, we have an excellent health system, and one that we should be proud of, not one that we should be criticising all the time.

Mr Maskey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: You had your opportunity to speak, and my time is quite limited.

The debate was prompted by recent incidents, when action was taken by the Belfast Trust on 8 January to relieve pressure in the emergency department of the Royal Victoria Hospital, and by the Southern Trust on 6 January to relieve pressure in the emergency department of Craigavon Area Hospital. Please note that I am referring —

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for giving way. Last week, my colleague David Simpson and I met Mairead McAlinden, the chief executive of the Southern Trust, and her senior staff. One of the issues that we raised was the increase in patient numbers in the A&E department on 6 January. She informed us that it was accepted that it was exceptionally busy on that particular evening and that the normal escalation processes were able to cope with the situation. Let us remember this: doctors, nurses, managers and, indeed, all the staff worked late into that evening to ensure patient safety. Craigavon Area Hospital is fortunate to have committed and caring staff, as do all our hospitals.

The motion talks about crisis conditions, and some Members referred to a crisis in Craigavon, but, from where I am coming from, that was certainly not the case there. Does the Minister agree that the use of such language can be very damaging to staff morale and the wider public perception?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his intervention. Not only is it damaging to staff morale; it is wrong. As I listened to Mrs Kelly speak, Corporal Jones-like, earlier in the month, I wondered what exactly the problem was, and I sought to clarify the issues. Over the first 20 days of this month, the very busy Craigavon emergency department saw 3,802 people and admitted 1,046 people. That was in the first 20 days. In all that time, there were no 12-hour breaches, but Mrs Kelly wants to put it out there that there was a crisis in Craigavon hospital. She will have to answer to the public and the staff for that. No doubt, as she speaks later, she will have something to say on the matter.

You should be very careful about the language that is used. I encouraged people previously to be more mature in how they handle things and how they speak about these things, but clearly that has had little impact on some people.

These are emergency departments. A&E does not stand for anything and everything. Some people seem to think that that is the case. Mr McCrea talked about people coming in with emergencies and waiting for four hours to be seen. Let me be absolutely unequivocal about it: people with emergencies will be seen immediately, not in four hours. They will be seen immediately.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: No, you have had your opportunity. People who are coming in with less urgent matters will most likely be seen within 15 minutes or, at the most, 30 minutes, by a triage nurse, who will identify where they should be on the waiting list. Those people will come in behind the people who require urgent care.

When we refer to four hours, it is not four hours to be seen; it is four hours for someone to have been seen; for an assessment to have been made of what is wrong, which often involves scans or blood tests and waiting for those tests to come back; and to have been treated and discharged or admitted to the hospital. That is what we are talking about in four hours. Four hours is not actually to be seen; four hours is for the treatment plan to have taken effect.

4.15 pm

I should say, when I am on my feet, that I urged the media some time ago to be slightly more mature in how they respond to things. Last week, they said that waiting times had trebled for over-12 hours in our emergency departments. Let me state the facts, because they are stubborn things and are hard to overcome. In December 2012, 579 people waited for more than 12 hours. In December 2013, 168 people waited for more than 12 hours. That is 168 too many, and I will continue to work to ensure that that is driven down. However, I make it very clear that those figures indicate that people are working very hard to ensure that our emergency departments are better places for people to be seen and treated.

Let me also be very clear that people who have heart attacks and strokes have a better chance of survival now than they had last year and a few years ago. The people who work on trauma are making huge steps forward as well. Our emergency departments, in terms of what they are actually about, which is emergency care, are responding very well to the public's needs. However, we have issues that we certainly need to address. That is something that I am very happy to do.

I understand that the Belfast Trust held an immediate debrief following the incident that has been referred to. A further review is planned to take place in February. The trust has an ongoing programme of reform to improve its service. The specific learning from that incident includes modification of the trust's escalation plan to minimise the likelihood of having to instigate such measures again.

The Health and Social Care Board is also undertaking a review of the circumstances that resulted in a major incident being declared by the Belfast Trust. The membership of the review team and its terms of reference are currently being finalised. There will continue to be periods of pressure in all our emergency departments throughout the winter.

Again, it is useful to put facts on the table. The Royal Victoria Hospital, in the three days that led to the emergency plan being put in place, had 380 admissions. In the same three days the previous year, it had 300 admissions to hospital. In truth, the problem did not exist in the emergency department. The problem existed because people were not being taken out of the emergency department and into other parts of the hospital. The steps taken were to ensure that people were taken out of the emergency department and moved to other parts of the hospital. The emergency department was able to flow quite normally once again, albeit that it was a highly pressurised place given the numbers of people who came through.

I make it very clear that the statistics and facts do not reflect what has been said this afternoon by people who appear to be misinformed or to have some intention to misinform. Either way, it is not a very mature debate in that respect.

In March 2013, we put an additional £2·8 million into the South Eastern Trust to improve capacity at the Ulster Hospital. The Ulster Hospital has been struggling to meet a significant increase in demand, particularly admissions. That has helped to improve performance.

The Northern Trust required particular support, and in May 2013, I announced the appointment of two senior directors to the Northern Trust to lead on the next stages of the turnaround process. In June, the turnaround and support team produced its report. I am pleased to say that the performance of the Northern Trust's emergency department has improved significantly. That was acknowledged by Mr Beggs earlier, and I acknowledge him for that. I must also mention that £9·2 million was spent on the emergency department at Antrim Area Hospital, which opened in June 2013. With its state-of-the-art technology, it is providing patients with access to safe and resilient services in the long term. So, actions have been taken across a number of emergency departments that required help.

As I go into the next year, I am very cognisant of the fact that we have financial pressures. That is because we are operating on a budget that has been largely flat-lining or that has had only modest rises. We have managed to strip around £700 million of inefficiencies out of the health and social care sector over the past three years. However, while doing that, we have had an increasing rate of demand that exceeds the increasing demand in any other Department. So, as we move to next year's Budget, I offer any Member of any of the Executive parties an opportunity to intervene at this point if they really want to, and I ask them whether they will stand with me in getting more resources, if I can persuade the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to the Department of Health so that I can put them to the service.

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes.

Mr McKinney: I can do that. We accept that there is a need for extra resources in the service, but we also accept that there is a need for strategic thinking. There is a wheel here. Whenever you get a blockage in the pipe at GP services, that leads to a blockage in the pipe at A&E. That is the fundamental point. So, we will join you in looking for more money when you actually address the issues and recognise that the problem is there in the first place. When you have exhausted all that, we will all join you and go to the Finance Minister to look for more cash.

Mr Poots: I do not think that you can speak for all the Executive parties, Mr McKinney, but I welcome that the SDLP is now committed and that, if the Finance Minister —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: I think that the SDLP has already spoken.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: The health spokesman for the SDLP has spoken, and Ms McLaughlin would like to get in.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Thank you. Does the Minister accept, and will he agree with me, that, rather than dealing with issues on transitioning through Transforming Your Care, the recent bid to the January monitoring round is looking at a fund to deal with clinical negligence? Surely that is not the best use of resources, given the strains on the system to date.

Mr Poots: I am very disappointed that we got such a stupid response in this instance. Clinical negligence refers to things that happened not yesterday, not last month and not last year; clinical negligence is referring to things that have happened over many years. Ms McLaughlin should check, because it was the Public Accounts Committee that demanded that courts deal with these things more quickly. Consequently, in Northern Ireland this year we are paying out £56 million of public money for clinical negligence cases for things that happened years and years ago because the Public Accounts Committee demanded it. I might remind the Member that the Chair —

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee was none other than John O'Dowd at that particular time.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: He is now the Minister of Education. I note that Sinn Féin has not indicated that it wants more money to go to health, so it has carped. In fairness to the SDLP, it has said that it would, but Sinn Féin has carped about health —

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: — but it has not indicated that it wishes to give more money to the health service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister will resume his seat for a moment. I must remind Members that, if any Member does not wish to give way, other Members should not persist in asking. Continue.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not mind the heckling from the sidelines. It is a demonstration —

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: I would like to give way, Mr Beggs, but, unfortunately, I am out of time. I have only a minute and a half to go, and I have a few things that I need to say.

We appreciate that people recognise that there is a vastly increased workload on Health and Social Care. That is why we employed more nurses, that is why we employed more doctors and that is why we are employing more people in allied health professions. That is because we want to meet and service the needs of our population, which is growing older. We are increasing direct access to wards, which will reduce the number of people who are coming through emergency departments. We have put in place the integrated care partnerships and are seeking to improve patient pathways for chronic disease. We are also mindful that the performance of EDs falls behind that in other parts of Great Britain. So, I am keen to learn from the widest range of peers and to benchmark against the best.

We have had involvement with GB expertise in the Northern Trust, for example. I am giving consideration to how we could utilise similar expertise to test whether there are more things that we could do better in our emergency departments, particularly in how they integrate with the rest of the hospital, which I referred to. I can assure you of my commitment to continue to work to improve emergency department care —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is coming to a close.

Mr Poots: — and waiting times for all patients. I hope that, in the debate, I have provided you with an indication of the substantial amount of work that is being undertaken at all levels by the HSC.

Mr Wells: The debate has confirmed and underlined why we need Transforming Your Care in Northern Ireland. One of the reasons why we have peaks of demand in the health service and pressure on staff is that there are far too many people in Northern Ireland who are far too high up the ladder of healthcare. We are far too quick to visit A&Es and demand the highest level of care, even when it is not needed.

It has been refreshing and interesting to hear several Members who are not from the Minister's party admitting, as Mr Brady did, that 20% of those who present for treatment at A&Es and general hospitals should not be there in the first place. However, unfortunately, under the system we have at the moment, the clinicians are forced to deal with them. We must bring in a new and radical change to health service provision to stop people thinking that way.

We have an excellent health service in Northern Ireland — a health service to be proud of. The outcomes, particularly for five-year survivorship, show that it is a health service that can hold its head up alongside any other health service in the United Kingdom or western Europe in many specialisms. I am concerned that the genuine difficulty that some Members have with the pressures that our staff are under — which we accept — translates into a gloom and doom scenario that can do an awful lot of damage to our health service and the morale of those who are carrying out such difficult tasks.

I have the benefit of occasionally seeing the 'Lurgan Mail' and the 'Portadown Times', and Mrs Kelly is very quick to catch a headline and issue statements, which Mairead McAlinden and her team in the Southern Trust have to correct before they get into print. Three weeks in a row, I had emails from the press office of the Southern Trust to correct statements made by a certain MLA, which sometimes —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mrs D Kelly: I very much refute the implications of Mr Wells's comments. Might I tell Mr Wells that, regrettably, the practice of the Southern Trust has not been to give information and to deny — much like the DUP is in denial? Mr Wells, as a representative of South Down, how do you stand on the closure of the A&E at Downe Hospital? Perhaps you would like to tell the voters in your constituency about your rationale there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Wells: Thank you for the extra minute. Mrs Kelly's second point is valid, and I will deal with it when I deal with Mr Rogers's comments about Downe. It should be raised.

It strikes me that, when the honourable lady — sorry, the lady — issues a press release to her local papers,

the Southern Trust are on to me as the Deputy Chair of the Committee and, I suspect, all the other MLAs in the Southern Trust area to explain the factual position. Inherent in those comments is that they believe that the honourable lady has gone too far, has been too critical and has not allowed the facts to get in the way of a good story. I know that an election is coming up but, please, do not play political football with the Southern Trust. On almost every indicator, the Southern Trust is the best performer in Northern Ireland and one of the best performers in the United Kingdom. Therefore, I think that it is wrong to rubbish the excellent work of that team. The reality is —

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. It is very unusual for Members from these Benches to pay tribute to parties on the other side of the House, but Mr Wells has done the same. Will he join me in welcoming Mr O'Dowd's comments in the local papers when he made it very clear that it is wrong to create public fear about hospitals, particularly Craigavon Area Hospital?

Mr Wells: I was just coming to that point, Mr McIlveen. I read in the 'Lurgan Mail' that Mr O'Dowd had a meeting with the Southern Trust, which, of course, the chief executive immediately accepted the request for. He said that certain individuals should not rush to conclusions and condemn the work at Craigavon Area Hospital.

We have an excellent health service in Northern Ireland, and I get really annoyed when I hear MLAs quoting the public inquiry into the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust in connection with the health service in Northern Ireland. There is nowhere in Northern Ireland that is anywhere near that. That was a chaotic, disastrous situation that, quite rightly, led to heads rolling. We are nowhere near that, and the Minister and the Department would make certain that we never get anywhere near that.

So, please do not quote that in the context of our health service.

4.30 pm

There will be peaks in health service provision in Northern Ireland, and it is impossible to build in the capacity that will deal with all those peaks because if you did that, you would have spare capacity for 350 days a year. Therefore, difficulties will arise, as happened at the start of January.

What does encourage and reassure me is the speed with which the relevant chief executives moved to deal with those pressures. They were in there immediately. Note that the Minister was in the Royal Victoria Hospital the following morning making certain that those changes were implemented. So, we do have a strong team in action.

There have been great positives and even Mr McCrea — welcome back, Mr McCrea, to the Assembly, by the way. We have not seen you for a very long time. *[Laughter.]* Maybe you have been availing yourself of the A&E in some part of the United Kingdom, but it is good to see you back. The place was very lonely without you. But certainly, there have been great improvements, particularly in the Northern Trust area.

Finally, Mr Rogers. Mr Rogers, you are a clever politician — I would call you a bitter political enemy but that would not be true — but you know that the situation in Downe Hospital is nothing to do with patient pressures whatsoever. It is because we cannot attract the middle-grade doctors —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Wells: — that we need to man that. It should not have been mentioned in the context of this debate because it has nothing to do with the other issues being discussed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. Before proceeding, I suggest that there is perhaps a little too much noise from a sedentary position. I ask Members to be of impeccable behaviour. I now call Mrs Dolores Kelly to conclude and wind up the debate on the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I very much welcome the opportunity to wind on this important debate. It is not one of personal attacks. I note that the Members opposite, including the Minister, seem to be suffering from a contagious condition called denialitis, because that is what they are. They are quite clearly in denial about the crisis that faces our health service. They are in denial about the Budget that they supported, as did other parties with the exception of the SDLP, that saw such reductions to the health service, where nurses are now fearful for their registration and where the Royal College of Nursing, the College of Emergency Medicine and the trade unions are saying, "Wake up. This is a real crisis within our health service. This is unsustainable. Get real."

Unlike previous Chairs of the Health Committee, I will not be attacking the Minister in a personal way nor, I hope, Mr Deputy Speaker, be asked to leave these premises on the basis of what I have to say this afternoon.

It is quite clear that many contributors who largely welcomed the debate put on record our admiration for the dedication of all staff at all levels in the Health and Social Care service for dealing with what is a worsening crisis across the sector. Many contributors talked about the effect of the failure of the Minister to adequately resource the GP, out-of-hours and outpatient services, and the inappropriate use of accident and emergency departments by patients who seek and require access to good healthcare at the time and not to be told, "You have to wait two or three weeks for your GP appointment". There is a real crisis, and many Members spoke about the need for greater public education on the use of not only A&E but the minor injuries unit, out-of-hours services and the GP service itself. I commend those Members for raising that valid point.

The fact is that, under Transforming Your Care, there is a pressure on hospital beds. That was part of the problem in Craigavon hospital. Unlike my colleague Minister O'Dowd in Upper Bann, and Mr Wells, who, although he lives in my constituency, represents another, I am on the ground talking to staff on the ground. One member of staff said that the crisis in Craigavon Area Hospital on that night was one of the worst crises —

Mr Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Not just yet — was one of the worst crises in 40 years. One member of staff told me that they shoved every patient into every nook and cranny in the hospital that they could find. Why? So that they would not breach the 12-hour rule. That is why. That is what we have heard about: meeting targets rather than ensuring that people get the care and treatment that they need.

I spoke to nursing staff across a range of wards in Craigavon Area Hospital. The recovery ward was actually used to admit patients to on that night. What would have happened had there been a major incident that required the theatres to be opened and the recovery ward to be used? It would have been an even deeper crisis. That is not the intended use of the recovery ward.

Let us be very clear: I am speaking on behalf of the many staff who feel that they do not have a voice and feel suppressed by their administrative superiors and by some of the Members opposite who take a gung-ho approach to the health service.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Member for giving way. She talks about what her constituents on the ground are telling her. We take on board what constituents on the ground say. However, has the Member spoken to the chief executive and the senior staff about the situation in A&E on 6 January? Have you gone along to get the actual facts?

Mrs D Kelly: Yes, indeed I have. I spoke to Mrs McAlinden the following day, and I am meeting her this Friday. I can assure you that I take my representational responsibilities very seriously.

I can also tell you that I have a copy of a press release that was issued by the information service in Craigavon Area Hospital. It denies that patients were admitted and that a full ambulance divert was in operation on 6 January, which is quite exceptional. I have informed myself well. I have not stuck my head in the sand because I am too embarrassed to say that I voted for a Budget that would cut millions of pounds in the health service. I see that Mr Anderson is doing a Pontius Pilate, washing his hands of it and saying that it is down to his predecessors. However, his party accepted it.

I heard Mr Wells mention the cost of administration. I can tell you that, because of the cuts in administration, nurses now have to do HR and other work that is diverting them from nursing care. Less money per head of population is spent here, even though it is a population in greater need. I see a failure of the Executive and the Health Minister in particular to cope with the changing demographics in Northern Ireland.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Where are the plans for a growing older population and an increasingly diverse population? There are more births per head of population here than anywhere else in these islands. There is a long way to go until we get the health service sorted out. The Members opposite continue to suffer the symptoms of denial, but I would not advise you to go to A&E. You might want to try your GP, your outpatient service or some sort of clinic that deals with people who do not live in the real world. Does Mr Givan want my advice on where to go? Is that why he wants to make an intervention?

Mr Givan: If the Member is really that concerned about the financial pressures on the health service, why is her party continuing to oppose welfare reform? We are handing back £15 million that could be spent on the people lying on the trolleys that she now claims to have sympathy for.

Mrs D Kelly: Let me inform Mr Givan because he may not have listened to his party colleagues in the past few days, who said that there has been no imposition of cuts because of welfare reform. Does he not know that, under his party, which, as we often hear, is the largest party in the North, many people are living in increasing levels of deprivation and poverty? That party is prepared to see a situation in which people are pushed more and more into poverty. Westminster is crumbling under welfare reform, so we will not take any lectures —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: No, I have given way enough. I want to touch on some of the contributions. If I have time at the end, I will come back to Mr Weir. I do not hear the party opposite wanting to get to grips with the cost of policing parades or street disturbances. There was not much angst from those quarters —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I need to remind the Member to return to the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: It is all about money at the end of the day.

We see a health service in crisis. As many Members said, that is backed up by the professions, the unions, the facts of the budgetary cuts and, indeed, a leaked letter that was in the media last August in which the Western Health and Social Care Trust said that it was having to work out how to save some £26 million. The Minister has not yet told us whether all the trusts will break even at the end of this financial year, and the winter pressures have not even kicked in at this stage. Thankfully, we have been relatively free of epidemics so far this winter. One worries about the "what ifs" should that scenario arise. As Mr McKinney and others said, there are issues with workforce planning; staff posts not being filled; agency workers being used, as the Chair of the Health Committee said, as a cost-saving measure; and training.

Let us be very clear: I have heard about the crisis in the health service. I have heard about ambulances backed up at the doors of A&E, and it would not be right to finish the debate without recognising the epidemic in A&E of alcohol and drug abuse. Yet, under Transforming Your Care, changes will be imposed to how those addictions are treated, and beds will be lost. So we will see an escalation in the number of patients who are drunk, and quite often abusive to staff, attending A&E.

There are a huge number of pressures for the Health Minister to contend with, and pointing the finger at the Benches opposite is not how he should resolve the issues. He needs to face reality and be honest. Hospital administrations might then be more free to outline the real expenditure of their department and their trust. We need to take a comprehensive and holistic approach to A&E, including public education to highlight how other service constraints adversely impact it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mrs D Kelly: More money is the bottom line.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 31; Noes 60.

AYES

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin,

Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Anderson and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr McKinney.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis conditions recently experienced by patients at the accident and emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this, and other occurrences where accident and emergency departments have been overstretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times.*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Any Members still leaving, please do so quietly.

Assembly Business

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During Question Time, the Justice Minister named one particular individual who could now be a candidate as a result of the change that he is seeking to make. Can the Speaker's Office review Hansard and advise the House if it is appropriate for a Minister to do such an act in the middle of a public appointments process, which now, for some people, will put in jeopardy the very outcome of that process?

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is not for the Speaker to decide what a Minister says, but you have put your concerns on record, and I am sure that they will be read in Hansard.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Lagan Valley Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Givan: For some here, debating Lagan Valley Hospital's emergency department will feel a bit like déjà vu. Back in September 2010, I brought an Adjournment debate about the potential reduction in the opening hours for the Lagan Valley emergency department.

The then Health Minister was Michael McGimpsey, and we discussed the concerns that were being relayed then in public that the Lagan Valley would lose its opening hours during the week, from Monday to Friday. I decided to review that debate to refresh my memory of some of the things that were stated then, and a lot of those same issues are applicable today. I remember that when I raised it, the then Health Minister said that it was nothing to be concerned about, that there had not been any changes and that this was scaremongering. However, lo and behold, as we proceeded throughout the year, changes were made, and on 1 August 2011 there was a reduction during week-nights in the Lagan Valley's emergency department. It was only open from 8.00 am through to 8.00 pm, and it was closed at night-time from Monday to Friday.

The then chief executive of the South Eastern Trust, which is responsible for the Lagan Valley, advised that it was an interim measure to address the recruitment difficulties that the trust was facing, and that it was a temporary measure and the situation would be reviewed on a regular basis. That is what was said over two years ago about the then reduction in the hours at the Lagan Valley emergency department. Of course, the council engaged at the time on the issue. It campaigned around it, and the trust outlined a model that it believed it could implement at the Lagan Valley.

Members will be familiar with the 'Developing Better Services' 2002 document, which indicated a reduction of what the accident and emergency unit would be at the Lagan Valley. That document said that it would be a minor injuries unit, but the trust said that that would not be appropriate, and that never happened. It saw that there would be a role for the Lagan Valley emergency department to continue, but not as a full-blown acute accident and emergency provision, because that requires laboratory backup support, which the Lagan Valley does not have.

5.00 pm

It then outlined to the council that it had a model that members from the South Down area will be familiar with: Lagan Valley could follow what had been implemented in the Downe Hospital, where there was more than an injuries unit but not a full acute emergency department. It also meant that you could work in conjunction with the trust and the GPs' out-of-hours service, coming together to ensure 24-hour, front-door access to an emergency department. That model, implemented in the Lagan Valley, would be able to accommodate around 90% of the people who use that hospital. In the region of around 30,000 people avail themselves of the emergency department during a year, so that model would accommodate over 90% of those people.

At that time, political representatives from all the parties recognised that we could not have in the Lagan Valley what there is at the Royal, the Ulster or Craigavon. Collectively, we said that we would support the implementation of that model, which would ensure 24-hour provision. The trust was then mandated to take it forward. Obviously, time passed, and it was not being implemented. Before Christmas I, along with the Health Minister and my colleague Jonathan Craig, met the trust to find out where we were with implementing the model that was promised two years ago. I was very alarmed by the response that I got. The senior management of the South Eastern Trust, including the chief executive and the clinical director, who is based in the Ulster Hospital, and John Compton, the chief executive of the board, were all at that meeting. I was very concerned at the responses that I heard. Indeed, we were going back to the arguments that we had had two years ago, when I had to listen to officials from the trust saying, "Lagan Valley is not going to be what the Royal or the Ulster are, and you cannot have an acute service, because we do not have the necessary laboratory support". Those are all the arguments that we had two years ago, and we recognised then that that was not deliverable. Yet, here we are two years later, and, rather than implementing the model that was promised to the people of Lagan Valley, the officials are rehearsing old arguments. It was made clear to them at that meeting that we were not happy with the progress — as I saw it, the complete lack of progress — in implementing that model. It also indicated a clear difference in how the GPs in Lisburn think about the issue, compared with the GPs in Downpatrick. The view was expressed then that GPs were very reluctant to deliver the model in Lagan Valley that was being delivered in Downe. That concerned us at that meeting.

Literally a number of weeks later, following that meeting, reports started to come out in mid-December about the need to close Lagan Valley further at weekends during the night-time hours. I was certainly very disappointed at the way in which the trust handled that. There was no communication with any of the elected representatives. The Minister can speak about whatever communication he had, but, when I contacted him about it, the news had not been communicated to him in the timely fashion that one would expect for the Health Minister.

Then my colleague Brenda Hale, Jonathan and I met the trust, and it talked us through the crisis that it was facing. It used arguments that were similar to those that were relayed a number of weeks ago about the Downe. It said that it faced an immediate pressure, because it did not have the particular doctors who were specialists in emergency medicine available to fill all the shifts that were necessary, that coming into Christmas there was a real pressure and that, looking into January, there were in the region of 700 unfilled hours. During December, the trust had asked the consultants to act up and to do a lot more shifts to meet that demand over the Christmas period so that the closure did not happen immediately. However, it was indicated at that meeting that, "It is inevitable for operational reasons that we cannot deliver the service

in the Lagan Valley Hospital at the level at which it is currently being delivered".

We expressed our bitter disappointment at that, and the announcement was subsequently made public that the trust had to take that particular action. I thank the consultants who did all that extra work, as they helped to prevent the unit from being closed immediately. A more planned closure of those hours during the weekend took place. However, the consultants should never have been put in that position. The trust has had to grapple with this problem for several years and has always indicated that it is temporary and will be reviewed. Rather than it being temporary, it has become permanent, and the situation has now got worse. Therefore, the staff that are left have had to stretch themselves further. In my view, had the trust been doing its job, it would not have faced the particular pressure that was placed on it.

I noted with interest that, in responding to the closure, the Minister said he was concerned about the decision that had been taken by the trust and had tasked it with four areas that needed to be dealt with and brought forward.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will, yes.

Mr McKinney: The Member has just recounted the whole process of the trust being able to make a decision and he and others, as elected representatives, being unable to do so. Does that not point to a fundamental issue at the heart of the problem, namely accountability — or the lack of it?

Mr Givan: I have every sympathy with the point that the Member makes. Political representatives from across all the parties have been left very frustrated at the way in which the changes are happening. They are happening, often, by stealth. It is put forward that a safe service cannot be provided, and changes are then foisted on people. There seems to be no real planned process in place whereby elected representatives in the community are able to influence that and see it taken forward. The Member makes a very valid point.

Mr McKinney: Will you take another intervention?

Mr Givan: I am going to make some progress, but I appreciated the point that the Member made.

The Minister highlights that the trust and the board need to bring forward a detailed implementation plan to secure community confidence. I am glad he recognises that community confidence is a particular problem for the South Eastern Trust. My personal confidence in the trust's management is at an all-time low. It has a very small window of time to deliver what it said it could deliver and what the Minister has mandated it to do. There is no point in the Minister having a policy objective for Lagan Valley Hospital that political representatives in the Chamber will agree with and the trust then not being able to implement it. My confidence and faith in the trust to do the job is at an all-time low. At what point does there need to be an intervention in the trust to make the policy objectives of the Minister happen? That is a matter for him, taking a much broader remit into consideration. However, I know that, locally, among the political representatives in the community, confidence in the trust is at an all-time low. It should take very serious cognisance of that.

Lisburn has the second largest population in Northern Ireland outside Belfast. It is projected to grow to an estimated 130,000 by 2015. It is a broad area from Dundrod to Dromara. It is not, as some people think, just Lisburn centre, only seven miles from the Royal; it is a much broader area than that. We need to bear in mind people having to travel long distances to reach an accident and emergency service. I believe that the trust is exporting its failure to provide necessary services for local people to the Belfast Trust and the Southern Trust, putting unnecessary pressures on Craigavon, the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Ulster, all three of which have acute emergency departments. I want people who suffer major traumas to be treated in those hospitals, because that is where the best care is. What I do not want is people from Lisburn who could be cared for at their local hospital going to other emergency departments and blocking up the system when those services need to deal with major trauma incidents.

Lagan Valley has been given a commitment by the Minister, and that needs to be implemented. It has also been given a commitment by John Compton. I have listened to him talk about this issue in the media. He said that he was committed to delivering 24-hour, front-door access at the Lagan Valley Hospital. The trust needs to get the GPs on board. I have heard the excuses about their contracts being different, and I accept the points that Members have made on that. However, it is for the trust to bring together all who are involved and are stakeholders to deliver the service that the people of Lisburn expect and, indeed, demand from the trust so that their needs can be met in the local community. That is the best solution. We need to see it implemented in the Lisburn and broader Lagan Valley area.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I hope that the Adjournment debate will be used as a genuine attempt to get some answers about what happened and what steps can now be taken with regard to the A&E department at the Lagan Valley Hospital. In his opening comments, Mr Givan somewhat laid out the plans and how we got into this situation.

During the summer of 2011, the Lagan Valley Hospital had its service reduced to daytime and weekends only. At the time, staffing concerns were cited. We were assured at that stage that it was hoped that the decision would be only temporary. Nevertheless, despite the supposed concerns of the Minister at the time, the opposite has happened and services have been further reduced "until further notice", prompting this comment from the DUP Mayor of Lisburn:

> *"The Council is committed to restoring 24 hour access to the Lagan Valley Hospital and I am both angry and disappointed at the decision of the Trust to implement this temporary reduction in opening hours at the Emergency Department."*

This is exactly the situation that locals feared when services were first reduced in August 2011. Few people in the Lisburn area now doubt that the A&E unit at the Lagan Valley Hospital is in the process of being scaled down. If that is not stemmed, it could end with a relatively young department, opened only in 2000, closing its doors completely. That would be a deplorable decision that the Minister would have to account for personally. Many Lisburn people have been born in the hospital and hold

it in the highest esteem. They have a great loyalty to it. Whatever the future holds for the hospital, the Minister has to be upfront about it. I said exactly the same thing to him when we discussed the Downe Hospital in a similar Adjournment debate a couple of weeks ago. The Minister must realise his role in any decision, not stand by and blame the trusts. Was neither the Minister nor his permanent secretary advised in advance by the trust of the decision during one of their quarterly or monthly meetings or even warned just how difficult things were becoming at Lagan Valley? Whilst recognising the lines of responsibility between the trust and the Department, they are ultimately responsible to the Minister. If he says that he was not adequately informed of the staffing pressures at Lagan Valley, either his officials did not do their job right or maybe he just was not paying enough attention. I just cannot understand how such circumstances could have remained unknown to the Minister.

Of course, if the further reduction in services was unavoidable and the Minister and the trust explored all relevant channels, we would find ourselves back to the problem that is seemingly at the heart of the matter, namely staffing. The problem exists in the A&E departments of the Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals. It also applies to a great many units in other hospitals. Indeed, the Minister used the same staffing argument emphatically to shut the A&E department at the City Hospital. Again, little or no heed was given to consideration of the 45,000 admissions that it had had the previous year. Therefore, considering that the problem appears to be getting worse, what exactly will the Minister do to bring about change? For instance, will he consider reviewing employment contracts to place enough focus on evening, night and weekend work?

Of course, it is not only the people in and around Lisburn who will be impacted on by changes to their local hospital. Indeed, in my constituency, Craigavon A&E has been feeling the strain over recent months. I fear that the decision in Lisburn will compound that further. So, in conclusion, with an eye on my Upper Bann responsibilities, I ask the Minister to give his assessment of the wider knock-on impact that changes at Lagan Valley will have on bordering hospitals, not only in Craigavon but at the Belfast RVH, which of course has faced a plethora of its own problems in recent times.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that we are having the debate. For once, I could reasonably stand up and say that I agree with everything that Paul Givan has said and sit down again. He has laid out the situation. He has given us a full chronology of all the events of the past few years. I could perhaps go further back. I was talking to Alderman Davis the other day. He can trace this crisis, as he calls it, right back to 1971, never mind 1991.

However, in most respects, we still have a very good functioning hospital. We have lost the battle over some aspects, but the hospital is there to stay. We should bear it in mind that, over the period that we are talking about, there was doubt about the future of the hospital on that site at all. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are still blessed with a good hospital, although we have a problem with A&E and whether it is minor injuries, full A&E, 24-hour services or restricted hours.

5.15 pm

In case I forget later, I pay tribute, as Members did during the previous debate, to the ability, commitment and dedication of the staff — nurses, doctors and everybody involved in Lagan Valley — especially those in A&E who have had to work in difficult circumstances.

I wrote to the Minister and asked him a question about the current situation. Last week, in a different forum, I asked him the question, and he answered it to my satisfaction. He said that, if the staff and facilities were available to man a proper A&E unit in Lisburn, it would be his intention to maintain that service. In the current circumstances, I am not sure that we can ask for much more from him. In the meantime, what worries me is the fact that A&E will always have peaks and troughs, which is part of the problem; it is not predictable. I listened to the previous debate, and what happened in the Royal on, I think, 8 January was pretty unusual. If I remember correctly, on a Wednesday evening, instead of the usual situation where 20% of the people who attend A&E need to be admitted to hospital, the figure went up to 42%. The situation was dealt with, but there was considerable panic. Nurses were phoning their union representatives, people were crying, people were in corridors and in recovery units and whatever. It was a serious situation. If that was a one-off, I would not be too concerned, but it keeps happening. As we heard during the previous debate, it has happened again in Craigavon. Before that, the whole argument was about Antrim, which seems to have been more or less resolved.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that the situation in Lisburn after 8.00 pm and at weekends contributes to the problems in Craigavon, the Royal, the Ulster and perhaps even in Antrim. In an ideal world, the solution would be to improve the service in Lisburn, but how do you do that? I accept the Minister's explanation that he has moved mountains to try to get the unit properly staffed. I imagine that posts were advertised extensively and that we looked abroad for doctors and consultants. I guess that we had a look at their training and perhaps put something in their contract to say that they must spend time in A&E at some point. I presume that we looked at salaries. Nevertheless, nothing appears to work, because A&E has a slight stigma about it and is not where the top doctors mean to be. Is there some way, Minister, that those doctors could be persuaded or forced to spend part of their career in A&E rather than entirely in an area of their choosing? Perhaps that could be pursued. I do not know whether there is a professional body that represents consultants and senior doctors, but I imagine that there is a royal college. Perhaps the onus could be put on it to insist that its members play their part and do their bit to resolve these situations.

I totally agree with Paul Givan. The Lisburn catchment area comprises some 115,000 people, and the numbers are going up not down. If you look at a map, you could say, "They can all go to the Royal. It is only down the road". It is not just down the road. If you live in Aghalee, it is far from down the road. I will touch on the Downe Hospital, where the situation is the same.

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

Mr Lunn: The issues are the geography, the Ambulance Service, ambulances piling up and so on. I do not know what the solution is, but I would like to hear the Minister responding to some of my points.

Mr Craig: I thank my colleague Mr Givan for bringing the issue to the Assembly today.

I want to record my disappointment at the way in which the trust has handled the issue. It is despicable that it kept neither the Minister nor the elected Members for Lagan Valley informed of its intentions. I get the distinct impression that it was probably living in a bubble of hope, thinking that it could resolve the issue without ever getting to the situation of closing A&E at weekends. There was an imperative on the trust at least to make Members and, above all, the Minister aware that the situation might arise. However, that is the past, and it failed to do that. It failed to do so not only recently but, as Mr Givan pointed out, in 2010. It is a huge disappointment.

There is a huge lack of trust among elected Members and the general public in Lagan Valley about the whole A&E issue. Even Members working in Lagan Valley lack trust, and many have complained to me because they believe that the trust is working to an agenda that will ultimately lead to the closure of A&E. We have sat in meetings with the trust and listened to what it has said. It has told us all the right things: "No, that is not our intention. We do not want to do that. We want to get the 24/7 service up and running again". It also pointed out a number of key issues, including the failure of GPs to come up to the mark in assisting with the delivery of the 24/7 service through the week. The lack of delivery from GPs is also part of the issue that led to the weekend closure.

GPs and junior doctors constantly tell me about the unsocial hours and shift patterns that they are asked to work in A&E. They say that it is one of the reasons why they would not choose a career in A&E. I find that interesting, if alarming. I went to the bother of looking up the shift pattern that they are asked to work. What I found is that, over an eight-week period, the shift pattern repeats itself. It is clear that doctors are asked to work only three weekends over that eight-week period, which I do not find that surprising. I confess: my wife is a paramedic, so I know the shift pattern that they are asked to work. I can tell you that it is a lot worse. So there are questions in my mind about why that is an issue.

The one thing that I find of interest — this may be at the root of the doctors' criticism — is that week eight is holiday cover. Looking honestly at doctor cover in A&E, we see that the lack of doctors to provide cover will inevitably lead to holiday cover becoming routine rather than exceptional. If you look at that and at the pattern of shift work and overtime that those doctors are asked to work, you very quickly start to see why no one would want to work what looks, on paper, a reasonable shift pattern. That is at the root of the problem of attracting young doctors to A&E. It is not the work, the type of work or that they do not want to do that type of work.

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

Mr Craig: It is that the shift patterns and the hours that doctors are being requested to work in A&E lead to exhaustion.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the chance to speak in this debate. As an MLA for Lagan Valley, I am only too aware of the inconvenience that the closure of the A&E department at weekends and evenings has caused many families in the area. However, I commend the Minister for the stance that he has taken on the issue to ensure that patient safety remains the number one priority.

It is very important to stress that this is not just a Northern Ireland issue. The NHS is stretched to capacity across the United Kingdom, and there have been sweeping reports illustrating bad practice and issues around patient safety because of the lack of emergency consultants. Whilst that point has been made a few times in the debate so far, it is most critical to understanding why the Minister had to make the only decision that was available at the time, which was to reluctantly reduce the opening hours of the Lagan Valley A&E.

It is also widely accepted that there are great difficulties in attracting senior clinicians, doctors and other health professionals, as my colleague Jonathan Craig pointed out. Dr Mann, a senior clinician, was quoted in the 'Nursing Times' as saying that staff shortages often meant that medical shifts were being covered by poor quality locums or, more worryingly, not at all. That not only put other staff in A&E under immense pressure but potentially led to unsafe care.

The blueprint for the remodelled A&E service in England was proposed by Sir Bruce Keogh towards the end of 2013 and considered some of the issues facing our Health Minister as well as focussing on trying to ensure that non-emergency patients are not accessing A&E services. He illustrated some solutions that would ensure that services would be streamlined to concentrate specialist A&E expertise in fewer hospitals, which is something that our Health Minister has already begun to implement.

Having read the blueprint, much of the solution was placed at the door of GPs getting back into emergency and out-of-hours care. Although that is a sensible option, it would require great upheaval through a renegotiation of the GP contract, and it is by no means a guarantee. Although it sensible and clear why the Minister is concentrating on specialist A&E services for stroke, trauma and heart patients in specific units, there is a place for a minor injuries unit in the Lagan Valley Hospital, given that the majority of people who turn up at A&E only have minor injuries.

My colleagues and I have discussed with the chief executive of the South Eastern Trust and other senior health officials the possibility of using emergency nurse practitioners (EPNs). They have responded positively to the suggestion, and consideration is being given to how EPNs could help ease the burden and free up senior clinicians for medical emergencies. On that basis, I ask the Minister whether he has given any consideration to developing the number of EPNs to help ease the burden at Lagan Valley. Whilst that might lead to a reorganisation of Lagan Valley, it would mean that the EPNs could assess, diagnose, treat and discharge patients with a range of minor injuries and illnesses. If there was the potential for training EPNs, maybe Lagan Valley could be the pilot project for that.

The decision taken on Lagan Valley Hospital was tough for the Minister, given that it is in the heart of our constituency, but it was the only safe option. It is fair to say that options are available for the site, but a major A&E unit may not be the best or safest option.

I am sure that my suggestion will not solve all of the challenges faced by the Minister at the Lagan Valley, but the people of Lagan Valley would sleep better in their beds at night if they knew that a 24-hour service led by suitably trained healthcare professionals was available if required.

Mr B McCrea: I listened with some interest to the last contribution. I was struck by the contrast between the Member's tone and what she was suggesting and that of some of the Members who spoke earlier.

It is interesting to compare this debate with the debate that we had earlier when we were talking about a supposed crisis in A&E in general. In that debate, some were saying that there was no crisis, and an amendment was tabled that said that everything was rosy.

The Alliance Member for Lagan Valley was fulsome in his praise for the Member who secured the Adjournment debate, and he did give a reasonable chronology of what happened. However, I am at a loss as to how you can draw a conclusion that says, "I agree 100%." This debate appears to involve DUP MLAs discussing with a DUP Minister something that seemed to happen almost unknown.

I am not sure if I got this right, but I think that the thrust of what Mr Givan was saying was that he had accepted, along with other MLAs in Lagan Valley, that the Lagan Valley Hospital was not going to be the same as the Royal Victoria Hospital and that it would have to be changed but that it had come as a surprise to him that things had developed to this stage. He was saying that the lack of communication and community consultation was the most problematic aspect of this issue.

Therefore, there is an issue, given that the Minister was lauded in the previous debate for being so much on top of what was happening in the Royal Victoria Hospital. I think that it was Mrs Dobson who made this point: how is it, then, that all of this came to him as a complete surprise?

5.30 pm

Mr Craig mulled over why there might be a crisis or problem. I have to say that I am not an expert in medicine, the organisation of health trusts or anything else. The only thing that I can do is to try to talk to people who are experts in such matters, and I try to take my guidance from them.

The proposer of the topic says that he has absolute rock-bottom trust in the trusts, as it were. That is an undermining of the expertise that has come forward, and I am not sure that I know what level of expertise he has to make such an assessment. He may well have such expertise, but, if so, he has the advantage on me there.

That is why I was so taken with Mrs Hale's contribution towards the end. She made a number of very good, important points that I happen to agree with, which may not be good news for her. She said that this is not just an issue for Northern Ireland — for Lisburn or wherever — and that there are challenges throughout the United Kingdom; that people have to look at how this is dealt with; that the most important thing is patient care and safety; and that all the decisions that are made — hard as they are, as she quite rightly said — are made with the best intentions by medical professionals and their advisers to try to do the right thing.

That is where the debate has taken us. If we really want to put the patient at the centre — I suspect that absolutely everybody does — and really want to look after patient safety, it is important that we listen to the people who have expertise in such matters. Somewhere along the line, we have not been able to communicate to the community or, as I hear from people, to elected representatives what is really going on. I do not, for one minute, think that there is any group of professionals, whether clinical or administrative, that sits together and says, "Let us see whether we can come out with the worst outcome possible". Everybody is trying to do their best, and everybody is looking to do what they can within the constraints of budgets and the demands that are placed on their service.

I noticed that the proposer of the topic raised a point of order on another matter, earlier on, about naming people in the Chamber. I have to say that I do not think it useful in the Chamber to do anything that attacks the integrity of the people who are trying to do really good work for the people of Lisburn and beyond. Everybody, I am quite sure —

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

Mr B McCrea: Absolutely, Mr Speaker. Everybody is trying to do their best. Maybe what we should do is give the Minister the chance to talk. He is the person with the responsibility, so perhaps he will give us some guidance as to how we restore public confidence in Lagan Valley Hospital.

Mr McKinney: I commend the fact that, after the debate on the motion earlier, most of the parties in the House now agree that there is a crisis in the health service. For us, that is a significant advance, and I hope that it will help to focus minds. We understand that the Minister's party will feel protective towards him in his stewardship of the health service, but we believed all along that it cannot be true that DUP constituents are not saying the same thing to that party on health as others say to us. I take on board Mr Givan's remarks in that context.

The weekend A&E closures experienced at the Lagan Valley Hospital are sadly another consequence of the current crisis conditions in our service. We are told that those closures are not financially predicated but based on the lack of middle-grade doctors. I do not want to labour the point, but to look at the situation in isolation is, once again, to miss the point. The House recognises that there are problems with GP waiting lists, shortage of doctors, the numbers of beds, the shortage of nurses and nurses' employment conditions. The House has also realised — rightly, in my view — the second-to-none levels of care and the quality of services that the staff deliver.

So, in some respects, following today's earlier debate, a greater clarity is emerging in this discussion, due to the fact that we all agree that the wider strategic thinking in the health service is not producing results. Once again, I reflect on Mr Givan's remarks.

The biggest indictment, and, in our view, the fundamental issue in this debate, is that the trust took a unilateral decision to restrict A&E services at Downe and Lagan Valley that was consistent with their inability to source doctors, but it was inconsistent with the Minister, who tells us that he was against any such decision in the first place. Ultimately, the Minister could not do anything, as the trust had, effectively, presented a gun-to-the-head situation. So the decision was made on the basis of patient safety, but who in the Chamber, or anywhere else, could say that the best interests of the wider population were being served, when it is clear that we need an accident and emergency provision?

It is our case that the trust's decision was made somewhat easier by a gradual erosion of such services as maternity, elective surgery and teaching, and also by the downgrading of the emergency department. All of those are critical losses to any healthcare provider. Our worst fears could be — Mr Craig has touched on this slightly — that the trust did not find it a difficult decision to make, given that the direction of travel was already in train. I mention mid-Ulster, Omagh and Dungannon and refer back to my colleague Patsy McGlone's comments earlier in that context.

As a result of the decision, we have ended up with a crisis of confidence in the public mind about the level of services at Lagan Valley and Downe, because if a qualified doctor does not want to, or finds himself unable to, work in an emergency provision, or is unable to learn his trade in that provision, will the public have confidence in the safety and be assured that they will get the highest level of care there? Just to be clear, and I put this on record: this cannot be misconstrued as being any reflection on staff. We have made it very, very clear that they provide excellent health services, and we fully support them. They, along with the patients and unions, are the ones who have led in this debate. We are merely reflecting it.

Ultimately, the simple laws of supply and demand apply here. When you shut down somewhere, and the same amount of people are looking for a service, they are going to end up somewhere else and put pressure on that service. That is the fundamental truth of this. That is the picture that has emerged, and it will not take much of a review to underscore the truth of that, but I suggest that it will take much more analysis and action to resolve it.

Lagan Valley is only one small part of the jigsaw, and it is up to the Health Department to look at the entire picture and start to strategically prepare a course of action to relieve the pressures, provide services and, ultimately, alleviate the crisis in the public mind.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank Mr Givan for bringing the debate to the House. We had a debate two weeks ago about the changes in the Downe Hospital's emergency department, and today provides an opportunity to focus on the Lagan Valley and allows me to update Members on what has happened since the changes to the emergency department opening hours of the two hospitals were announced.

I take this opportunity to reassure the people of Lisburn of my commitment to the ongoing development of the Lagan Valley Hospital as a whole. Our local hospital has seen a number of changes in recent years, in line with the vision that it will be a local hospital for the people of Lisburn and an important component of the hospital network within the South Eastern Trust. I share the desire of Mr Givan — and, I believe, the trust as well — that as many of the current services as possible should be maintained so that patients can get safe services as close to home as possible.

I therefore asked the HSC Board and the South Eastern Trust to bring forward a detailed plan for the future of the Lagan Valley Hospital and the Downe Hospital, with an implementation plan to secure confidence in the community that the best possible steps are being taken. The plan is currently being developed, with a view to finalising a potential model in February. That will form the basis of a detailed engagement and consultation with the local community and wider stakeholders on the proposed options. I expect the final proposals to come to my Department in the autumn.

It is early days, but I understand that the trust's plans will include collocation of the urgent care and GP out-of-hours service; inpatient beds providing 24/7 for frail, elderly people and people with long-term conditions; further utilisation of the Lagan Valley Hospital's very successful day surgery service; and a comprehensive range of assessment, diagnostics and treatment services.

Lagan Valley's emergency department does not see the range of services that a big A&E unit, such as those in the Royal or the Ulster Hospital, would. The hospital does not have some services, such as critical care and emergency surgery, and therefore cannot treat the most severely injured. However, it treats the people whom it sees in a timely and caring manner. Lagan Valley, like all our hospitals, comes under pressure at times. However, it has performed well in recent months, with 87·8% of patients seen and discharged or admitted to a ward within four hours in December 2013, with no one waiting over 12 hours. That shows that, although smaller emergency departments may not see all the complex cases that a large A&E does, they provide a very valuable service.

Shortly before Christmas, the South Eastern Trust advised me that, in the light of critical medical staffing difficulties, it would not be able to safely sustain the opening hours at the Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals' emergency departments. I assure Mr McCrea that I do not do an inventory of staff every week or month. That is not something that I am capable of doing. So, it came as news to me that it did not have an adequate number of middle-grade doctors to provide a safe service. The service was heavily reliant on locum cover. The situation had worsened over the previous six weeks, with the loss of two specialist doctors very quickly and a worsening position on locum recruitment. The trust advised that the recruitment agency that it uses had struggled to fill shifts in all three of its hospital sites. In the weeks leading up to the decision, the trust had been reliant on its emergency department consultants covering vacant shifts by working on their days off or effectively working full shifts when on call. However, that arrangement could be sustained only in the short term.

The position in December was that, across the two hospitals, the South Eastern Trust had 15 shifts to cover in December and around 70 in January. The trust felt that the difficulty in recruiting staff and securing locum cover would not improve in the immediate future and that it was unrealistic to expect consultant staff to continue to provide cover. For that reason, the trust decided that, from the weekend commencing Saturday 4 January 2014, the emergency departments at the Downe and Lagan Valley hospitals would be closed on Saturdays and Sundays until further notice and would operate from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm on Mondays to Fridays.

I am greatly disappointed by that decision. I know that some people in the greater Lisburn and neighbouring areas will be inconvenienced by it. I stress that the decision was made because of a shortage of medical staff. It is not down to a lack of money or a desire to centralise A&E services in a few large hospitals, as some might have suggested. Some have said that staff shortages is just an excuse and that they do not believe the South Eastern Trust has tried hard enough to recruit staff, or that doctors

should be compelled to work in smaller hospitals. The shortage of staff in emergency medicine is a national one, and its effects have been widely reported.

The South Eastern Trust has made many efforts to recruit middle-grade doctors, but that has met with limited success. I understand that, in the most recent recruitment exercise in July 2013, the trust advertised for nine middle-grade doctors on all three sites. It received only three applications in response, and all three applications were for the Ulster Hospital. No applications were made for either the Lagan Valley Hospital or Downe Hospital. Traditional recruitment methods have had limited success, so the trust has explored other options. For example, it has trawled over 30 agencies locally and nationally for short- and long-term locum staff. It has used job finder agencies to source suitably qualified staff with the correct skills. It has maintained links with emergency care consultants throughout Northern Ireland to ascertain whether any suitably qualified staff were available. It also looked at the possibility of recruiting from the EU and overseas. That had one successful appointment: a speciality doctor from the Czech Republic who worked in the Downe Hospital for one year. Outside the normal recruitment processes, the trust also tried to develop its own middle-grade staff by, for example, working intensively with locum staff to develop their skills to a point at which they are able to work at middle-grade level and become trust employees.

5.45 pm

We also have the issue that, previously, we were able to engage doctors from Commonwealth countries. That has not been the case since an EU directive came into force. I have spoken to our Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers, and asked her to raise with Cabinet colleagues what we might do about that and how we might respond. I am very clearly of the view that patient safety should come before any European directive. That should be the line that the United Kingdom Government and Parliament take. Therefore, if there is a national shortage and a national problem in recruiting emergency doctors and there is the potential to recruit doctors from Commonwealth countries, we should do so. I would challenge any court in the land to say that we did the wrong thing in recruiting doctors from outside Europe in defiance of a European directive. I have, nonetheless, asked that fresh efforts are made to secure medical staff for the Lagan Valley and Downe sites. The trust has redoubled its efforts to attract emergency medicine staff. Advertisements have been placed in the local press, and further contact is being made with recruitment agencies.

Once I became aware of the changes to the Lagan Valley and Downe Hospital emergency department opening hours, I asked for several key actions to be taken. The first was on staff recruitment, which I have just mentioned. Another was that all appropriate and feasible steps should be taken to ensure that the consequences of the changes were managed in a way that minimised the risk of unmanageable pressures on the emergency departments at the Ulster, Royal Victoria and other affected hospitals so that patient safety and the quality of the patient experience were not compromised.

To minimise the impact on other trusts, action was taken to allow direct admission access to GPs at the Lagan Valley and Downe Hospital sites at all times when the emergency departments are closed and to streamline the direct access process to make it easier and quicker to repatriate to the Lagan Valley and Downe Hospitals patients who present to the Ulster Hospital's emergency department, when clinically appropriate. Additional nursing staff are also in place at weekends in emergency departments in the Belfast, South Eastern and Southern Trusts, and additional beds are available for admissions. An additional out-of-hours GP is on duty in the Lagan Valley and Downe areas. GPs are able to contact direct admissions through a single telephone number.

Additional ambulance resources are also in place, with two additional A&E crews on duty from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm at weekends, one in Downpatrick and one in Lisburn. Mr Rogers said in a previous debate that it was very difficult to get ambulances. It is funny that, across Northern Ireland, almost 70% of people who called an ambulance had ambulance staff at their home within eight minutes of calling. We need to deal with these things in a mature way and not distort the facts. Others mentioned ambulances stacking up at hospitals. Over 5,000 ambulances left hospitals within 30 minutes in December, a further 5,500 left within the hour, and around 1,000 waited longer than that. Ambulances are not, in general, stacking up at hospitals.

There are also two intermediate care vehicles operating from 11.00 am to 7.00 pm at weekends, one in Lisburn and one in Comber. Additional hospital ambulance liaison officers are in place at weekends at the Ulster, Royal Victoria and Craigavon hospitals. The trust and the HSC Board have assured me that the number of attendances and admissions likely to arise at other sites would be manageable. Over the first three weekends of the temporary closure, there has been no significant impact on neighbouring hospital sites. The contingency plan appears to have been working. The HSC Board will, however, continue to monitor the position for some weeks to come.

I also asked the HSC Board and the trust to accelerate the work to develop and implement the new model of care at the Lagan Valley Hospital that will enable many of those affected by the changes in the short term to resume receiving services locally. At Lagan Valley Hospital, the trust has actively promoted the opportunity for direct admissions to the hospital through the GP out-of-hours service. New arrangements are now in place between the out-of-hours GPs and hospital medical staff to facilitate admissions, where appropriate. The board and the trust are also exploring the potential for a 24/7 urgent care arrangement involving emergency nurse practitioners working under medical supervision, as mentioned by Mrs Hale.

I hope that, as can be seen from the action taken by the trust at my request, Members are assured of my commitment to doing everything I can to see that an emergency care service is maintained at the Lagan Valley and Downe hospitals. However, it must be safe and resilient care that is not vulnerable to unplanned closure because the necessary staff cannot be found to provide it.

I have stated that I am profoundly disappointed that it has been necessary for the South Eastern Trust to temporarily reduce the opening hours at the Downe and Lagan Valley emergency departments. However, the Assembly should be in no doubt that I will continue to press the Health and Social Care Board and the trust to work to restore the opening hours, if possible, as soon as possible.

Adjourned at 5.50 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 3 February 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Lord Morrow: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek clarification on an important issue on which, perhaps, you can give me some direction. It is about a situation that has developed, particularly in my area, whereby some 1,139 farmers across Northern Ireland have not received their single farm payment. Payments were due in December, but as yet those farmers have not received payment, which is causing great strain and hardship for those businesses. I feel that the Minister should come here and make a statement on the issue. I would like to hear some direction from you as to how best that can be achieved.

Mr Speaker: As an experienced Member of the House, Lord Morrow knows that that is an issue for the Minister. Lord Morrow, you now have it on the record, which is important, and I hope that the Minister is listening to what you said. That is where we should leave it. It is an area and an issue for the Minister and her Department.

Mr Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning, a number of Members received in their pigeonhole notification from the Director of Corporate Services that there had been a breach of data security that resulted in the details of the salaries, employment dates and names of a number of employees of Members being released to a third party. The letter states:

> *"Like any responsible authority, the Assembly Commission has established protocols to deal with such circumstances through its data breach management plan".*

It appears that the breach occurred on 24 January, but employees were not notified until either this morning or at the end of last week. Indeed, the casual way in which the notification came to Members — namely, the letter appearing in their pigeonhole — is hardly the act of "any responsible authority".

The point of order that I wish to make is: have you spoken to the Director General to get a report, what action is being taken, and what explanation is there for the delay in informing those whose information was passed to a third party in this way?

Mr Speaker: Order. I go back to Lord Morrow's point of order. The Minister of Agriculture will be in the House today for Question Time. There may be an opportunity to put your concerns to her directly then.

On Mr Wilson's point of order, the Member will know that data protection is a very complex issue. I agree with some of the Member's points, but I would prefer him to come and talk to me about it outside the Chamber. If he has concerns, I encourage him to talk also to the Director General.

Mr Wilson: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I heard what you said, but these are the details of the employees of every Member who makes pension contributions, so I am not raising a personal issue. This is a serious breach of data protection. I think that the Assembly would like to hear a report from you or the Director General on why it took over a week to inform Members of this security breach and why it was done in such a casual manner.

Mr Speaker: The issue was fully discussed with the Director General and at our most recent Commission meeting. All Commission members were informed as soon as it happened and have been well kept up to date. Members, our Commission members are fully apprised of the situation. That is where we should leave it because there has been a wide discussion on this involving me, the Director General and, especially, Commission members.

I am not prepared to take further points of order on this. We really need to move on, but, if Members want to talk to me about it, please, please do so outside the Chamber or talk directly to the Director General. All I can say to the entire House is that all our Commission members have been kept totally up to date on the situation. That is really where we should leave it.

Mr Wilson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on this particular issue?

Mr Wilson: No, it is not; it is on the issue of secrecy.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat. I have given the Member quite a bit of leeway on a point of order that was not a point of order. I say to the whole House that, if any Member has concerns about the issue, please come and talk to us outside the Chamber. These matters are better discussed outside the Chamber, so let us leave it.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to Lord Morrow's point of order, can you confirm that that issue could have been raised today as a question for urgent oral answer to the Agriculture Minister? That is not an easy task, as I often find out. Today, for example, I was refused the right to raise such a question to the Justice Minister about the intended visit of a convicted terrorist and prison escapee to talk about his escape to prisoners in Hydebank Wood. That, to my surprise, was refused, but the type of issue that Lord Morrow raises could surely be raised by virtue of a question for urgent oral answer.

Mr Speaker: Order. A number of points of order have been made today. Mr Allister raised the issue of whether Lord Morrow's point of order should have been a question for urgent oral answer. Let me say this to the Member: the Minister will be in the House today for Question Time. That is where it should sit, and that is where it should rest. There will be an opportunity during topical questions to put those particular questions to the Minister. I would have thought that the Members who are raising those points of order would know that the Minister will be in the House this afternoon for Question Time. That is where we should leave the issue.

Public Petition: Immaculate Conception College

Mr Speaker: Mr Ramsey has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes in which to speak on the subject matter.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank you, Mr Speaker, the Business Office and the Business Committee for facilitating the presentation of this petition. I present it to the House on behalf of the many thousands of people who oppose development proposal 2148, which seeks the closure of the Immaculate Conception College in the Waterside area of my constituency.

As the last post-primary school in the Waterside, its closure will have a catastrophic effect on the local community. Parents are deeply worried about where their children will go. The principal point that parents are making is that they should have the right to chose for their children to be taught at a Christian-based Catholic school. Unfortunately, in Derry, the alternatives for the children who are at the school are St Cecilia's, which is oversubscribed and is an all-girls school, St Mary's, which is oversubscribed, and St Joseph's, which is vastly oversubscribed. The only other alternatives could be in the integrated sector, which parents do not want their children to go to.

We have seen Foyle and Londonderry College making a move. At the time, I met with the governors of the school and argued the case for the college remaining on the city side. They made a choice, which I will defend and support, to move to the Waterside. So, within the next year or two, we will have pupils from the Protestant community being taught in the Waterside and only Catholic pupils being taught in the city side. That is not what we want.

This school epitomises everything that is right about using the estate of a school. We have playgroups, youth clubs, GAA clubs and soccer clubs. We also have the Protestant community from Irish Street making use of community services in the school. It is the hub of good service to the Waterside.

Teachers and staff are deeply unmotivated. Morale is down since the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools made the decision to phase out the school with a view to closure. One can understand parents who hear that being disincentivised from sending their children there. So I am giving a petition to you, Mr Speaker, which I know will be passed on to the Education Minister. I hope that he will be creative and imaginative in looking at some way for the integrity of the Immaculate Conception College, formerly St Brecan's High School, to remain intact through an amalgamation. The school makes a valued contribution to the wider community in the Waterside.

Mr P Ramsey moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Chair of the Education Committee, Mr Storey.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

> *That Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Simon Hamilton as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Mr Weir.]*

Executive Committee Business

Children and Families Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

> *That this Assembly agrees that the UK Parliament should consider the extension to Northern Ireland of amendments to the Children and Families Bill dealing with the regulation of retail packaging etc of tobacco products.*

The Children and Families Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 4 February 2013. The Bill's main purpose is to improve key services for vulnerable children and to support families in achieving a work-life balance.

12.15 pm

Although the majority of its provisions apply to England only, an amendment tabled by the Department of Health in London on 16 December 2013 concerns Northern Ireland and therefore must be agreed by the Assembly through a legislative consent motion. The amendment relates to the retail packaging of tobacco products, more commonly referred to as "standardised packaging".

Branding on cigarette packs provides one of the last opportunities for tobacco companies to promote their products. Research shows that branded packs increase the appeal of tobacco products, reduce the impact of health warnings and influence perceptions of product harm. Members may be aware that standardised packaging was introduced in Australia in December 2012. Work on similar legislation is already under way in New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland.

The effect of the Department of Health amendment would be to provide a Secretary of State with UK-wide regulation-making powers. The regulations may impose requirements on the appearance of, and markings on, external packaging of tobacco products, as well as the internal packaging and any product wrappers. The aim behind introducing such measures is to prevent the uptake of smoking by children and young people.

Smoking remains one of the most preventable causes of illness and death in our society and is a major contributor to health inequalities. Despite substantial progress being made on tobacco control in recent years, 8% of 11- to 16-year olds in Northern Ireland are regular smokers. Evidence shows that that group is more receptive to tobacco advertising than adults and that young people exposed to tobacco advertising and promotion are more likely to take up smoking. If those children continue to smoke, half of them will face an early death as a result of their addiction. Preventing children from taking up smoking is therefore a key priority for my Department.

I am supportive of any measure that will bring about a reduction in the number of young people smoking. For that reason, I agreed to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in the UK-wide consultation on standardised packaging, which ran from April to August 2012. The consultation attracted considerable interest, receiving over 600,000 campaign responses and over 2,400 detailed responses. Members may wish to note that, of the detailed responses provided

by individuals or businesses in Northern Ireland, 75% indicated that they support the introduction of standardised packaging.

The consultation summary report was published in July 2013. In the intervening months, the Department of Health in London has been keeping the policy under active consideration. A welcome decision was subsequently made by the Secretary of State for Health in November to commission an independent review of the effect of standardised packaging on public health. Sir Cyril Chantler, an eminent paediatrician, is carrying out the review and is expected to produce his report in March.

The Department of Health has clearly indicated that legislation on the retail packaging of tobacco products will be introduced if the review provides sufficient evidence for that course of action. In order to progress swiftly, it was decided to take advantage of an opportunity offered by the Children and Families Bill to table a Government amendment to take enabling powers for retail packaging. The enabling powers will be enacted if the finding of the Chantler review is that standardised packaging will have a positive impact on health.

The Health Ministers from the devolved Administrations had previously expressed their support for a UK-wide approach to any legislation on the issue. The amendment to the Bill was drafted to allow for that. Members may be interested to hear that similar legislative consent motions have been debated and approved in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. It is my view that the extension of provisions in the Children and Families Bill presents the best option for ensuring parity across the UK on the timing and content of the legislation on standardised packaging. The UK-wide approach will ensure consistency across the four jurisdictions on the detail of the regulations and how they are implemented.

One of the advantages of this is a reduction of the burden on businesses, particularly for manufacturers of tobacco products. Manufacturers would have one set of requirements to comply with, and one established time frame. It is unlikely that that would be the case were the devolved Administrations to introduce primary legislation separately on this issue. There are also advantages to consider from a public health perspective, including the ability to deliver clear and consistent public health messages across the whole of the UK.

Given the additional time that it would take for primary legislation to be brought before the Assembly, the extension of the relevant provisions to Northern Ireland will also prevent a situation arising whereby our population is exposed to tobacco promotion through packaging for some time after it has been banned in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland.

I would like to reassure Members that, if they agree to the extension of the amendment to the Children and Families Bill to Northern Ireland, any decision taken by a Secretary of State to introduce regulations on the retail packaging of tobacco can only be undertaken on behalf of Northern Ireland with the consent of our Executive. This ensures that we in Northern Ireland will have a further opportunity to make a decision on the policy issue based on the outcome of the Chantler review. On that basis, I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I support the motion. The Committee was advised in writing by the Health Department of the proposals to bring forward the legislative consent motion on 9 December 2013. We were then briefed by departmental officials on the issues involved on 15 January 2014. However, at that stage, the legislative consent memorandum had not been cleared by the Executive or laid in the Assembly. The legislative consent memorandum was laid on 24 January, and the Committee considered it formally at its meeting on 29 January 2014. The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposed legislative consent memorandum, and we produced a report, which was made available to all Members last Wednesday.

As the Minister said, the legislative consent motion is being introduced to allow for regulations to be brought in at a later date on the standardised packaging of tobacco products. However, before any of the regulations can be made, the British Secretary of State must obtain the consent of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

Evidence clearly shows us that children and teenagers are more receptive to tobacco advertising than adults. Those children who are exposed to tobacco advertising are more likely to take up smoking. It also shows that the branded packs increase the appeal of tobacco products. The Committee understands that an ongoing review in England of the public health implications of introducing standardised packaging is due to report in March 2014. Again, the British Secretary of State will then take a decision on whether to introduce regulations for England on standardised packaging, and we will await with interest to see what decision is taken there.

The Committee took the view that the legislative consent motion would be the most efficient mechanism for introducing legislation on standardised packaging in the North, pending the findings of the review. We felt that it was important that we are not left behind if standardised packaging is introduced in England, Scotland, Wales and, at a future date, the Twenty-six Counties. The motion is important for public health and because of the impact on businesses. As the Minister said, it will reduce the burden on manufacturers if there is one set of requirements and one timetable to comply with.

Although the Committee fully supported the motion, we expressed some concern that the normal procedures and timescales for the legislative consent motion had not been followed. However, we accept that some of the timescales were outside the Department's control. Given the huge significance of this issue, it is important that we show some flexibility. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Wells: I support the Minister on this legislative consent motion. We need to keep emphasising the fact that 2,300 people die every year in Northern Ireland as a result of smoking-related diseases. Indeed, 900 of them die as a result of lung cancer. I have had the misfortune recently to lose four friends through lung cancer, all of whom, as it turns out, were ladies. All of them endured the most horrific, long-term and painful death imaginable, and all of them died knowing that they were heavy smokers and were entirely responsible for their condition. That

made it particularly difficult for them to accept that they could have done something to avoid it. All of them took up smoking as teenagers and regretted bitterly that they had been lured into accepting smoking as a glamorous, exciting experience. How difficult was it then to accept that the price that they paid for that was a horrific and very unglamorous death?

We know that 83% of all the smokers in Northern Ireland take up the habit before the age of 20, and that, in the United Kingdom as a whole, 200,000 people took up smoking in 2011, the year for which the most recent statistics are available. What is even more frightening is that, in the same year, 100,000 people in the United Kingdom died as a result of smoking, and, of course, 83,000 of those started the habit before they reached the age of 20.

There is absolutely no doubt that, as is presently permitted, the industry is spending millions and millions of pounds creating the most glamorous and eye-attracting type of advertising on its packets. Recently, of course, we had the point-of-display legislation, and, already, in big supermarkets in Northern Ireland, you do not have in your face these cabinets that clearly advertise the glamorous aspect of cigarettes. Eventually, by 2015, all displays will be removed from shops and supermarkets in Northern Ireland. This is part of a raft of measures that have been introduced to try to bring the rising rate, which is, unfortunately, beginning to rise again, of smoking in Northern Ireland under some form of control. We had the very welcome pubs and restaurants legislation that stopped many of us having to sit in a cloud of smoke as we enjoyed a meal. That was introduced, and, of course, there were predictions of Armageddon and that all was going to be doom and gloom, when, in fact, the trade took that on its chin, and now people can enjoy a meal —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr Wilson: Would the Member like to tell us whether he regularly sits in pubs inhaling this smoke or did he in the past?

Mr Wells: I can tell the honourable Member that I do not sit in pubs and that I do not drink intoxicating liquor. I cannot say, as Dr Paisley can, that alcohol has never touched my lips in my life, but, certainly, less than £5 worth of alcohol has gone down my throat in 56 years, and some of that was adulterated drink that was meant to be orange.

I was referring to pubs and restaurants. Note the "and restaurants". I certainly —

Mr Givan: What about sherry trifle?

Mr Wells: Sherry trifle is all right, because you are allowed to eat alcohol but not to drink it.

The legislation on pubs and restaurants has been a great success. We have also had the point-of-display advertising ban, which, again, went through the House. We had a ban on vending machines, which has been extremely successful. More recently, we have had the very strong controls that we put on the purchase of cigarettes by underage buyers. So, things are moving in the right direction. The industry has been given time to adapt to these changes. It would be absolutely hypocritical for the Minister to have introduced this raft of changes, some of which his predecessor, Mr McGimpsey, introduced and which, in my opinion, are quite right, if he were still to allow young people to be seduced by an attractive package that says, "If you want to be part of the in-crowd, if you want to be glamorous and to attract members of the opposite sex, smoke cigarettes". That is the message that we are sending out to the young people who are adopting this dreadful habit.

The situation as we know it is that, initially, the Conservative/Liberal coalition in the rest of the United Kingdom had proposed to introduce plain paper packaging. Then, as a result of political pressure from a rising political group in the UK, they pulled back on that. Then, when, quite rightly, there was an uproar saying that they were bowing to extremists on the issue, they decided to commission a review under an eminent academic. Part of that review will look at the situation in Australia, where the ban came in in 2012. I think that the Australian situation is very similar in many respects to that of the United Kingdom. They are both English-speaking countries and are developed nations that have tremendous problems with young people taking up smoking cigarettes.

12.30 pm

It will be fascinating to see the results of the plain paper packaging legislation in Australia to see how that goes and whether the statistics, information and research show that it is having an impact. There is already interesting opinion poll research in Australia that shows that young people no longer regard cigarettes as glamorous because, frankly, the packages are quite ugly, and so they should be. All that is on them is the health warning, and the brand of the cigarettes is in very small print.

It is also noticeable that the packaging in Australia before the ban included slimline packets, which were particularly attractive to young girls and sent out the message, "This is how to be in the in-crowd. Smoke cigarettes." Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. We will see the results of that research. All the legislative consent motion does is ensure, if the research stacks up and the rest of the United Kingdom goes down that route, that we in Northern Ireland will not lag behind; we will do as the rest of the UK is doing.

In the Irish Republic, there is also a move afoot to introduce plain paper packaging. If we did not have this legislative consent motion, we could have faced the rather ridiculous situation where all the rest of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic had plain paper packaging and there was one little island of bright, sparkling, glamorous advertising on the packets just in Northern Ireland. From a practical point of view, that would never have worked. I do not know how the manufacturers could have coped with that situation. I do not know how you could have prevented the ordinary packets leaking out into other parts of the United Kingdom and into the Irish Republic. Therefore, we could not really have run with that particular scenario. So, the situation is that this is permissive legislation. I know that there will be Members here this afternoon who will have concerns about employment in Ballymena, and those are valid concerns, but this will give time for the industry to adjust. It will also mean that any final say on the issue will be with the Executive. The Executive will have to approve it, and they will take into account all the issues outlined by me and others.

As we speak, several dozen underage people in Northern Ireland will take up smoking today. Half of those people will die young because of smoking. Anything that we can do to stop even one young person taking up this dreadful habit has to be a good thing. If cigarettes were invented today and were introduced on the market, they would be banned immediately. They would never be tolerated with what we now know. We owe it to the memory of all the people who will die a needless death this year because of smoking to do something to stop future generations of young people taking up this truly awful habit.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak in my role as a member of the Health Committee and stand in favour of the motion. We received evidence on the issue, as the Chair has reflected, and believe that a legislative consent motion should be carried in order to introduce plain packaging here. The reasons are numerous. However, the one that stands out and has been reflected here by colleagues is that the legislation will play a major role in discouraging our young people from taking up smoking in the first place. It is essential that this House actively attempts to reduce the numbers of our young people who smoke, as more and more are taking it up —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: Yes, I will.

Mr Wilson: He throws out this statement that the evidence that has been produced to the Committee shows that the legislation will dissuade people from taking up smoking. Where does the evidence come from? The only place where this has been tried is Australia. It has not been in even a year yet, so there has been no assessment done of the impact of the legislation. So, where did he get the evidence from?

Mr McKinney: Thank you for the intervention. The British Heart Foundation commissioned research and compared the situation in Australia with here. It found that, in Australia, around 48% of young teenagers who were involved in the research were deterred from smoking, and something in the order of 20% here were discouraged or deterred from smoking. That is the British Heart Foundation.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that we need to differentiate between research that asks young people, "Would you be less likely to take up smoking if you had standardised packaging?" and evidence. The Member has not quoted any evidence. The point has to be made very clearly that evidence has not yet been produced from where this has been enacted to show that it has a real impact in reducing the numbers of young people who are taking up smoking in the first place.

Mr McKinney: My colleagues cannot have their cake and eat it. I was asked whether any research was being done. Of course, research forms the preliminary approach to all these things. Research itself produces some evidence. I am sure that colleagues do political polling and consideration among their membership and the wider public when they consider making moves, as they do from time to time. That produces evidence sufficient for them to move; and I think that it is an appropriate means in this case. This is an important issue, and I think that that is entirely appropriate.

The amendments to the Children and Families Bill being considered at Westminster have a two-pronged approach, as we have been talking about. Of course, you are going to take issue, but the approach is that the amendments will reduce the appeal of cigarettes to younger people by restricting brand. To take that point full on again; if millions of pounds are being spent on a brand and on trying to encourage people, then it would, at least, lead people to suspect that, by removing the brand, the opposite might be the case. Secondly, the prominence of health warnings on the packets will be increased in an attempt to further reinforce the harmful effects of smoking.

In our opinion, the legislative consent motion brought to the House today is the best opportunity to introduce standardised packaging for cigarettes here. The cigarette industry is a multi-billion-pounds one. As I said, cigarette companies pay large sums to refine the advertising of their product. Colour association and symbols also play a large part in luring younger people to take up smoking. It is true that increased tobacco duty means that something in the order of £10 billion is collected in returns to the UK Government, but, as we have also seen through research, smoking-related costs in the UK are in the region of £13 billion. In Northern Ireland alone, £119 million is spent on hospital costs each year to treat smoking-related illnesses. As recent debates that we have had over the past few weeks and months suggest, we must do all in our power to reduce the pressures that are being put on our health service as a result of cigarette smoking.

Mr Wells referred to lung cancer, which is the most common cause of cancer death here. Smoking causes nearly 90% of those fatalities. Some 24% of adults here smoke, which is the largest figure in the UK. Something has to be done. If we are to reduce these statistics then we must actively seek to put in place measures that discourage people from smoking in the first place. There is considerable evidence, which I referred to earlier, particularly from the British Heart Foundation and on the early days of the Australian model. If it is producing some positive results then I think we should be encouraged to follow that lead.

If we do not adopt the legislation then the timescales involved in creating a new piece of legislation that would perform the same function could take an inordinate amount of time. During that time, hundreds, if not thousands, of young people will be encouraged to have a cigarette. That could lead to a long-term addiction, and Mr Wells has eloquently reflected on the impact that that has on many thousands of individuals. Half of all smokers are, sadly, destined to pass due to their long-term addiction.

In summary, the Committee and the SDLP feel that the House should vote in favour of the legislative consent motion on the Children and Families Bill. We support and encourage the Minister and the Department in that regard. Plain packaging is a reasoned, research-supported mechanism for reducing the number of young people who take up smoking. We should all protect future generations from the harmful results of cigarette smoking.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: I have just concluded.

Mr Beggs: I too support the legislative consent motion covering aspects of the Children and Families Bill. It would enable standardised packaging of tobacco products to

be brought into effect throughout the UK in a consistent manner. Standardised packaging legislation is designed to reduce the attractiveness of smoking or tobacco packages and increase the prominence of the health warning. The packet itself is an advert and can attract new customers.

Other Members have talked about the word "slim". People may be attracted to a slim cigarette because they think it makes them slim. Nonsense. The damage it does to their health is enormous. I have seen some very sophisticated designs of cigarette packages. You think you are buying perfume. There are very fancy mechanisms to open them. Why do tobacco companies spend so much time and effort in doing that? It is because they know that adverts pay and that the glamour factor pays.

It is widely recognised that standardised packaging could have a significant effect on young people by reducing the numbers being drawn into smoking and, subsequently, addiction. I have not heard the word "addiction" mentioned very often in the debate. Once someone has adopted smoking, it is one of the most difficult habits to break, so it is important that we try to reduce the numbers that catch the habit in the first place.

In moving forward with standardised packaging, it is important that we do not reduce the ability to include security coding on packaging. Enabling manufacturers to continue to do that helps in the fight against counterfeit tobacco manufacturers. I do not see why that cannot not be the case. Counterfeit tobacco avoids tax, and those selling it frequently do not worry whether the person they sell it to is an adult or a young person. They are already trading in an illegal product, and there is no traceability for ingredients.

It would be more efficient to have consistent UK-wide legislation, which would reduce the introductory administrative costs in the UK regions. It would also be more efficient for the industry because, if each UK region were to introduce slightly different legislation, manufacturers would potentially have to produce different batches of cigarettes for Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. It makes sense that the legislation be introduced consistently, if that is deemed appropriate. I certainly think that it should be. If different types of packaging had to be produced for different parts of the UK, that would add cost to manufacturers and, ultimately, consumers, so there would be no point.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. The assumption the Member makes is that, if there were legislation that covered the rest of the UK, manufacturers would still feel obliged to have branded packets here. If the Assembly decided not to follow the rest of the UK, the option would be for manufacturers voluntarily to have unbranded products. Indeed, if his argument that the cost of cigarettes would go up quite substantially is correct, they would probably chose to do so.

Mr Beggs: My point is that, if you had to have smaller production runs for a special run for Northern Ireland, there would be additional costs of some sort. If it is introduced on a much wider basis, there should be no significant cost.

Why do I think that it is important? I have not heard other Members for East Antrim refer to the 2,300 deaths a year that are directly attributable to smoking — not as an additional cause but directly attributable to smoking — the 28% of cancer deaths. Smoking increases the risk of a range of other illnesses such as coronary heart disease: smokers are twice as likely to suffer a heart attack. We are talking about trying to prevent new young people being attracted to smoking in those impressionable early years.

Some might say that a wide range of restrictions are already in place and ask why we need more. Northern Ireland has a particular problem. As others stated, almost one quarter of our population are smokers, with the adverse health effects that go with that and the pressures on our health service, which is struggling at present. That figure is staying consistently high, which is of more concern.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member will be interested to note that it is indicated that smoking costs the health service in Northern Ireland £119 million a year. As was said, there is a direct link between smoking and those who get lung cancer and heart disease. If that £119 million were saved, it would have a dramatic impact on health service provision in Northern Ireland. The Minister is constantly trying to find more money to plug various gaps in funding. If he had that money in the morning, life would be much easier.

12.45 pm

Mr Beggs: The Member makes an important point. However, I am even more concerned about the quality of life of many people in their latter years, when some of these ailments will strike, and they will be afflicted by ill health because of the addiction that started in their early years.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for giving way. I wish that he would listen to the logic of his argument. On the one hand, he argued that there are already numerous restrictions on smoking — he did not go through them, but he could, and it would take him some time. Yet, consistently, 25% of people in Northern Ireland smoke, and the figure is rising. Does that not tell him something about the effectiveness of gimmick legislation?

Mr Beggs: It tells us that we have to do more. I repeat that 2,300 people a year die because of this. Many also fight and struggle and successfully kick the habit in their latter years. Despite that, the number is staying consistently high. In other words, a considerable number of young people take up smoking each year. It is important that we do not allow the advertising on packaging, the images and the glamorous effect to continue. In particular —

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I want to pursue my argument a little further.

Mr Ross: Just on that point.

Mr Beggs: I may give way later.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not debate across the Chamber.

Mr Beggs: I am particularly concerned about the level of those starting to smoke between the ages of 16 and 19. That number increased between 2008 and 2010 in Northern Ireland from 15% to 21%, I am told. So there is a particular problem of significant numbers of young people smoking, and we are told that about 80% of smokers pick up the habit in those impressionable years. Smoking is highly addictive, so the best defence that we can give

is to try to reduce the number of young people who are attracted to smoking in the first place.

I would like to pose a question to the Minister about the wording in the Westminster legislation. I notice that clause 87(12)(a) states that the Secretary of State must:

"obtain the consent of the Scottish Ministers".

Clause 87(12)(B) states that the Secretary of State must:

"obtain the consent of the Welsh Ministers".

So why does it say that, in Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State must:

"obtain the consent of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister"?

I would welcome an explanation from the Minister, if he has been involved in any discussions on that issue.

I commend the range of charities that have highlighted the need to legislate to protect our young people: Cancer Focus, the British Heart Foundation, the Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke Association and Cancer UK. I noticed a particularly concerning video on the Cancer UK website of children giving their reaction to cigarette packaging. This may be of interest to Mr Wilson and Mr Ross. Children were being questioned about their impression of the packaging in front of them. It highlighted the sophistication of the wording used to describe such packaging. They found it attractive. They found it glamorous. It even mentions that they thought some packaging was similar to a children's cartoon image. The packaging is designed to attract new smokers.

There is clear evidence, in my opinion, emerging from Australia that something needs to be done. As others said, plans are afoot in New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Wilson: As we will have a decision to make on this, would he be prepared to share some of the evidence that he has found from Australia, which may help the Assembly? After six months, have the Australian Government been able to identify how effective that legislation has been?

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I would prefer to answer Mr Wilson, and then, perhaps, I will give way.

I note that some 59% of under-18s in Australia thought that the new standardised packaging would make more people of their age less likely to smoke and that 10% of teenagers in the UK make the incorrect assumption that certain cigarette brands are healthier than others. There is clear information. When you have a direction like that, you can choose to ignore it; you can choose to put it off; and you can wait until something definitive happens. Why do the manufacturers put so much effort into their attractive packages? The answer is, of course, to attract someone to purchase their brand and, when they purchase their brand, to start smoking and, ultimately, risk addiction.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes, I will.

Mr Wells: The Member may find it useful to know that 37 studies have been carried out already in other parts of the world on the impact of plain paper packaging on the demand for cigarettes. Many of those have shown a very clear correlation between plain paper and a reduction in the attractiveness and the take-up of cigarettes. Therefore, some of the work has been done already. However, I accept that the Australian model will be extremely interesting. Mr Wilson need not be too concerned, because the Westminster Government have made it clear that they will wait for the academic report before they make their decision. I hope that, if the evidence is overwhelmingly in support of plain paper packaging, Mr Wilson's concerns will be allayed and he will support it.

Mr Beggs: I also highlight a recent survey from a charity that indicated that just over one quarter of young people are put off by the current packaging: in other words, three quarters are not put off by the current packaging. That ought to be of concern to everyone. It also indicated that eight out of 10 young people would support the standardisation of packaging with the greater health warning and for the packaging to be less attractive than currently presented.

When first introduced in Australia, the Government indicated that they would reduce the attractiveness and the appeal of tobacco to consumers, particularly young people; increase the noticeability and effectiveness of mandated health warnings; and reduce the ability of the retail packing used by tobacco producers to mislead customers about the harmful effects of smoking or using tobacco products. Surely those reasons are valid also for the United Kingdom.

With approval of the legislation at Westminster, I recognise that an independent review of evidence will occur. I believe that evidence supporting standardisation of packaging will be found. It is right that Northern Ireland could be quickly included in any such national changes that result.

Changing the packaging will not stop anyone purchasing their favourite brand of cigarettes, and those who have a particular brand at present will be able to continue to do so. However, it will reduce the number of our young people who become addicted in the future. Prevention is much better than cure. I support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the comments made by the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, other members of the Committee, and the Minister on their efforts to get support for this legislative consent motion. I am a wee bit concerned about the tone of the interjections coming from the other side of the Chamber, and from Mr Wilson in particular. I see that he is writing furiously. He is mad to get in. I suggest to Mr Wilson that, as the Deputy Chair said, if we can, through supporting this legislation, prevent the death of one of our children, whether there is evidence or not, we should go for it. That is what it is all about.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCarthy: Wait a minute. I have in my head the idea that I will do an Oliver McMullan. When Oliver McMullan rose to speak last week, he advised the Chamber that he would not take any interventions. Therefore, I am going to do as Oliver did. Members will have loads of time to contribute later, and maybe we can cross-examine their comments. That is where we stand.

The Alliance Party is content and happy to support the legislative consent motion. Our children are our most precious asset. We would be failing in our duty if we did not use every avenue and means available to us to educate, encourage and persuade our young people of the danger that tobacco smoking can do to their health. As has been said already, the tobacco habit, or addiction, kills some 2,300 Northern Irish people each year. That is truly shocking — horrendous — and it is preventable if only we could stop young people from starting the filthy habit in the first place.

I use the word "filthy" because — I say this as someone who smoked as a young person — smoking stinks. It affects your lungs, your breath, your clothes, your hands and your home. Nobody wants to be near you, and you almost become an outcast, simply because you got hooked on tobacco by big companies only interested in making money out of your misery. We should wise up, and the sooner, the better.

As has already been done, we express our gratitude to all the local groups and organisations for their dedication in working to inform our young people not to start smoking. Last week, the Public Health Agency's stop smoking bus, supported by Cancer Focus, visited Parliament Buildings, and that was very welcome. The bus is touring Northern Ireland and will hopefully get the message out. We want to give it all the support that we can.

According to Chest, Heart and Stroke — I think that it was the Deputy Chair who informed us of this in an interjection — it costs our health service £119 million each year to treat smoking-related illnesses, illnesses that could be avoided if tobacco products were not as easily available. Of course, there is also the enormous family grief when a loved one is cut down and taken away as a result of smoking.

I support the legislation, and the sooner that it is enacted, the better. I want to say well done to our Executive — all parties included — for agreeing to it. When the lives of our young people are threatened, we can all agree.

The Alliance Party believes that there is overwhelming support for the measure and that the weight of evidence about it reducing smoking, particularly among young people, is very strong. As I said earlier, the conditions caused by smoking are preventable. We should therefore do whatever we can to prevent smoking-related conditions. Most smokers start young, so measures to deter smoking among our young people are especially important. It is recognised that they are particularly influenced by advertising and branding, which makes the proposals on standardised packaging most appropriate. The measures have strong support from the public and are endorsed by experts domestically and internationally, including the British Medical Association (BMA), many cancer-related charities and, indeed, the World Health Organization.

As has been said, many countries around the world have already either introduced standardised packaging or are actively considering it. The measure is set to be introduced in England, Scotland and Wales. It is also to be introduced in the Republic in the very near future. Therefore, for us not to introduce it when all our neighbours are doing so would be strange and, indeed, unforgivable.

I support the legislative consent motion and hope that it gets through as soon as possible.

Mr Ross: This is a serious issue. When the Health Minister indicated the serious health consequences for people who smoke tobacco products, his words should have reiterated the fact to everyone in the Chamber that it is a serious issue.

I say from the outset that I am particularly disturbed by a comment from Mr McCarthy. In his opening remarks, he said that it does not matter whether there is evidence or not. That is an absolutely appalling statement for a Member to make.

Mr McCarthy: Save the life of one kid.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr Ross: It is an appalling statement to make. People should be concerned if legislators in the House are stating that we should just ban something and that it does not matter whether there is evidence for doing so. They should be concerned, particularly people in Strangford, if one of their legislators makes such statements. No matter what legislation is introduced in the House, it should be tested robustly. Arguments should be put forward, and we should debate the issue. Legislation that passes through the House without any challenge or debate is not good legislation. It is important to remember that here today.

My opinion does not differ from that of the other Members who have spoken about how dangerous smoking is. I do not smoke, so I am not coming at the argument from a smoker's point of view. I listened to Mr Wells's comments, and I hope that I did not have to be a smoker to be cool or attractive to members of the opposite sex, particularly my wife.

Mr Wilson: It would take more than that.

Mr Ross: Indeed, it probably would.

I do not think that we should patronise young people by saying that they still think that, but that is what some Members have done today.

Any young person growing up in Northern Ireland, or anywhere in the UK or Europe, who is not aware of the dangers of smoking is living under a stone.

1.00 pm

There are those who have talked about the glitzy and glamorous tobacco that is currently available. There are pictures on it, and there are messages on it, and we hear, day and daily, the dangers of smoking. So, I do not think that this is a matter of young people not being aware of the dangers. They are aware of the dangers; they should be aware of the dangers. I think that all of us are. I do not think I have ever heard anybody say that it is a good idea to start smoking and that young people should start. It is important to put that on record at the very beginning.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. I too share a number of the views that my colleague has raised. At the start, we talked about evidence base. A KPMG report has been released recently which shows that, so far, this has had virtually no impact on new smokers or existing smokers ceasing in Australia. However, in the short time in which the report has been commissioned, there has been a 3% rise in illicit tobacco. Will the Member ponder upon that piece of evidence?

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for that contribution. It highlights some of the issues that I want to speak about,

but, primarily, it highlights the issue of evidence, because good law should be well evidenced. Since only one country has introduced standardised packaging, and it is far too early to tell the consequences — although I absolutely agree with the Member about some of the early indications of the experience in Australia — we need to ensure that if we are to pass laws, we have them well evidenced. Some of the contributions so far in the debate have not been from a position of knowledge or evidence on the matter, but from a more generalised view of things, without backing those positions up.

Mr Wells and Mr Beggs spoke about a number of measures that have been introduced to combat smoking or to try to prevent people taking up smoking, from bans on advertising to bans on the display of tobacco products in shops to raising the age at which a young person can buy tobacco products. As my colleague Mr Wilson said, there is little evidence that any of this has had a major impact on smoking or on the number of people who have taken up smoking. To that, Mr Beggs said that we, therefore, need to do more. Perhaps it is worth examining the point. When Mr Beggs asks, "Should we do more?", is his endgame that we should be banning tobacco altogether? If it is, that is fine.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will.

Mr Beggs: Has the Member viewed on the Cancer Research UK website its video of a group of young people being asked to describe what they see in front of them? Has he understood the attractiveness of the current tobacco packaging to young people? If he has, why does he not want to make it less attractive, so that, in future, fewer of them will be attracted to smoking? The Member appears to be doing a classic, "Oh, not an inch; if you take this wee step, then you are going to ban smoking." I have indicated clearly that I believe that those who choose to smoke should be able to continue to buy their product, but in a manner that does not attract new users. They should have the ability to purchase their product.

Mr Ross: Of course, the people who legally can buy tobacco products are adults. So, the decision to start smoking is taken by an adult, with all of the information available to them. They see the tobacco products that they buy at the moment, with the health warning on them and, indeed, some of the gruesome images that we have seen already. I fail to understand how extending the size of the gruesome image on the front of the box and removing any colours of branding to differentiate a product will have a major impact.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will give way in one second. If the Member is saying that he does not want to ban tobacco products, he must understand that, as we stand today, they are legal products, and therefore a lot of the legislation that is being passed is trying to prevent what is still a legal product from being available to adults who will decide whether to use those products. I give way to the Member.

Mr Beggs: The Member seems unconvinced about the benefits that would come about by reducing the advertising that currently exists on tobacco packaging. I suggest that he speaks to his party colleagues the Health Minister and the vice Chairman of the Health Committee who, having heard the information, have a completely different view than him.

Mr Ross: That is fine. Mr Beggs, I am capable of coming to my own conclusions and asking my own questions about matters; maybe you are not.

The front of every box has the words "smoking kills". If you are an 18-year-old adult deciding whether to pick up a product, and if that product uses the words "smoking kills", you are well aware of its health risks. If we are talking about making something less attractive, I have to say that I think that the packaging is not particularly attractive now. I have never walked into a shop, seen glitzy boxes and decided that I want to be a smoker, because I do not. They can have as many glitzy boxes as they like; I am not, as an adult, going to decide to take up a habit that could ultimately kill me. However, I think that adults should be able to take that decision for themselves.

Let us examine good law and bad law, with good law being evidenced well. My colleague Mr McIlveen talked about the early experiences in Australia. Unintended consequences have been raised any time that standardised packaging comes up. Many laws that are passed have unintended consequences. They come from a good place, but some of the outworkings are not so good. Mr McIlveen talked about the risk of counterfeit tobacco. Around the world, one in nine packets of cigarettes that is smoked is a counterfeit product. In Northern Ireland, that figure is one in five. That means that we have illegal counterfeit tobacco in the market at the moment. There are genuine concerns that, if we move down the line of having standardised packaging, there will be an increase in the number of counterfeit products on the market. I listened to one Member talk about how we can have coding on standardised packaging. I think that that would go some way towards helping to combat counterfeit tobacco.

However, one of the easiest ways to recognise counterfeit packaging is to visually identify it. That is a concern from not just Members but people who are working in organised crime. Indeed, I noted some comments by Peter Sheridan only a few months ago. He is an individual who spent some 30 years in Northern Ireland combating organised crime. He said that it would make it much more difficult for some of the authorities to identify counterfeit products and to remove them from the market. Of course, many of the counterfeit products, or the whites, as they are called, have no health checks on them at all or quality controls, so they are much more dangerous to people's health. If we ended up getting more of those sorts of products in the market, which would be even more damaging to people's health, I think that that is perhaps a sign of where some of the legislation's unintended consequences will have been identified.

A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) published last year said that, in the UK, Northern Ireland is the capital of counterfeit products in not just tobacco but alcohol, clothing, DVDs and all those sorts of things. I think that that is something that we need to pay particular attention to. We do not want to do something that will end up helping counterfeiters and organised gangs to sell their products in Northern Ireland. I know that the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has looked at counterfeit material before.

As I said before, I find some of the language used on glitzy packs to be quite insulting and patronising towards young people. I find quite insulting the idea that a young person who is legally allowed to buy tobacco products at 18 cannot decide for themselves whether a product is going to damage their health.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will give way in one second. It actually demonstrates a drift in not just this legislature but legislatures right across Europe towards paternal politics, whereby we want to take decisions for adults. That is not a particularly useful thing to do. I think that we should empower individuals with the information that they need. I have grave concerns about any individual who claims that, at the age of 18, they do not know the risks that are involved in smoking tobacco products. I will give way to Mr Wells.

Mr Wells: Does the honourable Member accept that 80% of all smokers in Northern Ireland are very keen to give up? They want to stop smoking, but they are finding it extremely difficult. Is it not a bit of a contradiction in terms for society to try to help those people when, every time they look at a cigarette packet, they see that it sends out the message that smoking is acceptable, glamorous and exciting? Surely we have to help those people by making it as unattractive as possible to continue the habit.

Mr Ross: I fail to see how looking at a tobacco product now is attractive. There is a massive sign on every packet of cigarettes that states that smoking kills and that smoking will give you lung cancer and has a range of other health implications. There are gruesome pictures on the front of every pack. I fail to see how anybody can determine that sort of packaging as glitzy.

Mr Wells: If that is the case, Mr Ross, why on earth are all the leading cigarette companies spending millions of pounds a year on designing more attractive packaging? On the basis of your argument, that is a total waste of money. When you go into any tobacconist or newsagent, you see that clearly they have spent months developing new packaging. Why? To attract more smokers.

Mr Ross: No. The reason is actually very simple. If you have a legal product and there is a market, you have to differentiate your product from others that are available to the consumer. That is why they look different. It is not about making some sort of glamorous, glitzy packaging that nobody could say no to, because quite frankly, that is not the case. It is to differentiate their product from other products in the marketplace. That is self-evident and, indeed, is the case for any legal product on the market.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for his indulgence in giving way. I wonder whether the Member would agree that perhaps one of the ugliest things that most of us have in our pocket at the moment is one of these phones, which, Mr Speaker, is on silent, I can assure you. Does the Member agree that, in an attempt for most of us to make our mobile phones more attractive, companies have jumped onto the fact that cases and holders for them are much more attractive and are a way of making our mobile phones more glamorous? Does the Member agree that there may be a risk with this legislation that we could go back to the days of cigarette cases? We are trying vigorously to discourage young people from taking up smoking, yet, due to the accessories that come onto the market, it could make it more attractive to them.

Mr Ross: The Member makes a very good and valid point: if we make cigarette boxes so unattractive or ugly that nobody would want to carry them around, of course the natural conclusion is that people will simply get a case that they can either slot their tobacco packaging into or that they will put the cigarettes into having taken them out. Individuals who look closely at the experience in Australia will see that there has been quite a growth in cigarette cases there already. That is one of the biggest dangers: that suddenly young people are trying to look cool with tobacco accessories. I think that that is a valid point.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. We are talking about glitzy packaging for cigarettes, but one thing that we have not touched on yet when we talk about targeting young people is that the majority of the young people smoking today are young girls. The numbers are far outstripping that of young boys, who are giving up the habit of smoking. When we look at rolling tobacco and so on, we see that that has not changed. The glitzy packaging on that has not changed, so young people are definitely being targeted. What are your views on the fact that there is an alarming rise in the number of young girls taking up smoking?

Mr Ross: I am concerned by that, because I do not think that any young person, whether male or female, should take up smoking. The health implications are as clear as they have ever been: smoking is damaging to one's health. I do not think that I have ever heard anybody saying that young people should take up smoking. Indeed, it is illegal for young people to purchase tobacco products until they are an adult at the age of 18, and I think that that is important.

One of the other issues that we need to examine more closely around standardised packaging — and it is important that do discuss this — is whether, by introducing gruesome plain packaging, we are more likely to get people to stop smoking or we are more likely to see them swap brands. If the packaging is not there to differentiate between products, I think that we will actually see people swapping brands. What we will do is not stop people from smoking but simply make them swap to cheaper brands. That has been acknowledged even by those who support this measure in GB. So, it would not actually have the impact that some say it would.

One of the other bizarre consequences, if we were to introduce plain packaging right across the United Kingdom, is that the most glitzy packages available would be those that would be counterfeit tobacco products coming in from other markets; from the US, for example, or other parts of Europe that will not introduce standardised packaging. The most glitzy packaging will come from other markets where there are no restrictions. Members also have to bear that in mind, particularly if our local market is flooded with coloured tobacco products from China, or places such as that, where we know that there is very little by way of regulation of the content of tobacco products.

1.15 pm

I accept that the motion will pass with the overwhelming support of Members across the Chamber. I also accept that the House of Commons will probably vote in favour of introducing standardised packaging across the United Kingdom. However, if we are to do our jobs properly as legislators, and if this legislature is to do its job properly, we have to examine the issues around the introduction

of legislation and challenge some of the presumptions made. It is not good enough to stand up and say that this is about saving lives without producing any evidence that that will be the case. This is lazy legislating and is the type of legislating that we should avoid. We should have well-evidenced discussions in the House.

As other Members said, the Executive will take a decision on whether we introduce standardised packaging in Northern Ireland. I hope that they do so after looking at the evidence from elsewhere and examining the unintended consequences. It is not just about the health of individuals but how we ensure that we do not unintentionally help organised criminals to bring in counterfeit products.

It would also be remiss of me if I did not mention the economic impact, not just in the reduced tax take for the Treasury if we get more counterfeit tobacco products in the UK but the impact on jobs in north Antrim, south Antrim and east Antrim. The JTI factory in Ballymena, which employs many people across the Antrim area, has had to cope with legislation from Europe on the size of their tobacco products and on how many cigarettes can be in a box. This is having an impact on its ability to sell what is still is a legal product into other markets.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will.

Mr Poots: The Member stressed very strongly that the argument should be on the basis of evidence. That is fair enough. Will he give us the figures for the amount of tobacco that is exported from the factory in Ballymena and what is used in the Northern Ireland market? If the argument is that if Northern Ireland goes down this route it will damage hundreds of jobs, then what is the evidence to support that? I do not think that that evidence exists either.

Mr Ross: There is evidence with respect to the cost of tobacco products in other markets in Europe. Some of the regulations brought in mean that it is much cheaper to buy tobacco products in Europe. If you are coming back, even from the heart of the European Union in Belgium, you can buy tobacco products there that are much cheaper, as you do not have to pay the same level of duty, and bring them into Northern Ireland. If we continue to restrict the availability of tobacco products in the UK, more people will import counterfeit tobacco from elsewhere in Europe. That has been clearly demonstrated in the comments of representatives of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and by many in the police.

I hope that we have a serious think about some of the unintended consequences of the legislation. Thank you for listening to my contribution.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I also support the motion. It was quite interesting to watch what might be termed internecine warfare on the opposite Benches, albeit it was fairly civilised.

I think that the message is very clear: smoking is bad and, as it says on the package, smoking can kill. Unfortunately, recent surveys have shown that smoking is on the increase here. In a 2010-11 survey, 24% of respondents said that they smoked and, in a survey in 2011-12, 25% of respondents said the same, so smoking is, unfortunately, on the increase.

It has been mentioned by other Members that smoking is the single greatest cause of preventable illness and premature death. It kills around 2,300 people each year, which is more than 100 people in each of our constituencies; a shocking statistic. Tobacco use is one of the four main modifiable risk factors for many chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, cancer and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Cost was mentioned: £119 million a year. However, that does not take into account the cost in human suffering of those who are dying from what may have been preventable diseases and their families.

Mr Wilson›s scepticism — possibly his cynicism, I am not sure which —

Mr Wilson: I am not a cynic.

Mr Brady: Of course not; you have proven that over many years. Look at the evidence. Mr Wells referred to 'Plain Tobacco Packaging: A Systematic Review', which was undertaken as part of the Public Health Research Consortium, which is funded by the Department of Health policy research programme. Some 39 studies were made, providing evidence of the impacts of plain tobacco packaging. The review provided conclusive evidence that the branding and design of tobacco packaging is used to make the product more attractive and target specific audiences, including young people. Branding also distracts attention from the health message on the pack and misleads smokers about the harmfulness of different products. There is growing evidence that standardised tobacco packaging is likely to have most impact on discouraging young people from taking up smoking.

The key findings of the review were that non-smokers and younger people responded more negatively to plain standardised packs than smokers and older people. Nineteen studies examined the perceptions or ratings of the attractiveness of standardised packs. All the studies found that standardised packs were rated as less attractive than branded equivalent packs.

Twelve studies examined perceptions of standardised packs in terms of their perceived quality, taste, smoothness and cheapness. The studies, which compared perceptions of standardised and branded packs, consistently found that standardised packs were perceived to be of poor quality by both adults and children. Thirteen studies examined perceptions of smoker identity and personality attributes associated with standardised packs.

Ten qualitative studies examined appeal, and four key issues were identified as being important: standardised pack colours have negative connotations; standardised packs weaken attachment to brands; standardised packs project a less desirable smoker identity; and standardised packs expose the reality of smoking.

So, much evidence has been garnered. With the legislation, it is important that, as legislators, we take all reasonable measures to prevent the spread of smoking.

Mr Wilson: At the start of my contribution, I will say a couple of things about my view on legislation and regulation. Some people judge the Assembly on how many laws it passes, regulations it introduces etc. I do not believe that that ought to be the judgement that people place on a body such as this. As we now see at Westminster and hear from the lobbying of the many

people who know how to make the economy work, the less regulation, the better. If you are going to introduce regulation, there ought to be tests for it. Is it simply a response to a well-organised lobby, or is it to address a specific problem? Will it be effective in addressing that problem? In addressing the problem, do you balance it with all the other things and objectives that we, in a democracy, wish to see?

This kind of legislation illustrates the problem. There is a problem with smoking. I am not a smoker. In my time as a public representative, before bans were placed on smoking indoors etc I can remember coming away from many a housing association meeting in east Belfast, and I could hardly find the door of the room. Of course, your clothes, hair and everything else were stinking. I am not a supporter of smoking, but I recognise that a quarter of the population, for one reason or another, wishes to engage in it. It creates health problems, but then so does drinking alcohol.

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a moment or two when I have finished this point. We regularly hear that our A&E provision is inundated at weekends, and many of the problems happen because people present themselves intoxicated with alcohol.

We had discussions recently on the degree of obesity because of people's attraction to fast food. The question is this: how many of these problems do we believe should be addressed by legislation, regulation and tighter restrictions? At what point do the general population say, "Let us make up our own minds rather than you making our minds up for us"? That should be a fundamental point as we start the debate and examine all the issues. I will give way to the Minister.

Mr Poots: The Member said that a quarter of people wish to smoke —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Minister to turn towards the mic.

Mr Poots: Sorry, Mr Speaker. The Member said that a quarter of people wish to smoke. Actually, 83% of that 25% wish that they did not smoke, and that is a very important element. Many of them choose to smoke when not even an adult. That is what the legislation is about: creating a system whereby it is less attractive for children and young people to take up the most addictive habit and most addictive drug in Northern Ireland.

Mr Wilson: Let me come to that point, which is important. If there are detrimental consequences of smoking, what do you do to discourage people from starting down that road? I heard some Members say that we have to do something. In legislating, it is not good enough that we introduce regulations that are ineffective, or are shown to be ineffective, and then have to keep adding restriction on top of restriction.

I agree with the Minister that, if there is a problem and you believe that you have an answer to it that does not unnecessarily infringe on the other liberties and entitlements that you believe people should have, of course you go for it. To do that, however, you have to have evidence that it works. So far, only one other country in the world has tried plain packaging, and it has not been in place for very long. There is no indication that it has reduced the level of smoking, and, as Mr McIlveen said, it is seen to have detrimental side effects, which were, perhaps, unintended but are, nevertheless, even more damaging.

Mr Brady and Mr — yes, the UTV man, Fearghal McKinney — talked about evidence and research. It is not research; they quoted surveys. People were asked, "Do you find this more attractive?" Listen to the language. "Do you find these branded products more attractive and of higher quality than non-branded products?" It was not, "If you were presented with this, would you stop smoking?" At least, both Members were clear that this was a product comparison. The real question should have been this: "Would this stop you smoking?" rather than, "Would you find this less attractive than this?" That is the weakness of the research that they quoted — it is research, not evidence. The only way to get evidence is to introduce the legislation, practise the thing on the ground and see whether it leads to fewer people smoking.

1.30 pm

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes, I will.

Mr Beggs: The Member said that the only way to have evidence is to introduce the legislation. In every country and society, there are a range of other factors afoot, and perhaps the only way we will know if it works will be if we introduce the legislation in the United Kingdom. Does he not agree?

Mr Wilson: The Member, in his speech, talked about that. Yes, we only have one country at the moment in which we can test this. One of the things that the Government in Westminster have said is, "Let's wait and see if, after having the legislation working for a period of time, it does what was intended." There is no evidence to date, but we have research by the Public Health Research Consortium — whatever that is — Cancer UK and Chest, Heart and Stroke quoted.

One of the things that I used to always say to youngsters in school when we were talking about dealing with data was, "Ask yourself what the source of the data is." If people are producing data and are starting off from a certain point of view, of course the questions they ask, the way they interpret the answers to those questions and the way they analyse the data will colour the conclusions that they come to.

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a moment or two.

That is fundamental. All of the data that we have heard quoted today has been from research by people who have a vested interest in showing that, somehow or other, the policy that they wish to pursue would be effective. There is no indication that that policy actually would be effective. Even the questions illustrate that.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. I am a little bit confused by the line that he is taking. Is he telling the House that organisations such as Cancer Research and Chest, Heart and Stroke are wrong and that what they are putting out is misleading? What exactly are you saying? Are you saying that there are no credible statistics on smoking and its effects on health?

Mr Wilson: No, and if the Member had listened to the argument, he would have heard the logic of it. If the DUP came up with research that indicated that 100% of the people in Northern Ireland want the Union flag to fly over the City Hall, I guarantee that Sinn Féin would say, "We can't accept that because it is coming from a point of view that already colours" —

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: No, let me finish the point. Sinn Féin might say, "Yeah, you produced this, but what question did you ask, how did you interpret that question and who did you put the question to?"

Mr Brady: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: No, let me just finish the point. Those are the kinds of legitimate questions you would ask.

All of the groups — and it is significant — whose research we have had quoted here today have a certain objective. As I pointed out, the research uses one basic question, which has been used as a source of much of what some Members have called "evidence". The question is, "Choose between branded and non-branded and tell us which is more effective." That does not tell you whether people would stop smoking if the only choice that they had was unbranded products. It tells you that they made a choice. That is the point I am making. It is nonsense to ask, "Are you saying that they're wrong, are you saying that they're lying?" No, of course I am not. I am simply saying that they approach research from a particular point of view and that, whilst the questions that they ask and the way they deal with those questions may be legitimate, we have to remember the source of the information.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for giving way. You said that some organisations have vested interests, but of course they have: they are trying to save lives. I am chair of an all-party group on chest, heart and stroke, and we have regular presentations from experts, people who are at the coalface of dealing with the effects of smoking and tobacco use, misuse and abuse. So, the vested interest that they have is to try to save lives and deal with the problems that smoking and tobacco cause daily. They are not necessarily just people who have opinions. They actually deal with the issue daily.

Mr Wilson: With all due respect, the debate is not on the effects of smoking but on the most effective way of preventing new clients from coming into the smoking market. Nobody is questioning that the experts are genuine in their desire to stop people dying a horrible death from smoking. The question is this: are we going in a direction that will be effective?

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. In many ways, he has made one of the points that I was going to raise. Does he agree that the debate has become a little bit convoluted, when it is specifically about whether the legislative consent motion, if it comes into law, will in itself be effective? The only emerging evidence is from Australia. The Member mentioned earlier that the two objectives of the legislation in Australia are to stop new smokers coming into the market and to aid with cessation. Does he agree that it is interesting that the lobby in Australia that was dealing specifically with cessation has now fallen silent?

Mr Wilson: Of course, and I am not surprised. The other research showed what influences people to start smoking in the first place. One of the reasons that smoking is more prevalent among young people from lower socio-economic groups is because their parents are more likely to smoke. Parents are an important influence. Peer pressure is an important influence. Curiosity is an important influence. All the packaging changes in the world will not affect those things. That is why, as other Members mentioned, education is important.

Let me turn to Mr Beggs's point that we should introduce the legislation to try to see what happens. It might be useful to ask what has been the effect of all the other things that we have introduced. There have been advertising bans, which were designed to stop the very thing that people have been talking about; namely, making it seem attractive in many ways. Vending machines have been stopped. People are not allowed to smoke inside pubs and in other public places. There has been a reduction in the ability to display pictures on cigarette packets. There are gory pictures on packets. There are attacks on those who sell cigarettes to people who are underage. Members have accepted that the impact of even all those restrictions has not been to reduce the level of smoking; rather, there has been an increase, with 25% of people consistently still choosing to smoke.

The Minister says that 83% of smokers wish to give up, and I do not dispute his figures. However, if banning advertising, stopping people smoking in public places and all the other measures that we have undertaken have not resulted in people giving up, and, in fact, we now see a small increase, we have to ask ourselves these questions: is this the way to deal with it? Is this kind of legislation effective? As I said in my intervention to Mr Beggs, if it is not effective, there is no point in engaging in gimmicks to placate lobby groups or to pretend that we are doing something. If there is any way in which to undermine legislation and a legislative Assembly, it is to make promises that we can do something and that it will be effective, only then to find that it is not effective.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way.

Mr Wells: The Member cannot have his cake and eat it. He cannot say that the changes will have no possible impact on the number of cigarettes being smoked yet also say that jobs will be lost in Ballymena as a result of the same measures. If they will have no impact, no jobs will be lost.

Mr Wilson: I have not said that yet, but I was going to say it. Now that the Member has warned me that he will intervene on that point, he has given me time to make a number of arguments, which I will do in a moment or two.

All that I am saying is that we cannot run away with the idea, because we already have real, statistical evidence that these kinds of restrictions do not work. Therefore, why do we say that we want to introduce more of the same if it is not going to be effective?

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes.

Mr Ross: Will the Member acknowledge that the job losses will come from the fact that if the market is flooded with counterfeit tobacco products, the legitimate

manufacturers of tobacco products will not have as much business? That is where the concern for job losses comes from. Their concern is that standardised packaging will help not just counterfeit products coming in, but illegal products.

Mr Wilson: That was the point that I was going to make, but I will elaborate on it in a moment or two. Yes?

Mr Beggs: It would be helpful if the Member could highlight a little more how standardised packaging assists counterfeit products. As I understand it, packaging can be made for between 5p and 15p, so no matter what one produces it can be replicated. It would be helpful if he could indicate how it might adversely affect the fight against counterfeit packaging, particularly, as I indicated, because it is important that the ability to use security coding continues.

It would also be helpful if the Member would clarify whether he is proposing reversing all the legislation that has been introduced to try to minimise the use of tobacco and its adverse health effects. Is he proposing that smoking should be reintroduced in pubs? What exactly is he saying when he says that all that legislation has not been effective? An important aspect, which he has not taken on board, is that sometimes it takes many years for changes to have a significant effect, particularly when there are large numbers of people who are addicted to the consumption of tobacco.

Mr Wilson: I will deal with the Member's last point first. It does take many years, but some of these measures have been in place for many years and have not had any impact. None of the measures that I have highlighted were introduced yesterday; some of them were introduced 10 years ago. How many years is many years? To say that we should wait and see is an easy argument for the Member to make. How long do we have to wait and see? If that is the case, why is he so willing to readily quote surveys or research that has been done on legislation that has been in place only for six months in Australia? He cannot have it both ways; either it takes a long time to work or it does not.

He also asked whether I wanted to reverse the legislation that is there. Once legislation is introduced, especially legislation in this kind of field, whether it is effective or not, it is always very difficult to reverse it. I am not suggesting that it should be reversed. All I am saying is that it has proved to be pretty ineffective, and on the basis of his figures, not mine. You do not simply keep adding on to ineffective legislation.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: No, I am not going to give way. We are coming close to 2.00 pm, and I assume that Members want to get this over with before Question Time. I do not think that the Member can suggest that I have not engaged in debate on the issue. I have taken plenty of interventions.

The last point is about the issue of whether we should continue with branding. Anyone who has done business studies will know that one of the purposes of branding and advertising of that nature is that it is defensive. It is not about getting new people in; it is about defending your product against similar products. That is one of the reasons why companies want to keep their particular brands. It is not, as the Member suggested, to make them so glitzy that people going to buy cigarettes think they are buying perfume. Many daft arguments were made in this debate, but the Member said that people thought they were buying perfume and when they opened it up, lo and behold there was 20 fags in it. In the name of goodness, if we have to reduce ourselves to those kinds of arguments, it shows how flimsy they are.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. I have listened intently throughout his contribution and that of Mr Ross, and I have some degree of sympathy for the arguments that have been made about people's choice of a particular brand. He has stated clearly that we need evidence, and that is something that, hopefully, the Minister will touch on when he is winding up.

The Member will be aware that an amendment has been passed in the House of Lords to ban smoking in cars where there are children. That is an area where there is irrefutable evidence of the damage that passive smoking causes to those young people who have no choice but to suffer what is inflicted upon them when they are travelling in a vehicle. The vast majority of smokers are responsible in that way, but there are some, as Members will know when they see them driving past, who smoke with a child in the infant's seat. Members will know of the impact that that has on the child's immune system. Where there is irrefutable evidence, as there is on that issue, will he encourage the Minister to take forward a particular piece of work when we have to deal with this in the future?

1.45 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Let me answer this question first. If the Member had been listening carefully at the start, he would have heard me say that there are a number of tests that you should apply to any legislation. The first is whether it addresses the problem and the second is whether it does so effectively. The third test is to ask this: does it have an impact on other things that, in a democracy, we expect people to have an entitlement to, that is, the freedom to make certain choices? There is also the question about the enforceability of any legislation to consider. I have to ask, on smoking in cars, where do you stop? Would it extend to smoking in people's homes etc? Also, how enforceable is such legislation? I think that we have to put that kind of decision in the context of a whole lot of other issues that one would consider when introducing legislation here.

Since I have not given way to Mr Wells and I took an intervention from the previous Member to ask, I will take Mr Wells's intervention.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member is in fine form, I have to say. Once again, he has proved himself to be one of the finest orators ever to have been in this Chamber. However, he made a point earlier that I must refute in the nicest possible way. He said that the branding of cigarette packets is intended to move customers within the existing brands rather than to attract new smokers. Where that argument falls down flat on its face is that 100,000 people die in the United Kingdom every year as a direct result of smoking, so the industry has to attract 100,000 more people a year to take up the habit to keep up its production levels. That is the problem, and, each year, 100,000 people are taking up smoking in the United Kingdom. So, it must be working.

Mr Wilson: Again, if the Member had listened to the point that I made, he would know that some of the surveys

and research have shown that new people are recruited for reasons such as parental example, peer pressure, curiosity and a whole range of other things. So, it cannot be put down purely to packaging. I have no evidence for this but neither does he, so I am not saying that there is not an element of that that is due to branding. All that I can say, however, is that given that, along with the name of the particular company, gory details are given on each package about the effect that smoking will have on you, I doubt very much whether packaging, in whatever shape or form it takes, will have the impact of attracting new customers.

That brings me to my last point, which is on employment. I will not dwell on it, because Mr Allister raised the issue anyway. I am sorry, it was Mr Ross; I said Mr Allister.

Mr Poots: He gets blamed for a lot of things.

Mr Wilson: Yes, I can blame him for a lot of things, but not this.

There will be an impact, and that will be that we will make it easier for criminals who sell cigarettes without paying tax and where the quality is not monitored, making them far, far more deadly. That will also impact on employment here in Northern Ireland. Do not forget that, in my constituency, there are hundreds of people who are employed in Ballymena in well-paid jobs. Those people's jobs will be affected not as result of stopping people smoking but as a result of switching people to the criminal gangs who import cheap cigarettes and sell them on the market.

Mr Speaker: I did not want to interrupt the Member during his contribution, but, before I call Mr McNarry, I remind the Member, for the second or maybe the third occasion, that he should call Members by their proper name. I am talking about the comment referring to Mr McKinney as "the UTV man". Mr McKinney deserves the same respect in this Chamber as every other Member. Once again, I say that to the whole House.

Mr McNarry: I was going to refer to "what's his name?" over there, but I am not going there. *[Laughter.]* I heard the debate, and it has been very interesting. Members have talked about a promotion for a cottage industry to make cigarette cases. That is not a bad idea, despite the fact that the product and those who use it are called stinkers. The Member is not here, but he called them stinkers. I take personal exception to that. It also appears that young girls are hooked on cigarettes because of glitzy packaging, and I will return to that.

We then moved into what could be called rights issues. We covered criminality and the illicit selling, off the back of a lorry, I take it, and into the mix, quite rightly, was the issue of jobs. Those of us who have had representation from the cigarette manufacturers know that they make the case on the basis of what Mr Wilson said, which is that it was purely for their jobs. That is what they manufacture, and they were making that case on the basis of their product. I think that that is fair enough.

Perhaps one could have some fun in this debate by weaving in tree-huggers, wind farm suckers or climate change whingers. It seems to me that those people find themselves appropriately in the lobby of fag bashers. They are the same people, coming from the same direction. Those same people seem to keep a distance and have very strong views that are anti-fracking. So, there is a mobilisation of people who seem to want to get into this type of thing, and they seem to be — they do not just seem to be; they are — making issues where I fail to see the issues.

I could also express irritation at the bellyaching about health costs, which says nothing about taxes paid and even less on departmental expenditure on wastage, not just in the Department of Health but throughout the Executive. Yet, some will not allow the debate to tread into the economics of it.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I will, surely.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member accept evidence presented earlier that some £10 billion is collected from tax returns in the UK, but £13 billion is expended on healthcare related to smoking?

Mr McNarry: I thank Mr McKinney for his intervention. I understand that there is no abuse of the revenue figures. I accept that they are correct, but I must say to the Member that I do not have the same confidence in accepting the figures about expenditure, because they come from many areas —

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I will, certainly.

Mr Wilson: He makes a very important point there. That £13 billion also has a notional figure for the cost of people dying, lost production and that kind of thing. Once we enter into those realms, it is not a like-for-like comparison, whereas he pointed out that we know the actual figures for tax revenue.

Mr McNarry: I think that the House has got that message throughout the debate; or, at least, I hope that it has. As always happens, figures are bandied about, and, with all due respect to Mr Wilson, he used to do the same when he was Finance Minister, and they did not always stack up.

Let us be clear: smoking is not good for your health. What does it say on the packet that I bought this morning? It says, and let us do the money bit, "UK duty paid." So, it did not fall off the back of a lorry. I paid my duty. It says, "Smoking causes ageing of the skin." So much for the macho ads for men's cosmetics and skincare that seem to appear in the middle of rugby matches. The packet says that smoking will damage your skin. I would like the Minister to refer in any summing up to how it damages your skin.

Finally, of course, the big message is that smoking kills. Nothing could be clearer. Here is a package that does not look glamorous or seductive to me or to anyone else. It shows a clear message — smoking kills. What it tells me is the brand that I want to smoke as a smoker, which I bought this morning. I should add, so that I do not disappoint the Minister, that I am a reducing smoker. That is a compliment to him for badgering me at times about smoking at all. I am doing my best to reduce in order to acknowledge and recognise the hospital staff and consultants, who I help to pay for, who helped me in a difficult situation not so long ago. I am grateful to them.

Mr McKinney: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: Again? I will.

Mr McKinney: Does the Member accept that much of what we heard this morning, particularly from the Benches here,

and in what he has just talked about, is an emphasis on brand and that brand sells? In this case, the brand sells cigarettes; and in this case, cigarettes kill.

Mr McNarry: I will come to that in a minute, if Mr McKinney will be just a wee bit patient. I am going to support the motion because I have read what it says. There is a message in the motion, and it is an exercise in an outcome that is beneficial to our young people.

I say to some others, and to Mr Wells who is not here, that the nanny state that he wishes for is not for me, nor is it an equaliser for the life as he sees it. It is far from it. He talks about seduction and glamour as if they are some kind of selling aids. I can tell him that they are not persuasive factors to a smoker, which leads me to ask the Minister about one point on plain packaging. I have read out what is written on the current packaging. If I may, I will refer to the blue bit without the brand. The brand comes in blue, red and green. The blue colour tells me its strength. How will the proposed packaging show the strength of the cigarette inside the pack? How will the strength be shown to the purchaser, irrespective of their age? The strength of a cigarette is an important factor to many smokers when choosing to buy the packet that they buy.

I heard the talk about evidence, first from Mr McKinney. I say to those who are proposing that evidence and making it a point, if evidence is so —

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to interrupt the Member, but I remind him that Question Time is at 2.00 pm.

Mr McNarry: OK, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

I say to the Member: if the evidence being presented is so strong, why not make cigarette selling illegal? If your case is so strong and you have all the evidence — and I do not think you have — do the honourable thing for children and others and make cigarette selling illegal. I will end there.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member called to speak will be the Minister to conclude the debate.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Social Housing: Choice-based Lettings

1. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he plans to introduce choice-based lettings as part of his review of the social housing allocation system. *(AQO 5425/11-15)*

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): Currently, I have no such plans. My Department commissioned research from the universities of Ulster and Cambridge to review the current allocation system, look at best practice elsewhere and bring forward recommendations. One recommendation is for choice-based letting. My Department is seeking views on that and the other recommendations at a series of public events. The academics recommend choice-based letting on the grounds of its success in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland in promoting consumer choice, shortening relet times, reducing refusals and improving tenancy sustainment. I will, however, wish to hear further evidence and the views of stakeholders before bringing forward any policy proposals.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. At Committee level, all parties agreed that choice-based letting would not be feasible, particularly given the nature of housing in the North. Does the Minister agree that it would not work in areas of high demand?

Mr McCausland: It is important to look at things on the basis of evidence. I commissioned the research, but it was undertaken by independent academics. We must look at what they produced after a detailed analysis of the market and what can be done elsewhere. It is one of a number of suggestions. We need to talk to stakeholders and a range of interest groups, look at the evidence and then make a judgement. I do not want to make a judgement until I have seen all the evidence, which as yet I have not seen. There are GB regions in which there is high demand, and it seems to work there. At present, however, I have no view either way. I am simply seeking views so that I can formulate an opinion in due course.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Will the Minister assure the House that, whatever lettings take place, the principle of need will be at the very core of the letting of any property and that the process will be fair, open and transparent?

Mr McCausland: I can indeed assure the Member of both those points. It is absolutely fundamental that the allocation of housing should be on the basis of need. The system should be clear, transparent and fully understood. We need a system that is fair and is seen to be fair. I am determined to ensure that that happens as we move forward.

Mr Storey: Apologies to the Minister for not being present for the first question. Will he explain why he felt that it was time for such a fundamental review of the allocation system?

Mr McCausland: The current allocation system has been in place since 2000, so, after 14 years, the time is right for a review of its operation. The system has many shortcomings, including a lack of transparency, perceptions of point chasing and queue-jumping, and a high level of refusals, so there are weaknesses. The system asks applicants to specify areas of choice at the very local level of common landlord area, which is often only a number of streets. In effect, that can restrict people's choices, lead to unrealistic expectations of when they might be housed and exclude people from being considered for possibly suitable properties adjacent to their area of choice. The fact that a number of academics from here and GB who have looked at this put forward a series of recommendations suggests that it was timely to look at a review of the allocation system.

Social Housing: Underspend

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the reasons for previous underspends in the social housing development programme. *(AQO 5426/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: The Department did not declare any underspends in the social housing development programme in the monitoring rounds this year. The programme is on target to deliver all of the planned units for 2013-14, and, in fact, the target may well be exceeded. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, however, was able to realise efficiency and other savings in the Bamford aspects of the programme and declared these to the Department in the last January monitoring round. I am glad to report that those funds have been successfully utilised by the co-ownership scheme to enable applicants to purchase a home and thereby help the wider economy and construction industry.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he considering any changes to the policy or its implementation that would make the provision even more effective?

Mr McCausland: I am indeed looking at how the social housing development programme is delivered. We are delivering on target, but I want to go beyond the target and see what more we can do to ensure the delivery of more social houses. A number of pieces of work have been and are being undertaken. The first of those was the performance and delivery unit (PEDU) report on the delivery of social housing.

The second is work to identify issues that were brought up in the PEDU report. Many of its recommendations have been implemented and some are being implemented.

Thirdly, we are looking at the issues identified by housing associations as an obstacle to their delivering more. A range of potential major difficulties has been raised, including the slowness of planning and issues with site acquisition. Sometimes, there are issues with the provision of water and sewerage supplies to sites and the capacity of housing associations to deliver. In the past few days, examples have been brought to my attention of housing associations identifying themselves as undertaking a scheme that they were allocated but pulling out at the last minute because they did not have the capacity to deliver it.

So there are a number of issues there, and officials are working to ensure that we get a more efficient and effective delivery mechanism that is better tuned, fit for purpose and will, therefore, enable us to go beyond our targets.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. How many social houses have been delivered since he became Minister in 2011?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for her question. My Department is responsible for implementing the current Programme for Government commitment to deliver 8,000 new social and affordable homes by 2015. By the end of the last financial year, we were well ahead of target, with 4,389 new homes delivered, of which 2,789 are social housing. The plan is to deliver a further 1,275 social houses this year, and plans that I approved in December will result in 2,000 more starting next year. So the Programme for Government target will be achieved.

Mrs D Kelly: Is it not the case that the quota for social housing newbuilds is not the most challenging and has been reduced in the past two years? Minister, have you considered or would you consider creating a special task force to address the dire housing waiting lists in parts of Northern Ireland?

Mr McCausland: First, the target was set by the Northern Ireland Executive and endorsed, across the board, as part of the Programme for Government. It is, therefore, one that we are achieving, and I am glad to be able to report that. However, as I indicated in answer to a previous supplementary question, I want to go beyond that. There are a number of weaknesses in the current delivery system. I have identified a few of them, but there are others. I will give this very specific example: a housing association had a scheme that was half finished but could not finish it off for virtually six months because there were issues around the water and sewerage connections for the houses. That sort of delay is unacceptable.

There are issues around site acquisition for housing associations, which is why we have, in a sense, front-loaded the system this year by ensuring that there was a substantial amount of site acquisition at the end of the financial year so that we could move forward into the next year with the sites already acquired. It is that sort of forward planning. There is also an issue around the capacity of our housing associations. Quite a number of them are not really involved in house building; they are simply maintaining their existing stock. The number of houses is largely being delivered by about five housing associations out of the whole range, and those housing associations are right at their limit. We need to see how we can ensure that there is greater capacity in the system, and that is why I have been doing the work. It is not only the PEDU report; there are all the other issues, and I have mentioned a few. We are looking very closely to see what can be done to speed up the system so that we can achieve a lot more.

Rather than setting up a task force, we have already done the analysis of how we could deliver more. That is being worked on to see that we address the issues that have been identified.

Rent Arrears

3. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the current level of rent arrears within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. *(AQO 5427/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that, at 5 January 2014, the current level of rent arrears was £11·3 million for domestic dwellings.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his very direct answer. Will he tell us what proportion of rent arrears owed to the Housing Executive is comprised of individual arrears at a high level and what percentage of its tenants in arrears have agreed budget plans with the Housing Executive.

Mr McCausland: I do not have to hand the figures for those very detailed points that the Member raised. I am more than happy to provide the Member with those details, but I do not have that with me and available today.

Mr Campbell: The non-implementation of welfare reform has implications not just for benefit recipients but non-benefit recipients. Will the Minister outline the extent of the rent arrears problem in the private sector, where welfare reform through housing benefit has been carried out already?

Mr McCausland: The Member raises an interesting point. Private rented sector tenants have already experienced housing benefit changes. That was prior to all the changes yet to come. It was several years ago, in April 2011, and we are almost three years on from that. At that time, changes included how local housing allowance rates were calculated and the introduction of a shared accommodation rate for single people aged 34 and under. Research carried out by Sheffield Hallam University on the housing impact of welfare reform in the private rented sector was published in the late part of last year. That research showed that, despite the changes implemented in the private sector through those earlier reforms, few claimants surveyed were in arrears. Those who were in arrears stated that those arrears were caused by a change in circumstances rather than the changes to housing benefit. They indicated that they had been able to meet the shortfall by reducing expenditure in other areas. In fact, there was evidence that the changes introduced at that time had the effect of driving down rents in the private sector, because landlords were particularly willing to reduce rents for existing claimants. There is also evidence to indicate that most of those affected are simply managing their money differently. Therefore, the anticipated level of difficulty that there might have been in the private rented sector has not necessarily materialised.

2.15 pm

Housing: Repossessions

4. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the number of house repossessions in each of the past three years. *(AQO 5428/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: My Department does not hold information on the number of houses repossessed each year in Northern Ireland. However, the Department of Justice issues quarterly statistics on the number of writs and summonses issued for mortgage possession actions. The statistics show that the number of writs and summonses issued was 3,903 in 2010; 3,588 in 2011; 3,732 in 2012; and 2,899 up until September last year. A total of 3,004 cases were disposed of by the courts in 2010; 2,698 in 2011; 3,157 in 2012; and 2,025 up until September 2013.

It should be noted that not all cases disposed of result in a possession order or in the enforcement of that order to evict the householder. For example, in some cases, an arrangement may be agreed between the householder and lender. Furthermore, lenders granted a possession order by the courts have up to 12 years in which to enforce it. Therefore, the number of possession orders granted in any given year may not translate into the number of enforcements or, indeed, evictions.

Mrs Overend: Behind every one of the repossessions is an individual or a family, many of whom have suffered the trauma of their home being taken away from them. At a time when the Executive continue to squander money left, right and centre, does the Minister still believe that a mortgage rescue scheme like the one in England, Scotland and Wales would be too expensive?

Mr McCausland: I will pass over the general criticism that the Member directed towards every Department, including her colleague's Regional Development Department.

Mr Wilson: Especially.

Mr McCausland: The point has been made that it was probably especially directed at her colleague Mr Kennedy's Department. I am sure that he will be very upset and deeply hurt by that criticism from a Member of his own party.

I have sympathy for the concept of a mortgage rescue scheme. However, in reality, I believe that it would help only a small proportion of those facing repossession and be extremely expensive to operate. It is estimated that a full proposed rescue scheme would cost more than £8 million over a two-year period and enable direct intervention for only 72 rescues in each of the two years. Therefore, the number of cases addressed would be extremely small. Those are all real cases of people facing real situations, and I do not want in any way to minimise or detract from that. However, the numbers that you would be able to help are extremely limited.

I am conscious that, when allocating money, the Executive have to weigh up all the needs and priorities for the people of Northern Ireland, be they education, health or whatever. The numbers that a scheme would help could be extremely small. Nevertheless, as the Member will be aware, we have set up the housing repossession task force to look at a whole range of issues around repossessions.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad iad an comhráití a bhí aige leis an earnáil airgeadais agus leis an earnáil tithíochta ó thaobh sealbhóirí tithe agus tionóntaí a chosaint.

The Minister said that he has put in place a task force. Has he had any discussions with the financial sector to examine ways in which homeowners and tenants can be protected from repossessions?

Mr McCausland: It will be helpful if I set out what we are doing to help to address the repossession issue. The fact of the matter is that my Department cannot resolve what is an underlying problem, or range of problems, leading to

possible home repossessions. As I said, I empathise with those who find themselves in that distressing situation, with the prospect of court action. We have established the housing repossession task force to investigate what the impact is and what further action might be taken, if there is the possibility of doing something further. Indeed, the Member is looking at the goodwill and generosity of spirit of some of our financial institutions. I noticed that he was almost shaking his head when I referred to those terms.

Through that task force, we are trying to harness the experience and the expertise available from all the stakeholders to identify ways in which government and others can assist in alleviating the problems. The first meeting of that task force is scheduled for tomorrow, with the aim of producing outline recommendations by the month of June. That is in addition to the funding we give to the mortgage debt advice service and, of course, as a support for mortgage interest. All those things are in place. I ask the Member to bear with me while we get the response from the task force. There seems to be a fondness for task forces over there in that corner.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. In relation to house repossessions, can the Minister tell us of the level of demand for the mortgage debt advice service and what it has achieved?

Mr McCausland: The formal contract for the mortgage debt advice service commenced in May 2011. Since then, the service has experienced demand at a level well above that originally envisaged. In 2011-12, the service provided advice and assistance to 1,310 clients, directly preventing homelessness for 280 households and providing representation and advocacy services, such as negotiation with lenders and attendance at court, for 804 clients. In 2012-13, it assisted 1,695 clients, directly preventing homelessness for 434 households and providing representative and advocacy services for 774. In 2013-14, up to December, it assisted 1,126 clients, preventing homelessness for 249 and providing representation and advocacy for 490. So, I think that that gives some indication of the extent of the excellent work that is being done by the mortgage debt advice service.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

5. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Social Development how many homes have benefited from the boiler replacement scheme including its precursor pilot scheme. *(AQO 5429/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: Over the 16 months in which the current boiler replacement scheme has been in operation, 10,103 homes have had their old, inefficient boiler replaced. The scheme is not due to finish until March 2015, and, by that time, we aim to have helped 24,000 homes replace their boiler.

The pilot boiler replacement scheme, which was launched in June 2011 and finished on 31 March 2012, assisted 1,743 homes to replace their boiler. Therefore, over the two schemes, to date, we have helped almost 12,000 homes and made a significant difference to the energy efficiency in those homes.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answers today. It is also right to welcome the initiative and to put on record our thanks to the Minister and DSD for going a long way to addressing fuel poverty. Can the Minister provide details on the amount of grant that has been paid out and the average cost of each installation to each property?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for the question, because it helps to give a better picture of the profile of the programme. Twenty-nine per cent of the applicants received the maximum allowable grant of £1,000; 39% received a grant of £700; 14% received a grant of £500; and only 18% received a grant of £400. So a significant number, almost 30%, received the maximum allowable grant, and they were folk on lower incomes. That indicates, I think, that the scheme is being directed to those who are most in need.

The average cost of installations is £1,587 for oil to oil; £1,853 for oil to oil with controls; £1,522 for wood pellet; £1,908 for gas to gas; £2,212 for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) to gas; £1,826 for LPG to LPG; and £2,191 for oil to gas. So, the cost of the installation is very much dependent on the type of change that the individual chooses.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. How many homes does he hope will be included in the scheme next year? What budget allocation is he hoping for to continue the good work on boiler replacement?

Mr McCausland: The initial amount that was set aside for the scheme over the three-year period was £12 million. I was able to secure an additional £6 million from the European regional development fund, so the overall package over the three years is £18 million. It is difficult to tie an amount to a specific year, because you have a process that may well span months, in which people make an application, that is processed, and they might then not even get the installation done for a number of months. That means that there can be a delay at the applicant's choice. It is hard for me to pin down what exactly would be spent in a particular 12-month period, but, if you are looking at the overall period over the three years, £18 million has been set aside for it.

The aim is to have a total of 24,000 installations over the three-year period. If I had to set an average figure, because of the reasons that I set out, around 8,000 boilers would be installed for vulnerable households over that period.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ross Hussey is not in his place.

Housing Executive: Chairperson

7. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the performance of the current chair of the Housing Executive, in particular in relation to the allocation of funds in the social housing sector. *(AQO 5431/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: The chairman of the Housing Executive, Donald Hoodless, has a wealth of experience in social housing. When I appointed him in November 2012, he took on an incredibly difficult job. Since then, he has shown his determination to put in place clear governance and assurance systems to tackle the issues and to make the organisational changes that are required to ensure that appropriate services are delivered to tenants, along with value for public money.

I do not forget that he has inherited some extremely difficult legacy problems. In response to those, he has

worked clearly and methodically to identify all the issues, particularly in the area of contract management. He has put and still is putting in place measures and procedures to deal with those and to reform the systems, the processes and, indeed, the culture of the organisation to ensure that they will not recur in the future. That is all within the parameters of good governance and achieving value for money. I am confident that the chairman has demonstrated clear leadership in that regard and that he is taking the right steps to address what have been endemic and long-standing procedural and cultural issues.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. I hear what he said, but is he still not aware that the Housing Executive has underspent in all aspects of its housing budget at a time of growing waiting lists and problems with maintenance? Does the Minister not think, even given what he has said about the chair, that the chair should resign in the light of that?

Mr McCausland: As I indicated in answer to Mr Nesbitt, the underspends were not really in the social housing development programme. We are on target there. The issues arose primarily in planned maintenance and so on. The fact is that the weaknesses in contract management by the Housing Executive have been the cause of those underspends. In a number of areas, work had to be put on hold because contracts were not properly managed and difficulties arose of which we are all aware. Those weaknesses in contract management by the Housing Executive go back eight, nine or 10 years, well before the current chairman's tenure.

I welcome the fact that the current chairman has acknowledged that there is a problem. There was a state of denial for a long time in the Housing Executive about the fact that contracts were being managed and monitored so badly. Not only has he identified and acknowledged the problem but he is now putting in place the necessary measures to ensure that that sort of thing does not happen again. Both the chair and the vice-chair have brought a level of experience and expertise that was seriously wanting at that top level in the organisation.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That brings us to the end of the period for listed questions. We now move to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Housing Need: Dolores Kelly Comments

1. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister for Social Development for his view of the recent comments on housing need from the SDLP's Dolores Kelly. *(AQT 641/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his question. Mrs Kelly made a statement that was issued on 15 January in cooperation with the Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) project, a lobby group in north Belfast. She said of north Belfast in the course of her contribution:

> *"Any objective analysis or examination of the facts" —*

this was in the context of north Belfast —

> *"can come to only one conclusion — Catholics in need of housing are being discriminated against. ... The conditions that the people of north Belfast have been subjected to are intolerable and would not be accepted in any other functioning democracy."*

I again emphasise her words:

> *"Catholics in need of housing are being discriminated against."*

She went on to say that it:

> *"is nothing short of 21st century gerrymandering."*

I want to put on record today the actual figures for north Belfast, not the myths that have been manufactured and peddled by the SDLP and republicans and the dissidents who were out on the streets of Belfast on Saturday — I think that about 50 of them turned up for their rally. The truth of the matter is that they have manufactured and peddled myths. The facts are these: there is no disadvantage, and there is no discrimination. The waiting lists in the North Belfast constituency as of September of last year were as follows: 2,059 Protestants on the waiting list and 1,986 Roman Catholics. The waiting list in North Belfast was a list —

Mrs D Kelly: Massaged.

Mr McCausland: I am glad that the Member across the way has said that the figures are massaged —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr McCausland: What she is doing, in that case, is accusing the Housing Executive of massaging the figures, because those are the Housing Executive's own figures. If she wants to look at —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Minister of the two-minute rule. The Minister's time is up. Let us address remarks through the Chair.

Mr McCausland: I will happily do that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up.

Mr Newton: Could the Minister outline his investment in social housing in Belfast since he took office?

Mr McCausland: I want to take the opportunity in addressing that to also address the housing stress figures in North Belfast, because they were not very much different. There were 821 Protestants in housing stress and 898 Roman Catholics. In other words, in a constituency like North Belfast, where roughly 50% of the community is from the Protestant community and 50% from the Roman Catholic community, the need in both communities is roughly the same. There is not the level of disadvantage and discrimination that has been manufactured and invented by people like Dolores Kelly, who concocted these ridiculous figures and have thereby had a damaging, indeed, toxic effect on community relations in the north of the city.

The truth of the matter is that these are the facts; these are the figures. People like Dolores Kelly can deny it, argue about it, dispute it, query it, calculate or whatever they want to do as much as they want, but they cannot get round the facts that these are the Housing Executive's own formal, official figures that were presented and made public. There is an old saying: "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still". The truth of the matter is that Mrs Kelly, like many others, simply cannot face up

to the facts. They do not like facts; they prefer myths, and they prefer invention.

As regards the money that has been spent on housing in Belfast, I confess that I do not have the actual figure in front of me, but I will be more than happy to provide that figure to the Member shortly. I thank him for his question and for the opportunity to rectify the falsehoods and the innuendos that some people propagate in this regard.

Orlit Homes

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he is aware of social homes that were constructed without cavity wall insulation, commonly known as orlit homes, the extent of this issue and what he proposes to do to address the problems of damp and condensation in these properties. *(AQT 642/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for an important question. The issue of single-skin properties that are particularly cold and very difficult to heat and are often affected by dampness has been around for many years. There is a range of such properties, and I will come to the figures in a moment. Sadly, the issue was cast aside and ignored by some previous incumbents in the Department. It has now been identified, and I am happy to put the figures on record to show the challenge. We are facing up to it and are working very closely with the Housing Executive and others in that regard.

There are 5,296 no-fines single-skin properties, 740 orlits, 615 easi-form properties, 801 rural cottages, and 3,444 pre-1940s terrace houses that are likely to be of single-walled construction. When you total all that up, you get around 10,000 single-skin properties. Bearing it in mind that the Housing Executive's stock is around 90,000, this shows the extent of the problem and the percentage of the stock affected.

We have introduced a piece of work that is being carried forward in Springfarm estate in Antrim to look at the best way to deal with the problem technically. That work will not only shape our work in addressing the problem in the future here, but, because it involves people from across the United Kingdom, it will ensure that the lessons learned are applied across the United Kingdom. It is a problem that is not unique to Northern Ireland, but it is a significant problem here. I am glad that we are now in a position where we are really getting to grips with it. We will know what the work is, what the challenges are and what needs to be done, and we will be able to take that forward.

Mr Dunne: I would like to put on record our thanks and appreciation to the Minister for his efforts to address the issue. Does he recognise the difficulties in heating such homes and the consequences of that? Does he have any idea when a programme of rectification may come into place for areas such as Holywood in north Down?

Mr McCausland: The challenge is quite considerable. Examples of retrofitting carried out in various parts of Great Britain show that it can cost in the region of £15,000 to £20,000 per property to do a really good job. When one bears in mind the number of properties that need to be tackled to address the problem and the cost per property, one can see very quickly what cost there will be. It will have to be done over a period of years.

I agree entirely with the Member that there are major difficulties for people who live in a number of these properties. They have to spend a lot more to heat them, and it is unfair that they have to do so while others in much newer Housing Executive or housing association properties have a much more energy-efficient home that costs a lot less to heat. I visited a home in Liverpool that had been retrofitted very efficiently, and the lady there commented on the huge reduction in her heating bill. In fact, in the previous eight weeks, she had not even had the heating on. We have also visited recent examples in Germany to see what they are doing there. A lot of work can be done to improve life for the residents of these homes.

Campbell Tickell Report

3. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister for Social Development whether he supports the Committee for Social Development's attempt to get the original unedited report by Campbell Tickell published. *(AQT 643/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: My understanding is that the report is either with or on its way to the Committee. It was requested by the Committee and is to be provided to it. Therefore, the matter has been resolved.

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure that that resolves the question. The question is about whether you support the Committee's call for the report, not the fact that it will happen. However, I will ask you this: on 10 June, you came to the House and announced that there was an overpayment of some £18 million, which, you said, I think, was likely to be a conservative figure. Do you regret rushing into the House at that time, given that the figures now seem to be considerably smaller than that?

Mr McCausland: As for the report being provided to the Committee, it is not for me to hold back or inhibit the work of the Committee in any way. It has made the request and will receive the document very soon.

As regards last year's announcement about maintenance contracts, it is clear from the Campbell Tickell report that the manner in which the Housing Executive drew up, monitored and managed contracts was deeply flawed. It is a pretty damning indictment of the way in which the Housing Executive managed and monitored contracts. It was not done properly, and it was open to all sorts of difficulties. That is one of the issues that go back a number of years. The contracts were set up a number of years ago, towards the end of direct rule and before the Assembly came into operation again. The problem was endemic — or, rather, institutional — in the organisation. In that regard, we are in a better place now because the Campbell Tickell report has identified the problems, and we can move forward.

There are lessons to be learned. I notice that Mrs Kelly, who is a great fan of the Housing Executive, is shaking her head. The truth is that it is a damning report because it states that there is a huge issue with the skills, ability and methodology used to monitor the contracts. It was very hands-off management. With the sort of thing that was going on then, it should not have been hands-off but very much hands-on management.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing

4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Development to update the House on the status of Housing Executive double-glazing contracts. *(AQT 644/11-15)*

Mr McCausland: I am glad to say that I have just been informed that those housing contracts have been signed, and work can now move forward again with getting windows installed. Some time ago, I identified two things as being particularly relevant in addressing energy inefficiency: double glazing and single-skin properties. We are now back on track with double glazing, and, as promised and committed to in the Programme for Government, all Housing Executive single-glazed properties will be double-glazed by 2015, which is a much shorter timescale than was originally envisaged by the Executive. We will be on target to get that work done.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that, and I am sure that the public will be pleased that the double-glazing programme will be back on track. There was a meeting some time ago and a discussion about the Glass and Glazing Federation's guidelines. Will the Minister outline to the House what potential savings the Northern Ireland Executive will receive from that?

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised me that, in relation to the double-glazing framework, the overall value of the three double-glazing contracts awarded is around £23 million and that that combined cost, following the secondary competitions, represents an average saving of around 21·5% when compared with the average cost in the previous contracts. The attention that was focused on the Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines and the competition have brought us to a point at which we now have a saving of around 21·5%. We were originally told that it would probably bring a saving of £15 million, and now we have the actual figure. A 21·5% saving is excellent. It keeps more money in the public sector to spend on housing or whatever, which is important. We are in a time of financial constraint, so we need to deliver value for money. If we can deliver a 21·5% saving as a result of looking at the Glass and Glazing Federation guidelines, that was a wise decision indeed.

2.45 pm

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that question 15 has been withdrawn.

Single Farm Payment: Update

1. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide an update on the current level of single farm payment issued for the year ended 2013. *(AQO 5439/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): This has been an excellent year for processing payments for single farm payment, and I am pleased to report that the highest ever number of farmers received their payments promptly this year. My priority right now is to speed up the processing of the tail of inspection cases that occur every year, and I expect that the last case will be paid approximately two months faster than last year and four months faster than the year before.

Members have recently expressed concerns about remote sensing cases. I can reassure farmers that those cases are being put through for the final stages before payment. I expect a significant number to be in farmers' accounts by the end of the month.

Mr McKinney: Shortly, we will debate the mental well-being of farmers. Will the Minister outline whether all outstanding payments will be paid to farmers within that period?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, and I am aware of the upcoming debate. It is a key area, and I am delighted that it will be discussed in the House. It shows that people have an interest in the welfare of farmers and the stresses that they face in their everyday job.

We have made significant improvements in processing applications. We are now four months ahead of where we were two years ago, so strides are being made and we will continue to do that. Some 93·6% of people have been paid, and we hope to have the remainder paid as quickly as possible. We have put particular emphasis on those whose inspection was done using remote sensing.

Mr Frew: Minister, 1,139 farm businesses were inspected through remote sensing. Some farmers did not realise that they had been inspected or that their single farm payment would be delayed until the very week that they were due to get their money. That has caused great harm to the cash flow of those businesses, hurting not only farmers and their business but the suppliers and merchants who live in those areas. You picked two concentrated areas, one in my constituency of North Antrim and one in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Will you explain why those areas were picked, why the Department has not been able to process the remote sensing inspections and why you have left those farmers in disarray?

Mrs O'Neill: It is important that people do not lose the run of themselves. Put it in context: over 37,000 applications were received by the Department, and, of those, 35,228 have been paid, which is 93·6%. That said, I have always said that I understand the stress and tension caused to those in the remaining 6% waiting to be paid, but you have to put that in context. We have seen improvements year on year. We have ramped up the number of inspections by remote sensing from 250 last year to almost 1,200 this year. Compared with last year, payments are being made two months earlier; it is four months earlier compared with the year before. There have been year-on-year improvements in the system. This year was always going to be difficult because we were moving towards remote sensing. Those problems will not be there next year.

I can give assurances to the remaining 2,409 cases that have not been paid. There is a variety of reasons why those people have not been paid. The Member will be very aware of probate cases, and we have over 300 of those. There are various issues with bank details. However, as I said, if you are in that 6%, I understand your angst. We are trying to get those people paid as quickly as possible and will have the majority of them paid by the end of February or early in March. A lot of work is ongoing, and there are a lot of positive developments. We are changing things for the better. It is taking time, but we are certainly getting there.

It worked out better for claimants that they were not notified until December. The reason is this: it is an inspection, and it is part of the control process that 5% of claims must be inspected. Had claimants been told earlier in the year, they would not have been able to change their claim. I did not have to inform people, but I chose to inform people in December so that they would be aware of why they had not yet had their payment.

Mrs Dobson: It would be remiss of me to not thank Mr Frew for quoting my colleague Robin Swann's press release word for word following the meeting in Glarryford last week. It is good to know he is reading Ulster Unionist Party press.

It is another year, and there are more problems with DARD's administration of single farm payments. The incompetence festers on. Does the Minister go out of her way every year to mishandle administration of the payments? That is how farmers see it.

Mrs O'Neill: There was no question in that. I have very clearly set out to the House the steps that were taken to improve things. Again, I say that you have to put it in context: we have significantly improved things, with 93·6% of people being paid.

Mr Allister: The Minister said that it had been an excellent year for the payment of single farm payments. It has not, if you are one of my farming constituents in the Portglenone area who, utterly unexpectedly, as we have heard, have had their payments withheld because of the remote sensing. Why could those payments not have been paid in December and recovered in the subsequent year if anything was found to be wrong rather than punishing them all with this punitive approach across the board?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, we are working under European rules, and one of the rules is that you cannot make any payment until the whole process of inspection has been completed. That is why we are not able to make payments. You have to remember why we are trying to improve things and why we are trying to do all of the inspections by remote control sensing. We are trying to get to a position where we are able to make early payments. That is something that the House has called for repeatedly over the past number of months. We have had quite a few debates on it. I, too, want to be able to pay people early, which is why we are taking forward the measures with the remote control sensing.

I want to pick up on a point that I failed to mention in answer to Mr Frew's question on why those areas were chosen. They were chosen at random. There will always be a difficulty when a particular area is chosen, and, given that satellite imagery is used, it makes sense to do it in one area. That being said — I will not hide behind this — if you are in the 6% of people who have not had their payment, I accept that you will be feeling angst. You need your payment to pay for feed, and there are implications from that. So, we want to get the payments out as quickly as possible.

Coastal Flood Defences

2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the coastal flood defences during the recent storms. *(AQO 5440/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency has responsibility for 26 km of designated coastal defences around the coastline of the north of Ireland. Those defences performed well during the coastal storms at the start of January in that they provided protection to the people and property situated behind them. To ensure that any damage to those defences is identified and repaired, initial post-event inspections of the defences are progressing well, with completion anticipated by early February 2014. More detailed structural inspections are also being progressed in parallel, with the completion of those anticipated by the end of March 2014.

I am pleased to advise that, at this stage, there appears to have been no major damage to the defences as a result of the storms. That said, other Departments have responsibility for stretches of the coastline, and I urge them to take whatever action is necessary to repair any damage caused and consider what further work is required to protect their infrastructure from future coastal storms.

Rivers Agency had already identified the likelihood of tidal flooding in Belfast and, in the light of the recent surge tides, is reassessing the level of risk to determine what further measures may be needed.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answer. By coincidence, I was speaking to my colleague Oliver McMullan earlier. Some towns in his constituency, particularly Cushendall and Carnlough, have faced difficulties over the past few months. Are the flood defences fit for purpose, particularly given the tidal surges that we have witnessed recently?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for the question. There is absolutely no doubt that coastal defences were severely tested. The defences that Rivers Agency is responsible for performed well. The effectiveness of those designated flood defence assets is constantly reviewed under a rolling inspection and maintenance programme that is operated by Rivers Agency.

Whilst Rivers Agency is responsible for designated sea defences only, it has developed mapping of coastal flood risk for the whole of the North of Ireland, and it is already sharing that with key infrastructure owners and the public.

The agency is willing to provide whatever additional support is required by other organisations in their assessment of the infrastructure and coastal defences for which they are responsible. Where property for which no other public body is responsible has been significantly affected by flooding from the sea, Rivers Agency can examine the options for improving the level of protection. However, any works would have to be cost-beneficial and be subject to competing priorities for available funding.

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister recognise that there are areas, such as Kinnegar in Holywood, that were not identified by the various agencies as being risk areas but should have been? Kinnegar has been subjected to the very heavy swell of Belfast lough. The area was protected mainly through the efforts of local residents, the PSNI, the council and the army, with some late support from Rivers Agency. Should an area such as Kinnegar have been identified early on?

Mrs O'Neill: I cannot speak about that individual area, but I will be happy to give the Member more detail in writing if it is, in fact, an area that Rivers Agency is responsible for. As I said, Rivers Agency is responsible for only 26 kilometres of coastline. There is obviously an awful lot more coastline

that is looked after by various agencies, including DRD, councils and harbour authorities. Quite a range of people are responsible. We are happy to assist any of those agencies where we can, particularly with maps.

One of the efforts that will happen, as a result of all the incidents since the first warning of potential tidal flooding in January, is an analysis of the work that was done and how everybody responded in order to see whether there are any gaps. However, in the area that we are responsible for, Rivers Agency defences performed well.

Mr Rogers: Minister, given that the greater the volume of water that a river can hold, the less likely there is to be flooding, and given that corresponding bodies in England are reviewing the policy of the non-dredging of rivers to help alleviate the flooding problem, have you any plans for a similar review here?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very much guided by the technical expertise of Rivers Agency. As I said, it will now carry out a post-event analysis of how things performed. The agency will bring forward recommendations on any measures that need to be taken. I am quite sure that dredging or non-dredging of particular watercourses will be considered.

Mr McCarthy: I heard what the Minister said, but I am sure that a number of people who listened to the response will not be enamoured by the fact that she said that there was not serious flooding in some areas. I can tell her that there was serious flooding in my area. People will expect her Department to come up to the mark. In view of that, will the Minister commit to an audit of all coastal defences to ensure that investment is available to secure our homes, farms and businesses in times of future high tides or coastal erosion around the North of Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: I will just correct the Member: I did not say that there were areas that did not flood but that the coastal defences that Rivers Agency is responsible for held up where they needed to. As I have already said, there will be a post-event analysis of all the events that occurred and how everybody responded. Recommendations will also come from Rivers Agency if there are areas where we need to strengthen our defences. I look forward to getting those. We will have to look at any suggestions that come forward and then at what funding we have available to be able to do some work.

Rural Development Programme

3. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to funding for the next rural development programme. *(AQO 5441/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: I consulted with all my Executive colleagues on my proposals for the 2014-2020 rural development programme as part of the consultation process. That included asking for views on the funding and prioritisation of my proposals. However, I have had no discussions with the Minister of Finance and Personnel on funding for the next programme.

The programme is still being developed. The projected costs will be refined once the review of the consultation responses has been completed. A number of decisions still have to be made on the final shape and size of the next rural development programme. Once the decisions have been finalised, there will be further substantive engagement with the Department of Finance and Personnel on the overall funding requirement.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her update. In the debate that we had about the transfer of moneys to the rural development programme, I asked you to lay in the Library all your correspondence with the Minister of Finance so that all Members could be aware of it. Have you done that yet?

3.00 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I am happy to say to the Member that my officials sent a copy of the draft proposals. In the debate, I said that I had sent them to all Members and would be happy to place them in the Library. I have done that. No, I will correct myself: I will do that. I intend to put what you have asked for in the Library, and it will be done in the next number of days.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. When will the Going for Growth strategy be brought to the Executive?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that it is a joint paper from my Department and DETI. The strategy was developed in partnership with the industry, which was very much in the lead. I recently wrote to Minister Foster to encourage her to forward the paper to the Executive, and I am disappointed that that has not happened to date. However, I am sure that that will happen in the next number of weeks.

It is now more important than ever that we show the industry that we are willing to support it, that we have a plan set out and that the Executive are committed to supporting the industry and moving forward with the asks that have been set out in the Going for Growth strategy. I met the chair of the Agri-Food Strategy Board over the past number of weeks to assure him of my commitment to moving forward with the agrifood strategy report and bringing the Executive paper forward so that we can test Executive support for it.

We need to remember that a significant body of work has been done, and we do not want to lose any momentum. We are talking about the creation of 15,000 jobs and a 60% increase in sales, a 75% increase in exports and a 60% increase in value added. That is an opportunity that is not to be missed; and it would be remiss of the Executive to miss it. I look forward to the paper being tabled and discussed and to reaching agreement on the way forward over the next number of weeks at the Executive.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answers. When does she hope to be in a position to put a formal paper to the Executive to make sure that the uncertainty around the rural development programme is ended?

Mrs O'Neill: I have a paper that has been drafted along with my DETI colleague, Arlene Foster. I am waiting for that to be cleared to go to the Executive. I have written to Minister Foster to ask for that to happen so that we can have a discussion at the Executive table. As I said, it is so important that we do not lose momentum, that we build on what has been done — the strategic plan that has been set out by the industry — and that we show the agrifood industry that the Executive are serious about helping it.

Ms Lo: What conversations has the Minister had with the European Commission in relation to the court case on top-slicing single farm payments?

Mrs O'Neill: The Commission is very aware of the situation here and that there was no agreement on the transfer. It was alert to the fact that I wanted to transfer 7%. I have very clearly set out in this House the need for a balanced approach to rural communities and the need to look after our farming community, the environment and rural dwellers. That was why I wanted to transfer 7%.

Unfortunately, because of the court challenge and the subsequent non-agreement of the DUP on the 7% transfer, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) notified the European Commission, which led to a zero percent transfer. That being said, I still understand what I have to do. I still want to create a rural development programme that is fair and balanced and meets all the needs of all rural communities, and I am committed to doing that.

Alongside that, we also want to have the agrifood strategy report agreed so that people can see that the Executive are committed to supporting the agrifood industry. The Member will be aware that we would have been able to deliver some of the key asks in the agrifood strategy document through the rural development programme. Some people, for whatever reason — they can account for themselves — decided to object to that. I will not be sidetracked; I will continue to do what I need to do regardless of the fact that we were unable to have any transfer of funds.

DARD Headquarters

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the progress made on the relocation of her departmental headquarters to Ballykelly. *(AQO 5442/11-15)*

9. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the relocation of her departmental headquarters. *(AQO 5447/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 9 together.

The business case for the relocation of the headquarters to Ballykelly is currently undergoing internal assurance. The preferred option points to a phased approach to construction, with 400 workstations being completed in 2016 and a further phase of around 200 workstations being completed in 2020.

My officials are continuing to progress this project, with a major focus on the development of the HR strategies that are needed to ensure that the skills, experience and knowledge that are available in my Department are retained and available when we move to the new headquarters. The success of relocation will be measured against my Department's ability to retain the high standard of service that our stakeholders and customers are used to. The phased approach will allow my officials the time required to properly manage the move from a Belfast-based headquarters to one that operates from the north-west.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. I know that she has had recent discussions with the Minister for Regional Development, so what advances have been made in the provision of a rail halt for the Ballykelly site or, indeed, for a shuttle service from one of the other proposed sites at either Eglinton or Bellarena?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is aware that I recently met Minister Danny Kennedy to discuss the provision of a rail halt. I think that it is a good suggestion, and, obviously, we need to scope it out more and take a look at the options. I think that it is fair to say at the outset that there are a number of challenges in taking it forward and in providing a railway halt at Ballykelly. The turnaround times on the rail network are very tight, particularly in the north-west, so there is not a lot of room for manoeuvre there. However, we are exploring other options, such as a shuttle service going maybe from Eglinton or from Bellarena, as you suggested. So, there are some areas that we still have to scope.

Although it might not feasible at this time to have a railway halt, I think that we need to explore it further. Given the size of the site and the potential for private business to come and invest in the site alongside our Department and any others that intend to move to the site, there may well be even more of a need in the future.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for her explanation thus far. What significance does she place in the fact that, when the strategic outline case was submitted to the central finance group towards the end of 2011, no reference at all was made to the Ballykelly site?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that, throughout the process, we have engaged with OFMDFM, which obviously owns the site. We are not running away with the idea on our own. OFMDFM is very aware and is very alert to us making sure that we move onto the site. We have identified the area that we want for the headquarters, and OFMDFM is supporting that. Obviously, it is also a Programme for Government commitment.

Mr G Robinson: Can the Minister confirm whether the Department has any other plans to secure further areas of the Shackleton site for any other agricultural purposes?

Mrs O'Neill: Not at this moment. At this moment, we are looking at the site for the headquarters alone. In the future, if other things can complement the headquarters, I will be quite open to looking at them at that time, but we are currently looking at the headquarters only.

Single Farm Payments: Remote Sensing

5. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking in relation to the delay of single farm payments being issued as a result of remote sensing difficulties. *(AQO 5443/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: Control with remote sensing has contributed significantly to helping DARD to make faster payments in 2013, which was a scheme year when there was very significant change to systems as a result of the introduction of a new mapping control. Had only traditional inspections in the field been used that year, the Department could not have envisaged paying so many farmers so quickly. Resources have been dedicated to funding remote sensory cases for payment as a top priority from early February. The aim is to have the majority of inspected claims paid by the end of February 2014, with the remainder paid by April 2014. That will mean that inspection cases generally, including remote

sensory cases, will be processed much more quickly than inspection cases in previous years.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the difficulties that we have seen and that farmers have seen with the drone-based system, is the Minister still confident that this is the best way to do this?

Mrs O'Neill: I am, and I think that the figures speak for themselves. If you looked at it, you would see that, at this moment, 93·6% of payments are made on time. There are significant improvements on last year and the year before. So, yes, I am confident that this is the way to go. This year was particularly difficult, because we had to line up the new remote-control sensing with both the payment system and the mapping system. Now that we have got over that and have done it, the priority is, obviously, to get everyone paid. As I said, the start of issuing those payments will be over the next number of days.

So, yes, I think that it is the way to go. It will allow us to be able to move to a system where we can continue to make payments even earlier year-on-year. I know that the industry wants that.

Mr Wilson: I think that those farmers who find themselves cash-starved at the moment will be very angry at the dismissive way in which the Minister said that Members should not lose the run of themselves over the issue. I think that that will be noted.

At what stage was she aware that there would be difficulties in making payments to the farms that were surveyed in this way? So that they would not get into cash difficulties, why were farmers not informed that there may be slowness in payments? What is the very latest date that any farmer will be paid as a result of the present delays?

Mrs O'Neill: My comments around people losing the run of themselves is primarily around the fact that you need to put it in context. I said after the very first question that I took at Question Time today that I understand that anybody who is in that 6% of people who have not been paid is anxious about their payment. I am not dismissing that for one moment, but my aim is to get the majority of people paid as quickly as possible.

I have improved things year-on-year, and I will continue to do that. Remote sensing is something that we must do if we are serious about trying to ramp up the number of inspections, get them done earlier and get the payments earlier. My aim is to move to a point where we get the majority of people paid as early as possible. We are making improvements. All I am saying is that you need to put it in context. That is the point that I was making.

In respect of the delays, as I said, when it came to processing the claims, I have made sure that there is extra resource to make sure that the payments are made as quickly as possible to those remaining people who need to be paid. As I said, we have improved things. We have paid two months faster compared with last year and four months faster compared with the year before. We hope to have the majority of all claimants paid by April, which is a significant improvement compared with years gone by.

Mrs Overend: A number of farmers in mid-Ulster came to my office to complain that they received no notification that they were undergoing the inspection. So, they were not able to plan for their financial situation, and they are very disappointed with that. Can the Minister assure the House that she will personally check that those letters are delivered next year so that those farmers can make plans for their financial situation?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that the Member is suggesting that I will personally go and hand deliver all the letters, but, that being said, everybody who was being inspected was supposed to get a letter. If they have not got a letter, I do not know what that is about, but we can look into it if you want to talk to me outside of Question Time about anybody individually. All the people who had an inspection by controlled remote sensing received a letter, which was posted to the address that DARD holds for them. So, if there are any discrepancies, I am happy to talk to you about it outside of Question Time.

Animal Cruelty

6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she plans to review how her Department tackles animal cruelty. *(AQO 5444/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: The welfare of animals is protected by the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, which recognises that causing an animal unnecessary suffering is a very serious offence. To reflect that, it significantly increased the penalties from those that were available under the previous Act. The Act provides powers for inspectors to take a range of enforcement actions appropriate to the circumstances of each case, including giving advice, giving a warning, issuing a legally binding improvement notice or prosecution.

The Act also sets out very clear enforcement roles. It gives my Department responsibility for the enforcement in relation to farmed animals. The PSNI has responsibility for enforcement in respect of wild animals, animal fighting and welfare issues where other criminal activities are involved. Since 2 April 2012, the Act has given councils responsibility for enforcement in respect of non-farmed animals such as domestic pets and horses. My Department provides annual funding for councils to support that work.

The involvement of councils has been a major step forward, as it is the first time that the North has had a dedicated manpower resource to investigate animal welfare complaints in respect of non-farmed animals and a budget to fund the work. Since April 2012, councils have investigated over 8,000 animal welfare complaints, carried out over 11,000 inspections and served over 360 improvement notices. They have also successfully prosecuted in four animal welfare cases, and I am aware that there are a substantial number of other cases being prepared for prosecution.

I believe that the involvement of councils in this work is a very positive development, and I am encouraged by the valuable work that they have undertaken to date. It is important that we allow sufficient time for the enforcement arrangements laid down in the Act to fully bed in before considering further changes.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the work that she is doing to tackle animal cruelty. How effective have the sentencing guidelines set by her Department been in deterring people from partaking in such heinous crime?

Mrs O'Neill: Sentencing within the legislative framework is a matter for the judiciary. I have engaged with Minister Ford to ensure that the sentencing is sufficient and reflects

the actions that have been taken forward. In making sentencing decisions, it comes down to the judiciary and the law. Following the introduction of the Act, I met Minister Ford, and he assured me that he raised the issue with the Lord Chief Justice, and in his programme of action on sentencing, he has enhanced the structures by which the judiciary ensures consistent and appropriate sentencing. I think that it is important that there is consistency when all these cases are taken before the courts. I am delighted that that has now happened, and we have something in place that all judges can refer to when it comes to dealing with cases of animal cruelty, which, in my opinion, should be dealt with in a way that makes sure that there is a proper deterrent so that it does not happen again.

3.15 pm

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. Minister, what funding do you provide to councils to assist with that matter, given the recent horse cruelty in Clogher valley in my constituency?

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is providing annual funding to help councils to implement their new role of investigating complaints and carrying out enforcement actions, including employing nine full-time animal welfare officers. I made £760,000 available for 2011-12, £780,000 for 2012-13 and £800,000 for this financial year, so the figure will increase by £20,000 for 2014-15. The funding also allows councils to assist animal welfare officers in carrying out their role by providing administrative support, bringing in specialist veterinary advice, paying for animal care costs and securing legal costs.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Badgers: TVR Trials

1. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, mindful of the TB threat to cattle from badgers, to update the House on the test, vaccinate or release (TVR) badger trials taking place in Northern Ireland. *(AQT 651/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: As the Member is aware, the trials are ongoing. It is a very novel approach that we have taken forward. We have an EU-approved eradication programme in place that we are continuing to work through. Alongside the TVR, we also have our government/industry partnership, which, you will be aware, I launched and came to Committee to talk about a number of months ago. On 17 September, I announced that I was going to establish the government/industry strategic partnership to look at TB alongside the TVR approach.

As you know, we have identified the two areas that we are looking at. The testing is ongoing. We have had a very high response from the farming community in those areas, which we are very pleased about. In the second area, we had a bit of a problem in getting responses from farmers because they had just dealt with the snow issue at that time last year. Now that we are moving back into spring and summer we can start going out and looking at the badger setts again. I am happy to provide the Member with any more detail that he wishes in writing, if he thinks that would be helpful.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. Does she agree that TB in badgers must be dealt with if TB in cattle is to be eradicated in Northern Ireland?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely, and the Member is aware that we are striving towards that. All the work that we are doing, including the TVR approach and the government/industry partnership, is to try to get us to a stage where we can drive out TB. You are aware that there is no simple solution or quick fix to the problem, otherwise we would take that avenue. If we look towards best practice in other areas and continue to take forward the research and initiatives that we are, I think we will be in a better place.

It is worth noting that the level has now decreased. I do not know the percentage off the top of my head, but we have had a decrease in the level of TB, which is something to be welcomed.

Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster

2. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she agrees that Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster are an integral part of rural Northern Ireland and play a vital role in the development of many rural young people. *(AQT 652/11-15)*

I declare an interest as a member and past president.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, I agree with the Member about the role that they play. I am actually going to meet them over the next number of weeks to discuss their plans for moving forward. They have done significant work, particularly on equality, in a lot of campaigns that they have been working on, so I am very happy to support them and look forward to meeting them and hearing about their plans for the future over the next number of weeks.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the young Mr Swann for a supplementary question.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for announcing to the House that she is planning to meet them, because I know that they are due to reach the end of their current funding period. I would not like her to fall into the same dilemma as her predecessor when she tried to remove funding from the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster. I think that that was a very bad mistake, and I encourage the Minister to encourage the funding at the current level, if not at an extended level.

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that it is fair to make that assertion about my predecessor. The previous Minister worked with the Young Farmers' Clubs to look at the areas of work that they are working on and to try to tie what they are doing in with the strategies that we have in the Department. That has worked very successfully, which has been evident over the past number of years. I hope to be able to build on that after I meet them.

EU Infraction Fines

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what the current level of EU infraction fines is, particularly in the past year. *(AQT 653/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have the figure with me, but, on disallowance, we are somewhere around £100 million in terms of the mapping from the start of the programme to date.

Dr McDonnell: What steps are we taking, can we take or might we take to reduce the fines and restore our status and credibility in Brussels?

Mrs O'Neill: Unfortunately, we are victims of how Brussels does its business and carries out retrospective inspections of how we take forward our mapping system. It has identified problems with our maps, and we have taken significant steps to rectify them. We are communicating that to Brussels all the time, and the level of disallowance keeps coming down, year on year. We now have a positive engagement with Brussels, and it is alert to how we are trying to tackle the problem it has identified with our maps. The mapping system was a major piece of work; we had 750,000 fields to remap. That has all been done, and we have made significant progress. As I said, that has been communicated to Europe.

Single Farm Payment

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she is aware that other areas of the European Union make advance payments to farmers eligible for a single farm payment, even where inspection, particularly remote sensing inspection, has occurred and will she use the CAP reform process to bring about a similar policy in Northern Ireland. *(AQT 654/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: I said that my aim is to move to a system whereby, in the first instance, we pay everybody as quickly as possible and make part payments. That is absolutely my aim. I know that other areas across Europe do that, and they are, I suppose, more advanced in remote sensing. We hope to get to that place very soon. Given CAP reform, there is now a significant opportunity to allow us to be able to do that.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. As a follow-up on CAP reform, has she made any final decision on a single-tier or two-tier payment system for farmers?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that the consultation has just closed. I am looking at all the responses and will take a decision on the way forward based on those. I am delighted to have received so many representations, even on that one issue: over 400 farmers from the Member's constituency contacted me with their views on regions and our many systems. I will take decisions in the round based on all the consultation responses.

Mr Lyttle: Question 5 — *[Laughter.]* Apologies, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker; it was bound to happen at some point.

Flood Alleviation: East Belfast

5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on Rivers Agency flood alleviation work in east Belfast. *(AQT 655/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that work is ongoing, and we are on target, as set out, to complete the work by 2016. Obviously, there were delays at the start, because we are working in conjunction with Belfast City Council. However, quite a number of works have already started, and we are pleased with the progress. As I said, we are on target for early 2016.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the works that are ongoing in east Belfast. Has she any plans to bid for extra funds to increase the rate and scale of flood alleviation for homes and businesses in east Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware of the scheme that has been worked up with the £6 million of investment. The Rivers Agency, with its technical expertise, has suggested that it is the best way forward and that those are the measures needed, and I am confident about its assessment. Like any area, when it comes to any additional resources needed, the Rivers Agency will talk to me about those needs. However, the £6 million investment will tackle a problem. The people of east Belfast have been waiting for that, and it is long overdue.

Single Farm Payment: Eligibility

6. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the current policy on the single farm payment and the exclusion of areas — for example, where the canopy of a tree is causing an area to be excluded from payment — what engagement her Department has had to ensure that those areas will be included. *(AQT 656/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: That is an ongoing discussion. We try to communicate that message to farmers. When the single farm payment application goes out, we send guidance so that farmers can look at what is and is not eligible. Those discussions are ongoing with Europe. A lot of what I said earlier in the conversation about disallowance has come about because of Europe's interpretation of what is deemed eligible and ineligible. We continue to have that conversation with Europe, but it is most important that we communicate the issue to farmers.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer. A number of farmers whose farms are sited along rivers have taken a scorched earth approach. Given the current policy, it looks like we will end up with trees being totally cleansed from certain areas. However, that is having a negative impact on river life and the angling fraternity. Is there any engagement with those involved in that end of things to see how we can move forward and ensure that we get a united approach to resolving this matter?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with you that we need a united approach, because we want to look after the environment. We do not want land to be stripped of trees: we are trying to increase planting, not the opposite. So it is important that everybody gets together and that, moving forward, anybody who is a partner has that discussion. We are making sure that we do that.

Single Farm Payment: Timescale

7. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give clarity and certainty to farmers, following her reply to Mr Elliott, in which she gave details of the number of responses, by providing a more definitive timescale of when she will and must have made decisions. *(AQT 657/11-15)*

Mr McCallister: I draw Members' attention to my interest as a recipient of single farm payment.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the consultation closed on 17 January, so we are working our way through all of the significant number of responses. I want to make sure that the decisions I take are based on listening to the consultation responses and taking on board the issues that

people have identified and what they think are the correct ways forward. I aim to do that as quickly as possible because I know that any change is difficult for anybody to manage, but farmers have a particular angst about CAP reform and what it means for them. You may have seen that we have published on the DARD website — in fact, some of the farming papers covered it last week — a question and answer guide to CAP reform, which I hope gives some clarity to farmers. We are also trying to make sure that we get as much clarity out there as quickly as possible. I assure the Member that I intend to take decisions as quickly as possible and on the back of the consultation responses that I have received.

Mr McCallister: I am sure that the Minister accepts that this is the big topic in rural communities and among farmers in her constituency and in mine. It is a huge issue that will set the agenda and define the support for farming families for many years to come. So does she agree that the quicker she can respond and the more engagement she has, the better, and the better informed her decision will be?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely agree, and, from the number of public meetings that were held, I have seen for myself the engagement of the farming community. No matter where we went, halls were packed, which shows me that people want to know what is happening. I want to be able to give them the answers as quickly as possible. The consultation closed just two weeks ago, but we are working our way through all the responses, and I will take speedy decisions that will allow the farming community to plan their personal affairs and the Department to plan for the new systems that will come into place from 2015 on.

Lough Neagh Working Group

8. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the working group that was set up to consider Lough Neagh and to state when a report will be available to Members. *(AQT 658/11-15)*

Mrs O'Neill: I intend to bring a report to the Executive. I have had discussions with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister, Carál Ní Chuilín, because her Department has taken forward work that complements the work of my Department with the working group. The interdepartmental working group has been recalled and is looking at both reports, and we hope to bring a paper to the Executive early in the spring — we are probably talking about March or April.

Mr Clarke: Will you outline the reason for the delay? It seems to have been some length of time since this group was initiated. Will you update the House on why there has been a delay? Why April and not now?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, two pieces of work were on the go: one in DCAL and one in my Department. You can imagine the scale of the work, given the potential and scope of Lough Neagh. Also, many Departments, including DCAL, and other bodies have an interest and a remit. I now have the report from DCAL. We met in December, discussed the two reports and decided on a way forward. We will bring together the interdepartmental working group and draw up a paper that we will bring to the Executive very shortly.

Rural Isolation

9. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking on rural isolation, particularly for people in my constituency in the glens of Antrim and other isolated rural areas. *(AQT 659/11-15)*

3.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I am very committed to that area. You will be aware of my tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework, which is a whole range of measures about access to benefits, including rural enablers going door to door to households, and youth employment schemes. The Member can pick quite a range of issues off the website. It is a serious effort to try to tackle the isolation that exists in rural communities. Quite often, people in rural communities feel like the poor relation when it comes to services. It is a pot of £16 million, but I would call it leverage funding. It draws in areas of work and cooperation from other Departments to do projects, particularly around rural transport and such issues, that would not have happened had we not had this pot of money and this plan in place. I am very committed to making sure that that piece of work continues. We are taking forward quite a range of areas of work.

Executive Committee Business

Children and Families Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Debate resumed on motion:

> *That this Assembly agrees that the UK Parliament should consider the extension to Northern Ireland of amendments to the Children and Families Bill dealing with the regulation of retail packaging etc of tobacco products. — [Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety).]*

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the opportunity to respond to a number of the issues that were raised during the debate.

In general, most Members who spoke, including the Committee Chair, supported the proposals in the legislative consent motion. Quite a number of Members spoke in favour of it.

Mr Beggs wanted an explanation as to why OFMDFM was making the decision, as opposed to me, and the answer is very simple. The issue has not been debated in the House heretofore because it came quite quickly, nor, indeed, did it have the opportunity to be debated by the Executive at that point. Therefore, it was an urgent procedural decision, and it was decided that, in that instance, it would be best left with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister with my support. They decided that we would proceed with the legislative consent motion. Given the issues that we have had in the courts previously, it ensures that we have cross-community support so that a Minister is not doing a solo run on the issue.

Most of the issues that were raised were raised by Mr Wilson and Mr Ross, and I propose to respond to some of them. I see that Mr Wilson is not in his place yet, but I hope that he can make it and that we can deal with a number of the issues.

Before I go to that, I should say that Mr Beggs also raised the issue of security coding. Security markings will remain on the standardised packaging. The EU's revision of the tobacco products directive will seek to improve tracking and tracing of tobacco products, and those provisions will be introduced by 2016.

I welcome the debate, and I think that it is useful to have such debates in the House. It is good to be able to hear all of the issues, so that we can give a robust defence of what we are doing. I believe that we can robustly defend what we are doing. Mr McNarry also made some points, and I will deal those as well.

There was a strong presumption that there should be evidence and an evidence base on which to do something. The first element of the evidence is the fact that 25% of people in Northern Ireland smoke. The next element is that half of those people will die as a result of smoking. There are 2,300 deaths each year, with 900 from lung cancer, and we cannot afford to ignore that. The evidence would say that to do nothing is not satisfactory; you need to do something.

Mr Wilson was somewhat sceptical as to whether efforts heretofore had achieved an awful lot. The figures do not indicate that that is the case. In fact, the figures indicate that there has been a dramatic fall in the numbers who smoked previously compared with the numbers who are smoking now. For example, in 1983, 33% of the total population in Northern Ireland smoked, and today it is 25%; 39% of males smoked and now males account for 28% of smokers; and 29% of females smoked and that has fallen to 24%.

If one considers that 8% of people who previously smoked do not do so today and that we have a population of 1·8 million, one will see that there are around 150,000 fewer smokers today as a result of the actions that have been taken. If you want evidence that the actions work, that is your evidence. There are 150,000 fewer smokers today than there would have been had we just carried on as things were in 1983.

Further evidence of that is that 75,000 of those people would have died as a result of smoking. Therefore, the argument that we should do nothing because actions do not work anyway does not stand up. It is wrong, and I am pleased to oppose it robustly.

Mr Ross: I thank the Minister for giving way. I think that it is a good thing that far fewer people are taking up the habit now than did in the 1980s. However, does he acknowledge that much of that is down to the fact that nobody now has the excuse of not knowing that smoking will cause them some serious health difficulties and that to use the argument that anybody would take up smoking now because of a glitzy packet is therefore wrong? What we should be doing is ensuring that we allow adults to take informed decisions for themselves. The emphasis should be on health campaigns to make people understand the dangers of smoking and why they should not take it up in the first place.

Mr Poots: That is more rehearsing of a previous argument. I will deal with that in a moment or two.

In terms of evidence, why should Northern Ireland do something more on smoking? Smoking prevalence in Australia, for example, is around 17%.

Mr McKinney: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: In a moment.

Smoking prevalence is around 17% in California, less than 20% in England, around 20% in Canada, and over 20% in Scotland and Wales. However, Northern Ireland as a region has the highest smoking levels in the UK. The concept that the rest of the UK may move to standardised packaging to reduce the prevalence of smoking while Northern Ireland does not do so is not one that we can sustain. I do not think that that argument is sustainable at all. We as a region smoke the most. Everybody else is trying to do something to take people away from smoking. Are we going to stand alone and be the only part of the British Isles not to have standardised packaging? That is not a sustainable position to adopt.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister for giving way and for bringing to the House the statistics that, in the period, 150,000 people are now not smoking and that, as a result, 75,000 people have not died. Does he accept that, given the nature of passive smoking, the number of people living longer could in fact be bigger?

Mr Poots: Certainly, passive smoking is a major issue. I remember watching 'Record Breakers' as a child. Roy

Castle, who was a great presenter, died from passive smoking. He raised the issue of passive smoking. Mr Givan quite rightly raised the issue of people smoking in cars containing children. I have heard people argue that it is a civil liberty that people are entitled to smoke, which it is. However, let me make this very clear: I do not regard it as a civil liberty to blow smoke around a confined space in which there are young children. That is not a civil liberty, and we should do something about it. I note that Westminster is looking at the issue. We will have to do that in due course, and, for me, the sooner, the better.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He will know that, a number of years ago, I brought such a motion to the House, and he pledged his support. Will he now give an undertaking that, if Westminster does not act, he will? I know that he looked at consulting on it, but this is a chance. I wholeheartedly agree with and support him, unlike some of his colleagues who are a little less enthusiastic about the measures that he is speaking for. I support the Minister on this action. Smoking has been and will continue to be one of the greatest challenges to public health, unless we do something about it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members should remind themselves of what it is that we are discussing.

Mr Poots: Thank you for reminding us of that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. It is certainly something that I am very keen to see happening, because it is wholly wrong that young children are exposed to second-hand smoke in that way. I think it is very irresponsible, and it is something that we can do something reasonable about, and we can take these issues into account.

We have recognised the prevalence of smoking in Northern Ireland; we have recognised the consequence of it, which is lost lives; and we recognise the benefits of engaging in campaigns, because they have reduced the levels of smoking thus far. We are now looking at next steps.

What can be done? The argument has been made, and made very strongly, that only one country, Australia, has introduced plain packaging and that, therefore, the evidence base is not strong for us to pursue this with the knowledge that it will reduce the number of people smoking in future years. Quite rightly, the evidence from Australia is not particularly strong at this time, because it has been in place for only around 14 months. However, the evidence that has emerged from it, certainly at an early stage, is that smokers have less satisfaction with their cigarettes because they perceive them to be of poorer quality.

A further study was carried out in New South Wales, which showed a 78% increase in the number of calls to Quitline in the months after standardised packaging was introduced. So, there is evidence from Australia that it is having some impact on smokers. However, what we are targeting here, with standardised packaging, is not actually smokers. We are targeting younger people to ensure that they do not get the habit of taking nicotine.

I think that it was Mr Ross who talked about not patronising young people. That is important. Our office is beside Lisburn college. We see many young people out smoking, so I carried out some investigations of my own as to why a young person still takes up smoking, in spite of all of the evidence that is available. It is seen to be cool, it is seen to be trendy and there are people in films who are cool that smoke, and so forth. So, there are still a considerable number of things encouraging young people to smoke, in spite of everything that is being said. Peer pressure, of course, is an element of it.

Then, of course, there is a message put out there, and it is not an official advertisement, that, because smoking can suppress your appetite, it helps you to control your weight. Girls in particular want to be thin, and so forth. That is one of the reasons why the number of female smokers is not going down to the same extent as the number of male smokers is going down. We need to challenge those perceptions.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: I will, in a moment. We need to challenge those perceptions and ensure that young people get the message.

I have a bit of grey matter up here now; I have a bit of grey hair, and so forth, but I can still remember being young. I can remember thinking, "You know what? We are indestructible. We can do anything". I know full well that when the young people of today are taking that cigarette, they are not thinking about having lung cancer when they are 30, 40 or 50 years of age; they are not thinking of having a heart attack; they are not thinking of strokes; they are not thinking of mouth and oral cancer; they are not thinking of all of those things that can kill them, in spite of the fact that it says "Smoking kills" on the packets. In fact, many of them do not see the packet when they take their first cigarette. In spite of the fact that it says that, many young people will still take up smoking because they see somebody else doing it. Of course, the colourful packaging, particularly the wee dinky ones that they have for the girls — the slim fits and all of that there — is an element of the branding of cigarettes.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for giving way. He talks about, and has rightly produced, some startling figures and statistics. In the debate, however, there seems to be an absence of how many young people are actually attracted to taking up smoking. The proposed legislation might be introduced. Would the Minister be able to give an undertaking to the House that, 12 months after its introduction, he will be able to give an assessment to the House of how many young people have not taken up smoking because of the introduction of the legislation on the packaging?

3.45 pm

Mr Poots: I accept that the arguments that we are making are less evidence based and more research based. Australia is the only country that has moved ahead on this, so in the context of how this is happening across many parts of the world, we are at an early point of policy formation. The Western World always moves ahead of the rest on these issues. To that extent, research work is being carried out that will indicate whether people are less or more likely to take up smoking. A lot of that is very subjective. So, I accept all that.

When you are looking at these things and weighing them up, you look at the potential upsides and downsides. The potential upside is that cigarettes become less attractive to young people. They will be less visual. Mr Ross is maybe too young to remember cigarette advertising, and maybe Mr Wilson is too old. I am in the middle, and I remember it. I remember following the Circuit of Ireland,

and there were really cool guys going about in their brilliant looking Rothmans jackets. I remember the Marlborough advertisements with the wild west scene and all that. Those are all things that still stand out in my mind, which is a demonstration of how skilled the cigarette industry was at getting its message across. Now it has to be much more subtle, but it is still hugely skilled at getting its message across. The reason why it is opposed to standardised packaging is because we would take another tool out of its advertising armoury. Why would the cigarette industry be opposed to this if it did not work anyway? That is the argument that was made earlier. However, it would still be selling as many cigarettes.

The upside is having fewer young people starting smoking. That is a huge benefit. If young people start smoking, they will have a life of it, given that the vast majority of people start when they are teenagers. The downsides include the potential loss of business. I do not think that that argument was made particularly clearly, and people diluted it by saying that it does not work anyway. All the evidence is that the factories here in Northern Ireland that manufacture cigarettes export most of them. So, whatever decision we take in Northern Ireland, it will have a modest effect, if any, on the local tobacco industry.

The issue of —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Certainly.

Mr Allister: To bring absolute clarity to that point, is the Minister saying that he therefore anticipates that any cigarettes that are produced for export will not be in plain packaging?

I also ask him to bring clarity to a second point. Will the localised plain packaging still carry the anti-smoking message?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the intervention. On the first issue, plain packaging would apply only to the countries where it is legislated for. So, the manufacture and sale of cigarettes in branded packaging would continue for the countries that do not have legislation. Currently, the only such country is Australia. The Republic of Ireland and the rest of Great Britain are considering this, as are we. So, in that respect, plain packaging would apply only to us and Australia. It would have no impact whatsoever on the branding on exports because no other country has legislated for it. However, I suppose that there is a fear that, if it has an impact, other countries will introduce it, so there could be some consequence. The benefit, if it has an impact, however, is that many fewer people will be smoking. Huge benefits will be derived from that, because there is nothing good health-wise that can be said about smoking.

The second element that Mr Allister raised was —

Mr Allister: Will the plain packaging still carry an anti-smoking message?

Mr Poots: Yes, thanks for reminding me. Yes, in fact, the messages will become larger. So, in that respect, that message will be got across in a more powerful way. I do not believe that the downsides vis-à-vis the upsides of proceeding with this have been well argued.

Mr McNarry asked how smoking can affect your skin, because it said that on the packet of cigarettes that he got this morning. He is doing well. I would encourage him to do more, but he is doing well in reducing his cigarettes. Smoking accelerates overall ageing of the skin, causing wrinkles by narrowing the small blood vessels in the outer layers of the skin, thereby reducing the amount of oxygen and nutrients that can get to the skin. It also damages connective fibres like collagen. You are a very fresh octogenarian, Mr McNarry. You see many people — sometimes when you see people on television — and immediately realise that they are a smoker never having met them because you can see damage done to their skin as a consequence of their smoking cigarettes.

This debate has been useful, albeit that this is not a day for decisions. This is purely enabling us to participate in what might happen in the rest of the United Kingdom. Again, we go back to the evidence base. The Chantler report that has been commissioned will be the evidence base for taking this to the next stage. So, we are not saying at this point that all of the evidence exists, but we have asked for a course of work to be done so that we can potentially move to a further stage. That is what this is about; it is about Northern Ireland being part of what everybody else in the United Kingdom is doing, and indeed, in the British Isles, because the Republic of Ireland is doing it. It is putting us in the same position as everybody else on these islands. I think that it is imperative that we do it and it is something that we cannot avoid.

Mr Wells: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I apologise to him for speaking when he was speaking. All attempts to convert Mr Wilson have failed, but we will keep working at him. Has the Minister had any direct contact with his colleague in the Republic, Dr Reilly, the Minister, as to the progress that the Irish are making on this? Obviously, if the rest of the United Kingdom went down the line of not introducing plain packaging, but the Irish Republic did, that would undoubtedly raise issues for Northern Ireland. Do we know where we stand as far as the Republic is concerned?

Mr Poots: I have not had a recent update, but I know that Dr Reilly is very keen to proceed with this. It is something that he considers a high priority. He is a former general practitioner and can see the real benefits of reducing smoking because he has seen the damage that has been inflicted in many of his cases over the years. That is a course of work that they are doing, and I hope that they will proceed. I understand that they have a Bill in the making, so that is making progress, and that will be left to the Dáil.

I commend the legislative consent motion to the House. I know that everybody can vote for it, because it is, as has been explained, an enabling motion. This is not decision day, as such, but it will ensure that we do not fall behind the rest of the United Kingdom. I warmly welcome the opportunity to have had this debate because we have been able to get some facts and figures out to the public. That will ensure that more people hear about the damage that smoking does and hopefully dissuade more young people from taking up smoking in the first instance.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly agrees that the UK Parliament should consider the extension to Northern Ireland of amendments to the Children and Families Bill dealing*

with the regulation of retail packaging etc of tobacco products.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I understand that reference was made to a comment that I made during my speech, and I was accused of referring to smokers as "stinkers". I said:

"I use the word "filthy" because ... smoking stinks. It affects your lungs, your breath, your clothes, your hands".

I did not call any smokers "stinkers".

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. You have it on the record.

Committee Business

Health Inequalities: People with Learning Disabilities

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 to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the health inequalities experienced by people with a learning disability; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to use the opportunities associated with Transforming Your Care to prioritise and tackle this issue.

Go raibh maith agat. As Chair of the Health Committee I am pleased to propose the motion. I want to declare an interest as a director of Destined, a learning disability organisation in Derry.

The Committee decided that the implementation of Transforming Your Care (TYC) was one of its strategic priorities for 2013-14, and we undertook a piece of work that focused on a number of the Department's key programmes of care. The first programme of care the Committee selected was learning disability. We decided to start by looking at what is set out in the TYC strategic implementation plan, which was signed off by the Minister a number of months ago. It states that one of the key objectives of the entire TYC model is the reduction of health inequalities. As Members will be aware, the Health Committee carried out a review of health inequalities that focused on early intervention. It was published in January 2013 and then debated in the Assembly. To build on that work, the Committee agreed to look at health inequalities in the context of learning disability.

Given that the TYC strategic implementation plan sets out the future service model for learning disability, the Committee decided to examine that service model and how effective it might be in tackling the health inequalities experienced by people with a learning disability. In undertaking that work, the Committee took evidence from departmental officials on the Department's current and planned approach. It also commissioned a research paper from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on the relevant issues. In addition, the Committee held a stakeholder event with representatives of learning disability charities, families and carers and those with learning disabilities.

I want to look now at some of the health inequalities commonly suffered by people with a learning disability. As the World Health Organization has explained, health inequalities are:

"systematic differences in health status between different socioeconomic groups."

The causes of health inequalities are complex and are often driven by what are called the "social determinants" of health. Put simply, those are the risk factors that can have

an adverse impact on health. Research has shown that having a learning disability is one of the risk factors that can lead to poor health. People with learning disabilities have worse health than the general population. For example, they have higher incidences of coronary disease, epilepsy and a range of other illnesses. Significantly, their overall life expectancy is shorter. Many of those illnesses are preventable, but, because of the barriers that prevent people with a learning disability accessing timely and appropriate healthcare, the conditions are often undiagnosed. As a result, complications can develop, leading to poor health outcomes.

I now want to discuss some of the Committee's findings and recommendations. As I said, the Committee wanted to understand how the service model for learning disability, as set out in the TYC plan, will reduce the health inequalities experienced by people with a learning disability. We were told by officials that there were a number of policies in place. However, significantly, they are all existing policies that predate the publication of Transforming Your Care. The Committee sees the merit in building on existing policies and programmes, but we need to avoid the duplication of work. We think that an opportunity may have been missed to use TYC to set out a more wide-ranging and ambitious proposal for tackling the health inequalities experienced by the learning disability population. We would not like to think that TYC simply pays lip service to the idea of reducing health inequalities, and I seek the Minister's reassurance that that is not the case.

4.00 pm

Turning to some of our specific recommendations, I begin by focusing on the issue of reasonable adjustments. One of the recommendations of the 2005 'Equal Lives' report was that each GP practice and acute hospital should have formalised arrangements to facilitate equity of access to services. During our evidence sessions with departmental officials, they reiterated the fact that the health service should make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the needs of people with learning disabilities. However, in relation to attending a hospital for care, particularly an A&E department, the people who attended the stakeholder event told us about a range of problems commonly encountered by people with learning disabilities. They felt that reasonable adjustments were not always made to help people to access the care they needed.

Some of their key concerns included the fact that attendance at hospital often involves a patient having to interact with a number of different staff — a receptionist, a triage nurse and a doctor — and people with a learning disability often find it difficult and stressful to have to repeat their personal details, medical history and current symptoms to more than one person. Long waiting times in an unfamiliar and often noisy environment, particularly in emergency departments, can be stressful for people with learning disabilities. There is a perception that staff are not skilled or experienced in communicating with patients with a learning disability and are often not aware of their particular needs. The Committee was provided with very little information by the Department on what work is being done to improve the experience and treatment received by learning disability patients when they need to access hospital care. Perhaps the Minister will be able to update us on that issue today.

Even if that work is being progressed, it is clear from our discussions with stakeholders that many further improvements are required. Therefore, one of our recommendations is that the Department should request baseline data from all the health and social care trusts regarding the reasonable adjustments provided at each of the hospitals for patients with a learning disability who require elective care and attend at emergency departments. A further recommendation is that the Department identify examples of good practice on reasonable adjustments provided at hospital settings and communicates them across the trusts.

I now turn to what we discovered about patients' experiences of GP services. We learned that a range of barriers can prevent people from accessing good care. They include long waiting times in a GP waiting room, which can be distressing for people with a learning disability; appointment slots being too short to allow people to communicate adequately with their GP; the perception, in many cases, that some GPs do not listen to the patient but simply take note of what their carer says; and the use of technical language and medical jargon by GPs, with the result that patients often do not understand what the GP is saying or what treatment they will receive. Given the importance of GPs in spotting the early signs of illness and disease, the Committee believes that it is vital that GPs provide a service to people with learning disabilities that meets their particular needs. We have recommended, therefore, that the Department engage with the BMA to consider options for providing more effective training for GPs on the reasonable adjustments that may be required for people with a learning disability and how best to communicate them to patients before, during and after their appointments.

The learning disability population is already a vulnerable section of society in many ways, and people face a raft of problems in access to meaningful day care post-19, employment, housing, welfare and so on. In addition, the fact that someone has a learning disability means that their health outcomes are generally poorer than the rest of society. Many of the illnesses and conditions from which they suffer are preventable through early diagnosis and treatment. However, in order to get that care, people need to feel comfortable in accessing health services, and they need to be listened to and taken seriously when they access the system. The key to that happening is the healthcare system and healthcare professionals recognising the need for reasonable adjustments and making that a reality for people.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion tabled by the Health Committee. As the roll-out of Transforming Your Care begins, the motion is timely. It is imperative that we do all that we can to eliminate the health inequalities faced by those with learning disabilities and to develop social inclusion and opportunities.

I am sure that everyone in the House knows someone, through family or close friends, who has a learning disability. Therefore, we should all be familiar with the real challenges and inequalities that can exist for people with a disability. Real challenges can exist in employment, education, housing and in generally trying to live as normal a life as possible. A learning disability is a lifelong condition and requires lifelong support. The provision of

such support must be through a multi-agency approach. It is not just a health issue.

People with a learning disability are a vulnerable group who, sadly, experience health inequalities. They have diverse needs, will often experience multiple health problems and often have difficulty communicating. That can lead to real challenges in identifying their health issues. It is vital that services are in place to provide an acceptable level of care and support and that they are consistent across all trust areas in the Province. As with many other areas in our healthcare system, there are often gaps in different trust areas. The approach to early years provision must also be consistent across the trusts.

Getting access to services such as occupational therapists, physiotherapy and language therapy proves difficult for those with a learning disability. Annual GP checks for adults with a learning disability are a positive development, but it is important that, with a response of just 69%, further progress is made. We welcome the work that has been done, including that of the facilitator nurses who chase up clients who do not appear for their check, and appreciate the efforts already made.

Another matter brought to my attention is the vacuum that appears when these young people go beyond school age. One of many gaps in health provision relates to opticians. Eye checks are normally carried out when they are young children in hospital. As they get older, they have to revert to normal opticians, where, in many cases, the necessary skills and time commitments may not exist.

Dental care is another area that needs more support. A recent evidence session of the Health Committee highlighted the case of a person with Down's syndrome who was suffering from toothache, but, because there was no speech communication, no one knew. These people need proper support.

The indications are that the number of people with a learning disability here will increase in the next 10 years. Therefore, it is essential that services are given the funding that they deserve and that support is in place to meet any longer-term rise. Day services must also be improved, particularly their diversity and age-appropriate nature.

A gentleman whom I know in my constituency of North Down told me that his brother, who has been living with learning difficulties, had recently been moved out of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. That is one of the positives to come out of Bamford. He had lived in Muckamore Abbey for 41 years and has now been moved to Seaconnell care village. That is an inspiring story, a wonderful story: someone who had spent 41 years in institutional care now lives in a sheltered community. That is positive, and we welcome it. We need more care village provision for people with long-term needs. I understand that 200-odd long-stay patients in learning disability hospitals still need to be resettled in the community. The promotion of independent living must be prioritised as we seek to end long-term residency in such hospitals. The Bamford report set out its theme and vision of improving community based services for those with a learning disability.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Dunne: With that vision, it is essential that the right networks exist to support such patients. I support the motion.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The health inequalities suffered by those with a learning disability should be highlighted and, more importantly, tackled. That is not just a vain hope, it is an imperative.

Health inequalities are described as preventable and unjust differences in health status between groups, populations or individuals. People with a learning difficulty have diverse and often complex needs. They may face a multitude of health problems and can have difficulty communicating. For those reasons, identifying health issues can become very challenging.

Research has indicated that those with a learning disability are more likely to experience poor health outcomes and have shorter life expectancies. The SDLP believes that healthcare should be provided free at the point of need, as is consistent with the founding principles of the NHS. Even though those with a learning disability are afforded the same rights, it is clear that they often face significant barriers in health provision here.

One of the key problems in this area is diagnosis. Those with a learning difficulty are much less likely to receive the regular evidence-based checks that are needed to monitor their health. It is argued that one of the reasons for that is the relationship between those with a learning disability and general practitioners. GPs are often our first point of contact in primary care. However, those with a learning disability are statistically less likely to see one regularly, and that can lead to a delay in diagnosis and result in poor health outcomes.

The TYC document has highlighted that greater day opportunities are needed for those with a learning disability. That has also been a focus in the Assembly, in the Health Committee, and through public consultations. Health provision for those with a learning disability has reformed throughout the past 40 years and must continue to do so to provide a model of care that incorporates greater flexibility and is in line with the Bamford review.

Historically, those with a learning disability were often stigmatised and, through longer stays in institutional care, removed, if you like, from society. The social integration of those with a learning disability and the promotion of their independence will be necessary to actively address the health inequalities that they experience.

A proportion of adults with a learning disability are cared for in specialist centres, and that can also lead to separation from society. Furthermore, only one in 10 people with a learning difficulty is in paid employment. It has been proven that a move away from institutionalised care and greater stimulation for those with a learning difficulty can improve their health outcomes. In this specific instance, a focus on community care, given that 82% of those with a learning difficulty are cared for in this way, is merited. However, more must be done to structure health provision for those with a learning difficulty.

Perhaps the main driver for a reformation in health provision for those with a learning disability has been the Bamford review and the subsequent 2005 'Equal Lives' report, which stressed the importance of GPs to those with a learning difficulty and recommended robust health records and regular health checks. We have been hearing about the difficulty in relation to those.

The SDLP recognises the improvements that were made through the first Bamford action plan but notes with concern a few worrying trends that recent evaluations have unearthed. Around 7,000 people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland are on GP registers. The proportion of those people who have had a health check is 68%. That means that a significant number of people with a learning difficulty have not yet had a health check. Moreover, there are people with a learning disability who are not on a GP register in the first place.

The SDLP is also concerned about the level of data on those with a learning disability region-wide. An estimated 26,500 people in Northern Ireland have a learning disability, yet no accurate register exists. That means that some people who have a learning disability are hidden and, consequently, so is the state of their health.

Another concern that the SDLP has is about the money and the budgetary deficit that exists now in comparison with when the first Bamford action plan was set out in 2009 and the possible effect that that may have on care for those for those with a learning disability in the future. It is clear that a joined-up-government approach is needed to address this issue fully. People with a learning disability have numerous needs, not just health ones. They also have education, transport and culture needs. Cross-departmental focus will be needed to improve the quality of their life and, consequently, to begin truly to address the health inequalities that they experience. I support the motion.

4.15 pm

Mr Beggs: The Transforming Your Care strategic implementation plans states that one of its key objectives is the reduction of health inequality. I am pleased that the Health Committee investigated health inequality in the context of those with learning difficulties. Useful evidence emerged, and recommendations were made that, I hope, will be followed up and adopted by those referred to. I hope that the Minister will pursue the issues that we have highlighted.

Annual health checks have been identified as an important aspect. Medical conditions that may have been missed in the course of a year can be identified in such checks. There is sometimes a difficulty with communicating with people who have a particular learning difficulty. They may have difficulty advising others of their discomfort or ailment. The annual health check is an important mechanism by which a professional GP can identify whether there is an issue and, if so, assist those with a learning difficulty.

In the course of our investigation, we learned that only 75% of patients' carers take up the offer of checks. I have to ask this question: what about the other quarter? Who decided that those people would not have an annual check-up with their GP? If I had a close family member with a learning disability, I would do my best to ensure that they had the opportunity for such a check-up to address any health difficulty that might otherwise have been overlooked. Health officials advised that, although all GPs were invited to take part in the annual health checks, only 76% of GPs offered the service. Therefore, almost one quarter of GPs do not. How are those who are not offered the service coping? Is the service provided by someone else? Is there a formal mechanism that enables checks to happen? It is important that there be a mechanism to encourage GPs to ensure that checks are available to everyone.

The second recommendation is to use a range of measures to advertise the health checks. I agree that the community and voluntary sector could be a useful mechanism for that. The use of health facilitators to accompany patients to health checks is important, but it transpired that few people actually knew of them. There needs to be engagement with the community and voluntary sector and wider information for the learning disability sector to ensure that people are aware of the service that is available. Will there be a need for more health facilitators when there is greater awareness of the service provided?

Waiting rooms and waiting times can be particularly stressful for people with a learning difficulty. People with some well-known types of disability find such strange situations particularly stressful. There is clearly a need for the BMA to look effectively at its training for reasonable adjustments and to pass on good practice to improve the situation. Similarly, there is a need for reasonable adjustments in our hospitals. Hospital accident and emergency departments and general waiting areas can be very noisy and stressful, particularly if you have to wait a considerable period and do not understand why you are having to do so. We need to look at how we can improve the service. The issue of multiple questioning arose. Someone who has had an accident may be questioned by a nurse and then a doctor. We need to see whether there is a better way of dealing with people who have a learning difficulty, depending on the nature of the illness or accident. There has to be greater awareness of the needs of patients who present at hospital, and good practice should be passed on.

During our investigation, we learned that some public health messages could not be understood by some people with learning difficulties. It would be helpful if the Public Health Agency engaged with the community and voluntary sector and the charities involved to try to identify the key messages that might be better transmitted to improve the lot of people with a learning difficulty.

The Committee learnt that there was no central register of people with learning difficulties. Without a central register, how can the health service determine whether there is a particular need that needs to be addressed in a particular area? I ask the Minister to respond to that —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: — and to the other recommendations that the Committee made as quickly as possible in order that the lives of those with learning difficulties and of all those in this vulnerable community can be improved.

Mr McCarthy: As a member of the Health Committee, I welcome the opportunity to further contribute to this very important issue. People with a learning disability — I speak with hands-on experience — are fully entitled to exactly the same first-class health provision as other people. It is wrong and unacceptable if that is not the case. It is vital that the Health Committee, having seen the evidence of this anomaly, takes whatever action is necessary to put the matter right.

The motion asks the Minister:

> *"to use the opportunities associated with Transforming Your Care to prioritise and tackle this issue."*

It seems to me that, as we are already on the journey with Transforming Your Care, no time should be lost before we see signs of improvements and, indeed, the total ending of these inequalities for people with a learning disability. Transforming Your Care and the learning disability service framework provide more contemporary guides as to how we can drive up the quality of service and outcomes and to the actions that we should be taking. Again, however, we must ensure that we follow through and, more importantly, deliver.

The health service will be interacting with people who have learning disabilities across a wide range of situations, from children's services through to providing support in ageing and palliative care. We must acknowledge and welcome the very particular support that comes from a range of community and voluntary agencies. I would like to pay tribute to the work of Maureen Piggot, who has been a voice for people with learning disabilities, working through Mencap, for many years; I think it is 30 years. Maureen has decided to retire, and I am sure that Members will join me in thanking her for her service over so many years and in wishing her a happy retirement and every success.

On 16 October 2013 we were pleased to hear from the Health and Social Care Board's director and assistant director of mental health and learning disability. They presented an outline of the content for service transformation in respect of learning disability. They said that Transforming Your Care is:

> *"a transformation model to improve overall health and well-being, and that includes placing individuals at the centre of care with the focus on prevention, protection and improved integrated care provision."*

That is what we wanted to hear. They acknowledged, as did Bamford, that:

> *"the promotion of social inclusion in terms of better health and well-being is very important."*

They also said that:

> *"'Delivering the Bamford Vision' and the Bamford action plan are all about health inequalities for mental health and learning disability, and recognising that there are a number of social determinants of poorer health outcomes, such as employment, education, housing and poverty. All of those things are covered on a cross-departmental basis within the Bamford action plan".*

One of the big concerns has been the implementation of the annual health checks and the role of health facilitators across all our trusts. That has already been acknowledged and spoken about by our Chair. It was heartening to be advised by the board's directors that they were determined to minimise any gaps or disparities experienced by the learning disability population. That is surely welcome.

Our Committee's recent visit to Carrickfergus was extremely useful, and we thank all the people whom we met. We listened and spoke to people in that locality who were affected; it would, most likely, be similar throughout Northern Ireland. We have their experiences on record and, hopefully, vast improvements can be made when the professionals examine that report.

We also express our gratitude to Dr Lesley-Ann Black from the Assembly's Research and Information Service for her excellent paper on this vexed subject. I was taken aback, as were others, to learn that the exact number of people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland is not known. The Department suggests that around 26,500 local people have a learning disability, and, because of that, difficulties in assessing and monitoring healthcare needs and in mapping appropriate levels of support are experienced. Perhaps the Minister will wish to comment on that.

In 2010, a major report was undertaken throughout the UK entitled 'Health Inequalities and People with Learning Disabilities in the UK'. The report contained many of the issues that were raised —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr McCarthy: — by our friends in Carrickfergus.

The 'Equal Lives' review of 2005 and the Bamford action plan 2009-2011 are serious efforts in ensuring that all people with learning disabilities are treated equally. We insist that no stone is left unturned until these inequalities disappear.

Mrs Cameron: One of the Department of Health's primary aims is to ensure that people have the opportunity of enjoying the best possible health outcomes and quality of life. To do that, we must ensure that, where barriers exist to accessing health services, they are reduced to the lowest levels or removed completely. The motion highlights people with learning difficulties, and I am pleased to speak on their behalf.

Often, people with a learning difficulty and those who love and care for them experience a range of barriers to accessing health resources. I am pleased to learn that 76% of our GPs have opted in to the process of offering annual health screenings to people with learning difficulties, as is recommended in 'Transforming Your Care'. I am pleased to note that, of the people who are eligible to attend those appointments, we have a take-up rate of 69%. That is indeed impressive and seems to suggest that GPs and individuals in the community are acknowledging the benefit of that annual health check. Although that is, of course, to be welcomed, it begs the question of why 24% of GPs are not offering the service. Perhaps the Minister will be able to respond to that query.

Often, small changes can make the biggest impact, especially in the case that we are talking about. These are people who need even the tiniest aspect of their routine managed to ensure that they are able to cope without adding anxiety or stress to their lives. Often, individuals with a learning disability also have a co-morbid condition, such as autistic spectrum disorder or epilepsy. That also needs to be considered when we are thinking about how to reduce barriers to health. For instance, crowded and noisy waiting rooms may be a major source of distress and confusion to someone, and the simple option of a smaller, quieter area in which they can wait for their appointment would make a person more likely to attend appointments. If the doctor is aware that the person with whom he is dealing has a learning difficulty, he may have other ways

that allow that person to communicate with him, and tools such as the incredible 5-point scale can be an easily used alternative to verbal communication.

We must also be aware, however, of the fact that those health inequalities are caused not just by health provision. For example, we know that families where there is a caring role for anyone are more likely to experience poverty. We know that poverty can lead to poor dietary choices, and we know that poor diet leads to poor health. I am encouraged to learn that the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health strive to work together to minimise those risks. One positive example of that is the issuing of a free book giving quality nutritious meal ideas to those on a budget. I believe that steps such as those are also vital to reducing health inequalities.

We as a society must be aware of the inequalities that exist, and we must use the benefits of devolution to deliver real change for people on the ground. We must strive to work to reduce inequality wherever it exists so that everyone can have the basic human right of the right healthcare that is delivered in the most appropriate way when it is needed. An ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure, and I believe that, through the implementation of TYC by the Department, we can ensure better health for those in this very vulnerable group. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I too support the motion. People with a learning disability have the right to access healthcare in the same way as everyone else. A person with a learning disability is more likely to have a range of needs and to require support from a variety of health professionals. They are also more likely to be exposed to the social determinants of health — poverty, unemployment and social exclusion — and to have poorer outcomes.

A report entitled 'Health Inequalities and People with Learning Difficulties' was published in 2010. It reported that people with learning disabilities have poorer health than their non-disabled peers and that they have a shorter life expectancy. Health screening of adults with learning disabilities registered with GPs reveals high levels of unmet mental and physical needs. Health inequalities start early in life and result in barriers to accessing timely and appropriate care. Existing patterns of care are insufficient and inequitable.

4.30 pm

The report also provided evidence of specific healthcare issues that affect people with a learning disability. For example, there is a higher incidence of stomach cancer and coronary heart disease and an increased incidence of psychiatric disorders. There are other reports about health inequalities in the learning disability population. Findings have demonstrated that people with a learning disability die younger than the general population and that they have greater health needs, often because they have multiple, complex health problems.

An investigatory report published in 2013 investigated the deaths of 247 people with a learning disability aged four or older in south-west England between 2010 and 2012. Those included in the study had multiple health problems. The main findings were that men with learning disabilities died 13 years earlier than men in the general population, and women with learning disabilities died 20 years earlier.

The main reason for those deaths was a delay or problem in their treatment. Some 37% of the deaths of people with a learning disability in the inquiry could be prevented and were avoidable. The inquiry concluded that there was considerable evidence of fragmented care, which failed to take account of the needs of people with a learning disability. The report also concluded that:

> *"The quality and effectiveness of health and social care ... has been shown to be deficient in a number of ways ... many professionals are either not aware of, or do not include in their usual practice, approaches that adapt services to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities."*

Here in the North, there have been no wide-scale independent inquiries into the lives of people with a learning disability who may have died prematurely. For the majority of people, the first point of contact when they are ill is their GP, yet, here, people with a learning disability utilise their GP significantly less than those in the general population. That has implications for diagnosis and treatment. Access to an annual GP check is welcome, yet when the Health Committee spoke to some groups in Carrickfergus, they were not aware of that.

The advent of TYC is surely an opportunity to introduce policy for people with a learning disability, which has inclusion at its core: inclusion in society; inclusion in decision-making; participation, as far as is practicable, in mainstream education, employment and leisure; integration in living accommodation; and the use of services and facilities, not least in the field of health and personal social services. A report published in 2006 stated that:

> *"The acid test of a national health service is not whether it works for people who are generally healthy but whether it benefits those with the shortest life expectancy, the greatest problems accessing services and the biggest risk that poor health will stop them taking part in society."*

Mr D McIlveen: I want to start by paying tribute to the Committee staff, under the leadership of Dr Kathryn Aiken, for facilitating much of the evidence and the stakeholder events that we have benefited from as members of the Committee. It has been eye-opening to hear all the different views that are coming from the sector. It was absolutely critical that we had as broad a research as possible on this issue, and the Committee staff have undoubtedly delivered in that regard.

This is a very important issue, and it is very telling that many of the self-anointed Jeremiahs of the health service that we had last week queuing up to attack the Minister over a made-up crisis are not here to be as animated about an issue that is of much greater importance. The question has to be asked of those people why they are not in the Chamber today to make their point around this particular issue.

We could not ignore some of the information that was passed to us from the sector. Many of the issues that were raised have already been rehearsed, and the excellent research document that was put together was very beneficial in making many points known.

I want to come from a slightly different angle in my contribution this afternoon. I have been very fortunate to work closely with some very progressive pharmacies in my constituency, many of which are under the auspices of the Ulster Chemists' Association (UCA) and other representative organisations. Those pharmacists are forward thinking and exceptionally dynamic. They are ready to flexibly alter their services to provide the best possible services for the communities they serve and work in. As a sector, they are extremely excited about the changes that Transforming Your Care seeks to make, and hope to offer an increasing diversity of services to their clients.

That is where I believe those folks who suffer from learning disabilities can really benefit, because it was highlighted during screening that 43% of those screened were found to have weight-management issues, particularly obesity. Look at the excellent work that Community Pharmacy has done on smoking cessation, which has been very well funded by the Public Health Agency. I believe that we could find other condition-management programmes, such as weight management, that could be very successfully managed by our pharmacists and Community Pharmacy. The Department has been quite clear that the issue of weight management would be a real target. From my work with pharmacists, I believe that this is an avenue that we should definitely explore.

It may be useful at this point to re-highlight what the Chair of the Committee mentioned regarding the barriers facing people with learning disabilities, such as long waiting times. Those can be eradicated through Community Pharmacy. Appointment slots being too short could also be successfully dealt with through Community Pharmacy. The issue around jargon and so on, which was also of concern, could be dealt with very well within the communities.

It seems to me that some of those difficulties could be addressed by other branches in the health service. I believe that perhaps our local pharmacy could be in a position to provide a more end-user-friendly approach. As the Minister will be aware, pharmacists have been doing a lot of internal work around social enterprise and embracing the themes of Transforming Your Care. I suggest to the Minister that they are ideally placed to overcome some of the barriers to healthcare faced by people with learning disabilities. I look forward to hearing his thoughts on the matter and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Gardiner: It is important to realise that there is a whole range of health inequalities in the health service. Many of them are set out in the Health Department's publication 'Equalities and Inequalities in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland'. They include the fact that 13% of people who live in areas of high-intensity violence suffer from ill health, compared to just 4% of people in other areas. Teenage birth rates are 70% higher in socially deprived areas than elsewhere. Some 96% of teenage births were to unmarried mothers. Incidence of lung cancer is 59% higher in socially deprived areas. Only 30% of professionals and managers suffer from longstanding illnesses compared to just under half, some 47%, of unskilled workers. Access to opticians takes almost three times as long in rural areas compared to non-rural areas.

There are many inequalities in our health sector, and I sometimes think that it would take the wisdom of Solomon to prioritise between them. There are disturbing differences in assessing what exactly constitute learning disabilities. I find it discouraging that the rate of moderate, severe or profound learning disability, based on HSC trust data, was 9·69 persons per 1,000 of the population. In contrast, the information from social security suggests a rate of 4·41 per 1,000. That is an enormous difference and it needs some explaining. We can all make guesses at the reasons. It could be that the HSC trust and the Social Security Agency are looking at very different measures of what constitutes learning disability. However, guesses are not good enough; we need to know precisely why the massive discrepancy exists.

So, although I welcome today's motion as a member of the Health Committee, I believe that it needs to be put into the context of all the competing inequalities in our health and social care provision. We need to be alert to the fact that resources are finite and that there is a cost to every measure that we demand, no matter how desirable. I support the motion.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Health, Social Services and Public Safety Committee for bringing this very important motion to the House.

We know that those living with a learning disability are more likely to experience major illnesses, to develop them younger and to die of them sooner than the population as a whole. Evidence indicates that they have higher rates of obesity, respiratory disease, some cancers, osteoporosis, dementia and epilepsy, and that a number of syndromes are associated with learning disabilities that carry specific health risks.

Although health deficits are faced by people with learning disabilities, much is being done in the primary and secondary care sectors to address those health inequalities. It is vital that those improvements be consistent, standardised and sustained.

The health and social care system is making progress in addressing health inequalities in general. However, it is important that other Departments and sectors are also committed to addressing the common social and economic risk factors of poor health, such as poverty, poor housing conditions, unemployment and social exclusion, which people with learning disabilities are more likely to be exposed to; otherwise health inequalities will remain. I will continue to work with ministerial colleagues to address the underlying causes of poor population health.

It is fundamental that those with a learning disability have access to the same range of services as the general population. We know that, even with a poorer health profile, the learning disabled population is less likely to get some of the evidence-based screening, checks and treatments that they need. They continue to face real barriers to accessing services. Information on and activities in health promotion and protection can be difficult to access. We need to change that, and changes are under way.

Last year, 76% of GP practices were providing health screening for adults with learning disabilities under directed enhanced services (DES). A further 14% of GP practices are signed up to deliver such screening. Thus, at 31 March 2013, only 10% of practices were not registered to provide DES.

In addition to DES health screening, the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency have commissioned health facilitators for learning disability, and over nine whole-time equivalent health facilitators are now in place. Those are learning disability nurses who work alongside GP practices to ensure follow-up appointments with secondary care and other actions as recommended by the GP surgery. Health facilitators work with people and families to ensure maximum attendance at screening appointments. They have an important role in training staff, family carers and people with learning disabilities themselves in preparing and implementing person-centred plans to promote good health.

Alongside DES and health facilitators, there are other specific initiatives to help to meet learning disability health needs, including the visual impairment services, women's cancer screening and aortic aneurism screening for men. Those screening services make adjustments to normal processes to encourage as much take-up as possible in the learning disability population. We need to ensure that everyone, including vulnerable people with learning or other disabilities, have access to general health screening for different conditions at the appropriate time.

Going into hospital is a time of anxiety and stress for everyone. It is an unfamiliar environment, with different people and unfamiliar procedures and terminology. Added to that, you may be severely ill and/or in pain. Imagine all that and also having a learning disability that may leave you unable to understand fully what is happening or to explain how you feel.

4.45 pm

The guidelines and audit implementation network (GAIN) were published and launched in 2010. They aim is to ensure that the specific communication needs of individuals are met within hospital settings. They set out best practice procedures to prepare for the admission of a person with a learning disability for inpatient treatment and his or her care while in hospital. These include seeing the person and not just the disability; communicating sensitively and appropriately; adopting a person-centred approach; delivering dignified, respectful and compassionate care; and adopting non-judgemental attitudes. Put into practice, many of these procedures can be quite simple and may involve, for example, the opportunity for a pre-admission visit to a ward, informing ward staff of the key needs of a patient or of additional support requirements, as well as about specific risks that may need to be managed or the need for increased clinical observation.

Hospital staff should respect the wishes and choices of patients who have a learning disability and involve them in decisions about their care. Families and carers who know the patient best also have an important role. The implementation of these guidelines is currently subject to evaluation, and I have no doubt that we will all learn from the findings. I can speak personally on this, having had a learning-disabled brother whom I had to be with 24/7 when he had to go to hospital because staff were unable to understand and deal with the circumstances. My view was that they could have done better. I know from personal experience that we have much to learn, and, given my experience, I will be paying a fair bit of attention to the issue.

Another focus is on health promotion. A number of ongoing campaigns are specifically targeted for those with a learning disability, such as tackling obesity, improving diet and promoting physical activity. Such initiatives also involve the voluntary and community sector. Work is under way, for example, for a community-based nutrition education programme, which aims to increase knowledge about healthy eating and food hygiene and to develop food preparation and cooking skills.

In another instance, Friends of Glenveagh School aims to provide 28 weekly youth club sessions to an estimated 200 young people. The Cedar Foundation will provide accredited training to six coaches in the sport of boccia. My Department, along with DCAL, DE, DSD and OFMDFM, also provide funding for the Special Olympics scheme in Northern Ireland, involving some 74 clubs, over 1,700 athletes and some 1,300 family members participating. We were glad to welcome their representatives to Stormont last week. This provides a range of sporting activities for people with learning disabilities and/or autism. In addition to promoting physical activity and a healthy lifestyle, it also assists with diet and weight advice, provides social interaction and support for participants and their families and carers. Other campaigns include those on sexual health and relationships; drugs and alcohol misuse; smoking cessation; and diabetes.

Research also shows that those with a learning disability are happier and healthier when they live an active and purposeful life with families who are well supported, or when living independently in supported housing and not in institutional care. The process of resettlement and the community integration programme is there to ensure that, in future, no one will live in a hospital.

By 2015, we aim to have moved all long-stay patients in learning disability hospitals, but who no longer require hospital treatment, into appropriate settings in the community. The key consideration is that their lives will be improved by the process and that other people in the future will not spend long periods, or even much of their lives, living in an institutional setting. As it is for all of us, a healthier life for someone with a learning disability is a life that is safe, where services and support address their physical and mental health, and their social care needs; and where they progress through play, education and life experience to an adulthood that fulfils their wishes and aspirations, encourages their independence and offers meaningful and varied activities that take place along with, and not apart from, the rest of the population.

As the recent day opportunities consultation summed it up, people with learning disabilities need and have the right to have "a meaningful day". That could mean individuals being in supported, paid employment or availing themselves of training. It could mean accredited further education; involvement in their community; voluntary work; a chosen sport or leisure activity; or simply providing opportunities to meet people and make friends.

As Bamford's 'Equal Lives' document stressed, people with a learning disability are individuals first, and each has a right to be treated as an equal citizen. They must be enabled to use mainstream services and be included in the life of the community. I view improving access to information on the services available for people with a

learning disability as crucial to achieving greater equality in health.

Service user and carer involvement is integral to tackling health inequalities. The Public Health Agency is taking forward the regional learning disability healthcare and improvement group action plan. Service user and carer representatives will be sought and supported to become active members of that group. The Public Health Agency already has contacts and links with a range of community, voluntary and charity groups and will continue to sustain and build its relationships with them.

Although people with a learning disability are living longer, and that is to be welcomed, there remain differences between their health outcomes and incidence of health conditions and those of the rest of the population. I am determined to minimise those gaps and disparities wherever possible.

I support the motion. I will utilise the resources of the Health and Social Care system to continue to address those issues through specific commissioning priorities; dissemination of information and guidance; promoting greater awareness, including training programmes; and through liaison with voluntary and community organisations and the private sector. I will continue to work with my ministerial colleagues to reduce health inequalities and to improve the quality of life for our citizens, especially those in this vulnerable group. My officials will work with other Departments and their agencies to tackle this and other issues as part of the implementation of the Bamford action plan.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, may I emphasise that this is the Northern Ireland Assembly rather than the "Northern Ireland Health Assembly"? I reckon that, over the past three weeks, 75% of the workload in plenary sessions has been health related. Indeed, today we have this motion and one on the mental health of farmers, and the Health Minister will respond to both debates. Tomorrow, we will have the fifth health-related Adjournment debate in a row. I raise that because, although the Business Committee has to reflect the large number of motions on health in its timetabling, it should try to spread them out. It places quite a difficult burden on the Department, the Minister and the Committee. I just wish to get that off my chest, because I think that most honourable Members are fed up listening to me summarising every one of these motions and wish to move on to something a wee bit more interesting, if not more important.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way. I wonder whether the Business Committee is a bit like 'I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!', in that it keeps picking the Minister whom it dislikes most to respond to debates.

Mr Wells: It is unfortunate that the Business Committee seems determined to lock the Minister in the Chamber rather than having him out dealing with the real day-to-day issues regarding the health of our community. If it is a ploy to keep him and me locked in here, it has been very successful.

I will move on to the substantive nature of the motion. Ms McLaughlin is not here to hear my comments, but we were pleased with the way in which she raised the issue on behalf of the Committee. She outlined the Committee's very successful visit to Carrickfergus, where we had a stakeholder engagement event. This was particularly unusual in that it was certainly the Committee's first visit to Carrickfergus — we were very conscious that we were in David Hilditch country so had to be very careful of what we said — and we had a unique opportunity to meet not only those in the statutory and charitable sector in the field but some of the service users. That was the first time that I had ever been in that sort of forum. It was very interesting to hear the views of the students who go to special schools and use the services. During that meeting and, indeed, throughout this debate, several themes have emerged.

First of all, many people believe that Transforming Your Care was somewhat of a missed opportunity in as far as dealing with this sector is concerned. I appreciate the comments made by Mr Fearghal McKinney, the honourable Member for South Belfast. He was the only person to put a figure on the number of people in Northern Ireland with learning disabilities. It is, in fact, 7,000. That is the population of Comber, so it is a very significant part of our community. Many of those who care for such individuals feel that Transforming Your Care could have gone further to help.

Concern was also expressed about GP health checks. What many honourable Members do not know is that any individual in Northern Ireland can go to their GP and demand an annual health check as of right. Unfortunately, precious few of us do that. Certainly, when it comes to this sector, it is absolutely vital that all 7,000 people, young and old, go to their doctor, because, as many Members such as Mrs Cameron, Mr Dunne, Mr Gardiner and Mr Beggs emphasised, it is inevitable that many people in the sector will have multiple conditions. It is very unusual to find someone who just has a learning disability; there are often physical manifestations as well. We heard about the issue of obesity and many other complex cases. Therefore, it is essential that all 7,000 have that annual health check-up.

We heard from Mrs Cameron that, of those eligible for a check-up, 69% go to the 75% of GPs offering the service. However, I still find it quite alarming that about a third of those who should go for check-ups do not do so. If they did, it would help to reveal ongoing conditions that will cause problems in the future.

Again, the issue of better training for GPs came up. I have to say that, although we have the benefit of many very able and capable GPs, they struggle at times with the more complex personal relationships that they have to deal with. I totally support the calls for the British Medical Association to instigate a series of training courses to make GPs more aware of the need to be particularly empathetic when dealing with this sector.

The other issue that I am very much aware of, and which was raised in an Adjournment debate about the Londonderry area a few months ago, is this cliff edge that these young people fall off at age 19. It is a year later for those with learning disabilities than for standard pupils.

The general view from Carrickfergus and from the research was that provision for under-19s in Northern Ireland is quite good, that we have a well-qualified team of staff who look after children in day centres, special schools etc and that the level of provision is excellent. Of course, the vast majority of these young people have very good carers looking after them, but parents worry intensely

about what will happen when they turn 19. The ideal model would, of course, be a mixture of work experience, further education and day centre provision, but that is extremely patchy in Northern Ireland. Parents expressed a universal concern that there was so much variability as to the view that they did not know where they stood. I think that we as a society need to make certain that there is adequate provision at 19.

Several Members, including the Minister, raised the issue of Muckamore and similar institutions. The target is that, by 2015, all 200 people in long-term care in that type of institution will be in the community. That is a lot easier said than done. I know that because, when the first target was first stipulated for 2013, we as MLAs were approached by a lot of parents and carers who said that they did not want it to happen for two reasons. First, they felt that their loved ones were happy and comfortable in Muckamore or similar institutions and wanted them to continue on with the high level of care that they were getting. Secondly, they had no confidence that there was adequate provision in the community for their loved ones.

The Health Committee has been lobbied several times by the parents and relatives of those in Muckamore because they do not want to go down that route. As you get further and further down the list and as you come to people who have profound needs, you see that it is going to be very difficult to provide community places for them all. I certainly wish the Minister well with that, because I know that he has very lengthy personal experience of the situation. He knows the difficulties that are out there. I will be interested to see whether we can hit the 2015 target.

5.00 pm

In his contribution, Gordon Dunne said that it is imperative that we create a situation in which we eliminate health inequalities. This was a theme throughout all the contributions: that those 7,000 people must have exactly the same entitlement and opportunities as the rest of the community. He said that there is a real challenge for those with learning difficulties accessing healthcare.

Tomorrow, my daughter goes into Craigavon Area Hospital for a minor knee operation. I know that that is quite a stressful situation for her and the family. It must be terribly difficult to have people of that age, with learning difficulties, going into hospital, because, as Mr Dunne, Mr Gardiner, I think, and, of course, Mr McCarthy said, the individuals concerned may not be in a position to express their health needs adequately to the clinicians. Therefore, someone has to be with them. It is important that we make a real effort to be certain that those people can make themselves well and truly heard. Mr Dunne also emphasised the fact that there is an inconsistent approach across the trusts and that we should put in place funding and support for people with learning difficulties.

Roy Beggs was one of the first Members to mention Transforming Your Care. He said that it must lead to the elimination of health inequalities. He mentioned the importance of annual check-ups, as did most Members who spoke. He also said that there have to be improvements in GP surgeries as well as in hospitals so that they, too, adjust to the needs of those with learning disabilities. He said that the Public Health Agency should engage with the community and voluntary sector to improve key messages. He raised a very interesting and novel point that no one else made, which is that there is a need for a central register for those with learning difficulties because, at the minute, we do not know exactly the extent of the problem and the various needs.

As I mentioned earlier, Fearghal McKinney said that the importance of GPs was stressed in the 'Equal Lives' report of 2005. He estimated that there are 7,000 people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland and quoted the fact that only 68% had an annual health check-up. He also stressed the need for a central register. He also suggested that there is a need for a cross-departmental approach to tackling the issue.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Wells: Finally, I pay tribute to Kieran McCarthy. Kieran has very personal knowledge of the situation. We always find his input in the Committee particularly helpful. The good MLA that he is, he was, of course, always campaigning to try to ensure that adequate resources are made available for this very important sector.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly notes with concern the health inequalities experienced by people with a learning disability; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to use the opportunities associated with Transforming Your Care to prioritise and tackle this issue.*

Private Members' Business

Farming Community: Mental Well-being

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. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McMullan: I beg to move

> *That this Assembly recognises the detrimental impact the current financial situation, compounded by adverse weather conditions during the past year, is having on the mental well-being of those within the farming community; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to liaise with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward proposals to promote the mental health service provision available to farmers, agricultural and agrifood workers; and further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address the stigma of mental health issues and promote the development of therapies and practices best suited to supporting those working in the agricultural sector.*

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Farming is one of our most vulnerable and important industries. The events of the past year are testament to that.

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

March 2013 saw one of the worst snowfalls in years and resulted in human suffering, mental and physical. Homes in rural areas were left isolated, without power or heat, and, if it were not for the emergency services, we could have been looking at lives lost, because some people had to be airlifted out of their home. I think that all of that proved to us, without any doubt, the vulnerability of living in a rural area.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his microphone closer to him? We are having difficulty hearing.

Mr McMullan: Sorry. On top of that is the stress that farmers suffered at the time, which we all know about. On top of that again is the number of livestock that farmers lost. The stress went on for days and weeks until they got the real figures for their losses. We are told that, in some cases, farmers did not even tell their family about what they had lost because of the stigma of having to say that their stock was gone and that they could not bring in money.

Other things have added to the stress to the health of the farmer, including a drop in farm incomes, rising fuel and feed costs, general overhead costs rising, and the banking sector tightening its lending and overdraft facilities, which have added to the farming crisis. The financial crisis that has resulted from the current economic climate has led to increased stress and pressures on farmers and their families in the sector. We have all heard stories of this — of farmers not telling their families, as I said earlier — and of children going to school and having to be taken out of school because the stress was showing on them at school. Some of the stories that we have heard are horrendous. That all led to stress.

Farmers, as we all know, have always been reluctant to seek medical help. In small rural communities, there is a stigma attached to mental health and stress. It is that stigma that needs to be tackled, and quickly. That, Members, is the thrust of my argument today: how do we get rid of the stigma of mental health?

We have cases of farmers having to sell their machinery to raise capital to replace buildings because their insurance did not cover them for snow or storm. That added to it again, because quite a lot of farmers took it that their insurance covered them for all of that, but they found out in the small print that they were not covered at all.

The other thing is the lack of information on benefits. This is a big thing. I will come back to the benefits issue.

In October 2013, Minister O'Neill met the Níamh Louise Foundation to award it a £10,000 grant from the Department's rural challenge programme. That grant will help to fund the post of a suicide prevention officer for the rural areas of mid-Ulster.

In November 2012, Minister O'Neill and Health Minister Poots launched the farm families health checks programme. That joint initiative between DARD and the Public Health Agency consists of a mobile unit that visits local farm markets and rural community events. It offers on-the-spot health checks, such as blood pressure, monitoring cholesterol and diabetic screening. In addition, individual lifestyle advice can be given. Onward referral advice to other services can also be given.

The issue of the farmer's lifestyle, which often leads them to having mental and physical health problems, has been identified in research. It is actioned in the rural White Paper action plan. Through DARD's tackling poverty and social isolation framework, it has been able to partner with the Health Department, the Public Health Agency and health trusts to develop and implement the farm families health checks programme. Since the programme's introduction, the large numbers using the service are proof of the industry wanting to find out about healthy lifestyles and maintaining good physical and mental health. It is also proof that farmers will access healthcare advice at a place and time that is convenient to them. One of the other problems is the lack of knowledge about where to go to get help.

It is known through evidence that farmers are under-users of healthcare resources due to their isolation, long working hours and the financial pressures of running a business. In a lot of cases, they live considerable distances from healthcare services. That problem will probably increase due to the Transforming Your Care (TYC) programme, which will see services more and more being centralised.

The Health Minister invested £13 million in adult mental health for the years 2012 to 2015. That money is spread across the five trusts on a capitation basis, which gives the Northern Trust an extra £3·713 million. The extra funding is for services both in rural and urban areas. I believe that that in itself raises a problem. That is because we have not really identified rural areas as having a specific problem; we have included the rural areas with the urban areas. The motion is clearly focusing on the farming community in rural areas.

We still do not have any reports from the trust about the farming community's medical status. Where has the £3·7 million been spent, and what are the results to date? Has a

programme even been identified for the farming community? I have asked that question several times, and I still have not got an answer. We need that programme to be identified, and we need to know how the trusts are going to get out into the community to reach out to the farmers and their families. They cannot wait for those people to come to them, because, in reality, the nature of their business means that they work unsociable hours. They have to be there, and the worry of becoming sick and of not being able to attend to their work is adding to the pressure.

I recently read a report on cancer services. It is a big thing when any person is identified as having cancer, but it is especially so for the person who is self-employed. It leaves them in the awful position of having to access benefits, and they do not know where to go to get those benefits. Those self-employed people who know where to go and who have ever tried to apply for benefits get very little help. In saying that, I was glad to know that a cancer service has opened in the Causeway Hospital in Antrim especially for that.

Figures show that approximately one farmer a week commits suicide. In all the examples that we have on depression in the agriculture industry, we see that the word "stigma" keeps arising. In the rural countryside, there is a perception that the farming life is an idyllic lifestyle, when you are outside and at one with nature. However, that can sometimes be far from the truth. The severe weather last year really showed the gaps in the services, which I mentioned.

One such gap is in accessing benefits. I rang the benefits office and enquired whether staff had a service to deal with rural isolation that meant that, after last year's crisis, they got out into the rural areas to give information to the farming community. The answer was no and that nothing has moved on since last year. Given all the talk about what was going to be done after what happened last year, nothing has been done. My Minister, the Minister of Agriculture, and the Minister of Health have put programmes into place, but it takes these other outside agencies, such as social services etc —

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

Mr McMullan: The main things that need to be looked at are the involvement of social services and the stigma that is attached to mental ill health. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Frew: The motion is somewhat timely, considering the problems that the farming community in my constituency is facing over the delay in single farm payments for remote sensing. The Department decided on that area, but it has heaped massive pressure not only on the farming businesses of that area but on the suppliers to the area. Rather than taking a hit once, they are taking it 50 or 100-odd times. They are having to bankroll and lend out, and they have large credit notices to their farm businesses and customer base, which is potentially putting hundreds of jobs and farm businesses at risk.

5.15 pm

In my constituency office, what I have experienced over the past years has been seen in the telling story of a person's demeanour when they walk into my office. It does not have to be a farmer or a rural dweller; it can be a businessman from any walk of life who is seeing his business fail and his profits fall or is struggling to make ends meet. The demeanour is the same across the board. They come into my office, not really wanting to be there but having been dragged in by their wife or daughter. The daughter and the wife do all the speaking, whilst the farmer — the man of the house — looks down at the floor or at his shoes and does not want to engage. It is as if there is a sense of shame, when there should not be. In all walks of life and in different periods of life, we all need help and assistance. Farmers should know that they should seek help and receive it. That is very important.

Farming is a very lonely business, and you might be on your own for long periods of the day. It is not only that. Whilst you struggle to feed your business, it is not only your family that you have to worry about feeding but your livestock. On many occasions, the farming community and the farmers who come into my office are more concerned about their livestock than their health. That is very telling. You know then that things have got so bad and farmers have left it so late to seek help that it might be too late.

They come into my office about a range of issues. Some come in because they cannot pay their electricity bill and NIE has been out to turn off their power. Of course, once there is any resistance, NIE walks away and starts legal proceedings, which, in itself, can cause terrible strain. Issues like the horse meat scandal also had an impact. The snow crisis of last spring had a great impact on people in my constituency, in the neighbouring consistency of East Antrim and other constituencies where there is high ground. There have also been long-term low gate prices, whereby the farmer — the producer — has to produce food at a low return whilst supermarkets make huge profits. That has an impact, and it grates with those in farming.

It is right that the Minister should look at this. He should not treat farmers as a special case, because, of course, he has to deal with the whole Province and there are also cases of mental illness in urban areas. However, it seems that the farming community, who live down long lanes, have the mentality that they do not want to speak to anybody about their problems. They meet their neighbours —

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

Mr Frew: — and talk about anything and everything but the state of their mental health. Something has to be done so that the farming community can be made aware that there is somebody there to help.

Mr Byrne: As a member of the Agriculture Committee and a representative of a rural constituency like West Tyrone, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

In recent times, the mental health of farmers has been affected by a plethora of external factors. Some have been to do with the weather, others with the erosion of rural services and others, unfortunately, with administrative failures by the Department of Agriculture. As a Government administrative body, DARD does not cover itself in glory with how it relates to farmers on the ground.

The weather crisis experienced by farmers and the resultant loss of livestock has undoubtedly played a huge role in affecting farmers' morale over recent years. Last year, I visited farmers in my constituency in the Sperrins who had lost sheep and cattle and were genuinely worried about how those losses would affect their financial

outcomes. Many relied on the sale of stock to maintain an income, and without that, they were stranded. However, really, the farm business had been downsized through the sale of such stock to ease cash flow problems.

I see that the Minister of Health is in attendance, and I welcome that. However, the Minister of Agriculture should also be here to listen to some of these issues.

It was then the role of the Department to help alleviate this pressure by providing financial assistance. Unfortunately, some farmers were left in limbo for long periods. DARD was slow to get compensation payments out quickly to those affected, thus adding to the stress. Not only did they not receive any monetary assistance from the Department but they continued to suffer extra farm costs such as increase costs for fodder, fuel and other related inputs. That combination reduced many farmers to a state of financial loss from which they are still trying to recover. Furthermore, single farm payment delays continue to frustrate, anger and bewilder many farmers. As we heard from the Chairman of the Committee, Paul Frew, some farmers have been waiting a long time for their entitlements. Given that 87% of farming income in the past year can be accounted for in relation to CAP support, it is obvious that any delay in the single farm payments is of crucial importance to farmers. The farmers who have not been paid are suffering severe financial difficulties, and the banks are breathing down their necks, as Mr McMullan said. On top of that, the general confusion around mapping systems and methods of control are becoming another frustrating issue for farmers.

The attitude towards departmental officials has changed. Those who were of great assistance 10 years ago are now viewed as enforcement officers, adding severe stress to farmers. DARD officials are regarded no longer as farm advisory officers but as enforcement officers.

A prevalent issue in the mental health of farmers is the reluctance within the rural community to come forward. Again, Mr McMullan made reference to that. Farmers are a stoic people, and they endure much without protest. The duty is now on the Minister of Agriculture and the Minister of Health to break the stigma that exists in the rural community and encourage those who feel vulnerable to come forward. I commend the Minister's work on the Breaking the Silence project, and I think the House will agree that initiatives of that sort are needed to reach out to those in the rural community. Initiatives such as those carried out by the members of the Niamh Louise Foundation, who do terrific work in suicide prevention and awareness throughout rural communities, is to be commended.

I acknowledge that the current financial situation also contributes heavily to mental ill health among our farmers. Farmers constantly tell me that the prices of materials are up but the price of their livestock has fallen. That trend is alarming and causes increased stress. If we are to address the above issues — financial assistance from the Department of Agriculture and the need to promote mental health awareness by the Department of Health — it is clear that we will need a joined-up approach from both Ministers and both Departments.

I support the motion, but I would like a realistic assessment to be made of the situation in which many farmers find themselves. Let us hope that the Department of Agriculture will also listen and be less cumbersome in the way that it processes single farm payment applications and, indeed, the verification that thus ensues.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion.

Living and working in the countryside can seem idyllic to someone looking in from the outside, but the truth is often very different. For many farmers and their families, feelings of isolation and loneliness can be commonplace. The typical image of a rough and tough farmer often masks the true thoughts inside him. To give an example, one farmer, explaining his feelings of isolation to the Samaritans, said:

> *"I often work alone for long hours without speaking to anyone. This means I don't get the chance to share problems, which can feel really lonely. It's amazing how important just having someone to talk to is."*

Those are the views of one farmer, but I am sure that they are mirrored on farms across Northern Ireland. For so many, living and working in the countryside can lead to a real feeling of isolation and emotional distress. Poor mental health follows and, sadly in too many cases, can lead to physical harm or suicide.

Stress, whether emotional or financial, can have devastating consequences. The current pressures on farmers, especially when they relate to cash flow, can seem unending. They were compounded by the adverse weather last March, which brought many to their lowest point.

Last Thursday night, in Craigavon civic centre, we heard powerful testimonies from people affected by mental ill health and suicide. The awareness event was organised by the Mayor of Craigavon and included the stands of local charities that help people affected by this issue. The powerful testaments of local people brought home the reality that so many people struggle with an invisible and scary illness, not least farmers. The event was hugely successful, attracting even the Health Minister, who attended to view the stands. I pay tribute to the outstanding work of those charities, including Lifeline, the Samaritans, Care in Crisis Lurgan, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), Action Mental Health, PIPS Upper Bann and Yellow Ribbon. They and others are the experts in this area and should be placed front and centre of any strategy to improve the mental health of our farmers. All too often we look to the statutory agencies, but in this case let us not forget the experts.

The important message that should be sent out to those struggling in any way is that there is always someone there to talk to. One of the speakers last week, Seanna Nugent, whose brother committed suicide, said that Kenneth did not want to die but just did not know how to go on living. That is true in far too many cases. I call on the Health Minister and on the Agriculture Minister to work together to bring forward strategies to improve the mental health of our farmers, and, indeed, their families, strategies that fully involve the charities that I mentioned.

My party's draft Programme for Government for this Assembly included:

> *"Introduce a mental health awareness programme for those working in rural areas, particularly within the agricultural sector, so that they become aware of the*

services available to tackle depression and other rural related stresses which are magnified by a feeling of isolation."

I would welcome an assurance from the Minister that this issue is being actively taken forward at Executive level.

The motion discusses opportunities in Transforming Your Care. I urge caution because, just as it creates opportunities to improve services, it creates opportunities to get it wrong. We do not want to see isolated rural villages and populations further deprived of services — quite the opposite. Farmers and rural dwellers live further from services and therefore require awareness programmes such as those proposed by my party to actively promote mental health and well-being.

I will give the last word to one of the contributors last week, Elaine Fogarty, from Portadown, who told us in Craigavon, "My illness no longer defines me. Hope does." The motion, if acted upon, will bring hope to countless numbers of people suffering in silence. We support the motion and call for action.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Members for raising this important issue in the motion.

Around 36% of Northern Ireland's population inhabit rural settlements, many living and working in the various sectors of our diverse agriculture industry. Although there are many physical hazards associated with farm work, there are also various mental health issues attributable to the long days, unsocial hours and isolation experienced by those endeavouring to maintain a successful farming business and livelihood.

As we are all aware, failure to treat mental illness can, in the most tragic circumstances, lead to an increase in suicide rates. The number of suicides in Northern Ireland has risen in the past decade. Although more suicides typically occur in urban areas, farmers are considered by many to be among the high-risk groups. In recent years, financial constraints, outbreaks of disease, poor weather conditions and the resulting uncertainties have placed a heavy burden on many in the agriculture industry. Worryingly, three systematic studies on mental health among the UK rural community following the outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001 reported elevated levels of psychological morbidity among farmers and other rural workers, many of whom opted for self-help, advice from family and friends or did not recognise the illness at all.

5.30 pm

The culture of self-sufficiency associated with rural communities, in addition to the social stigma and concerns over confidentiality in small communities, has no doubt resulted in the reluctance of some sufferers to seek help. The issue is further compounded by difficulties in accessing the appropriate healthcare facilities due, often, to poor transport and infrastructure. In recent years, however, efforts have been made to address some of those issues, such as the availability of healthcare facilities in rural areas, the stigma associated with mental illness in those communities and increased worries over farm safety. Collaborative initiatives have been launched, such as the farm families health checks programme, which is aimed at boosting rural access to health screening services. As others have mentioned, funds have also been awarded to the Niamh Louise Foundation, enabling a suicide prevention officer to assist in the delivery of its Breaking the Silence campaign. Although those measures are a positive step towards resolving some of the issues, the full impact of the initiatives is as yet unclear. Work remains to be done if we are to ensure that people living in rural areas have access to psychological therapies, a service that is already under-resourced.

I join other Members in calling for more to be done to promote the mental health services that are already in place for farmers and agricultural and agrifood workers and for the Health Minister and the Agriculture Minister to work together to develop therapies and practices that are best suited to supporting those working in the sector.

Mr Irwin: As a farmer, I am only too aware of the pressures on farmers in the industry, particularly those connected to recent difficulties with weather patterns, farm-gate prices and the struggle to make the books balance. I have added politics into the mix, but I not sure which is the most stressful.

Farmers by their nature are hard grafters and possess the all-important never-give-up attitude. That work ethic has sustained the industry and the Province through a number of crises over the years, such as BSE, foot-and-mouth disease, flooding and severe summer and winter weather. As Members have said, some farmers are waiting for months on end for their single farm payment.

On my farm, a couple of Christmases ago, it was almost impossible to get the cows milked because of the freezing conditions. The strain and worry of trying to keep a farm operational undoubtedly causes individuals a lot of stress. The recent television series 'Rare Breed' has shone a light on that work ethic and captured the ups and downs of farming and the different emotions that farmers go through: hoping for changes in the weather, fighting the elements to get crops sown and harvested and fighting the markets to get a fair return for their produce.

There is no doubt that mental health issues affect people in all sectors of society, and agriculture is no different. However, the work ethic that is ingrained in the farmer's mind presents a block to admitting that they have an issue and accepting mental health assistance. The motion brings that issue to light. Does the Minister have any data on referrals from the farming community?

There have been some very good initiatives aimed at the agricultural community from a health perspective, including cancer, blood pressure and general heart health. Those have been very well received, with roadshows visiting livestock marts across the Province to publicise the need for farmers to look after themselves and to act quickly if there are signs of any health issue.

The need for a similar approach on the issue of mental health is important, and I support the need for schemes that are more tailored to the agricommunity to assist in creating greater awareness of mental health and to make it easier for those in our agricommunity to come forward. I support the motion.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé breá sásta labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo inniu. I am very happy to speak in favour of the motion.

Weather conditions over the past number of years have had a long-term and detrimental effect on farmers, their

livestock and the wider rural community. The harsh winters of 2010 and 2012 were particularly difficult, with heavy and prolonged snowfall and freezing temperatures. For many, they were the worst in living memory. However, the spring storm of 2013 was unparalleled in its intensity and ferocity, particularly in areas such as the Mournes, the glens of Antrim and the Sperrins. Heavy snowfall accompanied by severe winds descended on these areas from Friday 22 March, and there was still snow on the hills some six weeks later.

The losses to many hill farmers were catastrophic and the sense of despair endemic. For many in the farming community, this seemed to be the last straw. Some talked of it as the end of a way of life. Thankfully, despite what some maintain, the Minister, the emergency services, the Department and others delivered physical assistance on the ground and rapidly processed compensation. Nonetheless, it was a very worrying time for all farmers, and it had an adverse effect on the mental health of many.

The suffering was far from over. The continued feeding of livestock into May, June and even later meant that fodder stocks were soon depleted. Farmers who had already encountered difficulties in receiving bridging loans from the banks could not access the necessary funds, even when the Minister had identified alternative sources of fodder from other parts of Ireland and elsewhere. There were also reports of profiteering. However, I have to say — Paul Frew touched on this — that there were many laudable examples of grain merchants and suppliers keeping many farmers on the go. Anecdotal evidence indicates that, at this time, desperate farmers were culling some of their stock. There were reports of animal welfare issues as well.

That was the dire situation. Many Members, particularly those from a rural constituency, will undoubtedly recall the impassioned pleas of desperate farmers. With those in mind, the Minister introduced funding that, in conjunction with the Niamh Louise Foundation, would help to put in place a suicide prevention officer for the mid-Ulster area. The Minister also introduced the farm families health checks programme to provide help and advice to people in rural areas who were suffering from poor mental health and suicidal thoughts. Minister O'Neill, speaking at its launch, said:

> *"Farmers lead very busy lives, often working alone which can have implications for both their mental and physical health."*

She said that a lot of cases could be prevented with "timely and appropriate care". In the first few months, over 1,000 people were seen at farmers' marts and community centres. Likewise, the social farming initiative was aimed at creating linkages between the agriculture and health sectors.

The motion calls for a strengthening of the linkages between the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety:

> *"to address the stigma of mental health issues and promote the development of therapies and practices best suited to supporting those working in the agricultural sector."*

That being the case, it is a commendable motion, and I recommend it to the House.

Mr G Robinson: The events of last winter brought into focus the need to promote the services required for our rural dwellers' mental and physical well-being. That is especially the case for our farming community, which suffered greatly because of the adverse and stressful weather conditions. I pay tribute to all our emergency services for their efforts during what was a challenging period for farming, rural and other dwellers and even the livestock.

In many ways, farmers have a solitary lifestyle mostly due to the nature of their job. That should help us all to realise the greater need for easier access to these services for vulnerable communities that live in remote rural areas. Last year's weather and its impact on our farmers will have repercussions for years to come. Therefore, it is important that we do what we can to help rural dwellers to cope with the after-effects of financial consequences that can lead to other medical and social hardships.

It is also important that we acknowledge the stigma surrounding mental health issues. This is unjustified and unacceptable. If someone is experiencing health problems, regardless of what they are, they should know that help is available. That support could be best provided by something like the rural support programme in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, but it should happen on a cross-departmental basis. The helpline is available from 8.00 am until 11.00 pm, seven days a week. This, therefore, is a great asset, and perhaps adaptions could be considered within rural support to provide more expanded services.

Harsh though it may sound, all Ministers are aware that budgets are constrained and that the use of existing infrastructures may be the best way to address these issues. Given the value of our agrifood industry, it is most important that we aid those involved in it and, indeed, all rural dwellers and businesses to ensure that we have a healthy and happy community. I pay tribute to Minister Poots for replying to this very worthwhile motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Farming is an all-weather, all-season, year-round job that involves a lot of hard work, effort and long hours. There is a long-held perception in urban communities that, because farmers have land and livestock, they must by definition be well off. In the majority of cases, of course, that is simply not true.

Farmers are primarily affected by three main issues that can mean the difference between any degree of success or failure. These are bad weather, obviously, poor crops and the continuing increases in fuel prices. Unfortunately, profits do not keep up with the rising costs of production. All those issues are outside the control of farmers, and that makes them so much more difficult to deal with.

A number of socio-economic factors contribute to health inequalities, and there is a strong link between deprivation and poor health. Poverty is an important risk factor for illness and premature death, and rural deprivation is often hidden. Currently, fuel poverty affects a greater number of rural families than urban families. In addition, those living in a rural area are often not aware of the financial assistance available.

Rural dwellers are more likely to suffer higher levels of loneliness and social isolation than people in urban areas. People in rural areas are reluctant to seek outside help for

mental health issues. Social factors, such as fears about confidentiality, can also prevent individuals from making use of services. The associated stigma of mental health problems and the reluctance to confront them is very common. When I worked in an advice centre in Newry, dealing with a large rural hinterland, I very much found that to be the case. Farmers and their families would not even discuss these issues with close relatives, never mind their GP or psychiatrist. Unfortunately, because of that, there is increasing incidence of depression, stress and suicide in rural areas. Stresses are increased by isolation, single-worker situations and a lack of knowledge about services and difficulties in accessing them. Also, with the financial pressures resulting from the current economic situation, all these problems are increased and magnified.

The range and availability of services are much more limited in rural areas than in urban areas. There have been joint initiatives by Departments, including DARD, DHSSPS and DCAL, to deal with these problems. They have joined the Public Health Agency and the main sporting bodies to provide help and advice to those in rural areas who suffer from poor mental health and suicidal thoughts. Speaking at the launch of the initiative, Minister O'Neill said:

> *"Tackling poor mental health and suicide in rural areas is important."*

She continued:

> *"The involvement of sports and the arts is critical — they provide a solid community-based structure that will ensure many people are targeted and get the ... support they need."*

There are many groups working in rural areas and providing a great service. As a member of the Health Committee I met the Niamh Louise Foundation, which provides a valuable service to vulnerable people who live in rural areas and makes that service accessible.

The rural population across the North is affected by a range of health issues, including isolation, infrastructure accessibility, demographic changes and socio-economic challenges. It is important that innovative approaches to rural healthcare are put in place. A more complete understanding of the health needs and particular problems faced by rural communities is necessary, and policies must be put in place that ensure that the health and well-being of rural communities is prioritised.

Mr Rogers: I support the motion and call on the Northern Ireland Executive to work closely together to provide much-needed help for those in rural areas who experience mental health issues. I welcome the debate and the opportunity to highlight the issues of rural social isolation and suicide prevention.

Farming is a native industry, and we must do all that we can to protect and sustain it. Many of our farmers are sole traders who work long days on their own, very often in inclement weather, and the nature of the work can have a detrimental effect on their physical health. Added to that are the mental pressures. They are under stress due to economic pressures and the bureaucracy associated with inspections, single farm payments, country management schemes, remote sensing or whatever. As someone has mentioned, the advisory officer of the past has turned into an enforcement officer. For example, many farmers have not recovered physically, mentally, emotionally or financially from the snow last Easter. Some sheds are still in ruins, and some farmers remain unpaid for their losses.

5.45 pm

I welcome the fact that the Minister of Health is here, but, as other Members have said, there has to be a cross-sectoral approach to this. Rural community transport, for example, affects the well-being of our farmers. Funding is difficult to obtain, and the need for the community and voluntary sector is increasing. The Minister of the Environment, from our party, and his Department are reviewing bus licensing. Will that have an impact on how the buses operate, because fewer people will be able to drive them? Will drivers have to sit another test, which will perhaps cost more money? The point that I am really illustrating is that we need some joined-up thinking on all issues, from DRD and DOE in this particular example. If we do not think this through, we will have fewer farmers and rural dwellers able to avail themselves of a service such as community transport to take them to the hospital etc. Despite the best efforts of our health service and others, we will have more social exclusion rather than social inclusion. That will cause medical problems, leading to more hospital admissions and more pressure on our hospital services.

It is vital that the Government listen to the real needs of the community at ground level. Leadership from DARD and other Departments must show the farming community that their concerns have been fully listened to and acted on in a joined-up manner. The working partnership formed by DARD, DCAL, DHSSPS and the main sporting bodies to provide help and advice to people in rural areas who suffer from poor mental health and suicidal thoughts is to be welcomed, but it needs to be expanded. I acknowledge the great social initiatives that are taking place at many football clubs, including my own, and the likes of the Men's Sheds initiative. Tackling poor mental health and suicide in rural areas is important. Partnerships that raise awareness of the available support provide a solid, community-based structure that will ensure that many people are targeted and get the support that they need. The conclusions and recommendations of the Niamh Louise Foundation report detail the need for dialogue and development across all sectors that have a role and investment in the promotion of mental health and well-being. We must take this as a true reality for our rural communities across the North. The very best provision must be made available to address the needs and issues facing rural communities generally and, more specifically, groups that have been identified as being at risk.

As other Members have done, I recognise the good work done through the Breaking the Silence scheme and the farm families health checks programme. The Social Farming Across Borders scheme, which linked healthcare and farming North and South, is another good example. The good practice established needs to be disseminated across the farming community. In fact, such projects should receive targeted funding through, say, the social investment fund. I call not on DHSSPS and DARD alone but on the whole Executive to work seriously for the health and well-being of our farmers, who are our primary food producers. I asked junior Minister McCann last week how rural dwellers were being accommodated through the social investment fund, and I think that that is a key issue.

You cannot measure the social deprivation in our farming community mainly through the Noble indices.

Finally, I know that farming is a male-dominated industry, and I urge spouses and other family members to urge farmers to seek timely and appropriate healthcare from professionals. Avail yourself of the cancer bus when it visits your area. Make use of your local GP.

Mr Swann: Like other Members, I welcome the fact that the Health Minister is to respond to the debate. I know that he is no stranger to the effects of stress and knows how important farmers' mental well-being is.

I know that I am not delivering the winding-up speech, but I will sum up on something that has been said around the Chamber today. There is a call for the Department of Health to work with DARD to roll out a programme of community-based health checks and information targeting farm families across all trust areas; to seek to improve services in local areas, putting the onus on commissioners in the planning and delivery of health and social care services; to promote rural health improvement strategies, including consultation; and to work with the Department of Agriculture to explore the impact of rural isolation and deprivation and how that affects health inequalities.

Those are not just things that Members in the Chamber have said today; those are six of the bullet points that are included in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's rural White Paper action plan — I can never remember the title of it. Those are the targets that have been agreed with the Department of Health. So, what we are debating in the Chamber today is nothing new. It is something that has been agreed between the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Health, but I will take the opportunity here to reinforce it. I am glad that the parties of both Ministers that we have called on, who are mentioned in this motion, are in agreement and have already committed that in the rural White Paper action plan.

You hear so often in any debate that we have here that it is about the call for joined-up services and joined-up approaches in how we do things. We have heard a number of very valuable, worthwhile and worthy organisations mentioned here that are already delivering those services in the rural economy. We have a number of good organisations out there, including Rural Support, which has been mentioned. It does fantastic work in this area, and always has done. It has been supported by the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture, but we need to be careful because sometimes in Northern Ireland, and in the rural economy especially, we seem to create organisations to solve problems that are already there. We need to be very careful that any resources that come out of the debate today, or any additional support, is funnelled into those existing organisations that have the support. George Robinson mentioned Rural Support specifically, and being able to give it additional resources to open up what it does.

The pressures on the agriculture community and the farming community are well mentioned in the motion. We are looking at the current financial situation, and I do not think that it is necessary to rehearse again the pressures that have been put on by inspections and delays in payments, because our agriculture industry faces those issues annually. Until the Department of Agriculture gets it right, the Minister of Health, unfortunately, has to be there to put services in to support those farmers and their families who are suffering that additional stress and crisis.

Long days have been mentioned. It always comes round; I think it was in a debate that the Ulster Unionist Party put forward on farm incomes that that was mentioned. I have found from talking to farmers that the long days that they spend in the yard and in the fields are getting longer, because they find it easier to put themselves into a forced isolation rather than walk into the house and confront their wife or try to deal with their son or daughter and try to face up to the problems that are encroaching on them every day, so it is easier to stay in that yard.

As any Member here knows, when you start to spend a lot of time alone and you start to get caught up in your own thoughts, the minor problems suddenly become major ones, unless you have somebody to relieve that pressure and somebody to talk to. Those are the sorts of services that already exist in the rural community, and we should look to those services and support them.

We talk about the stresses on the farming community and their mental well-being. There is the physical health stress and the mental health stress, and the compounding factors out there are only making the situation worse. If we follow the recommendations in the rural White Paper action plan, which has been developed and agreed, there is a lot in there that, if addressed and brought forward, can go a long way to tackling the mental well-being issues that we have discussed today.

The other challenges go back to the Minister of Agriculture to tackle —

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

Mr Swann: — and bring a solution to the issues that are causing the problems.

Mr Wells: At the outset, I will say that it is somewhat unfortunate that the Minister of Agriculture has not seen fit to come along and listen to the debate. I accept that the Minister of Health is responding, as he seems to have responded to every motion in this Building for the past three weeks, but for an issue as important as this, it would have been no bad thing if the Minister had dropped in for 10 minutes to at least express her support for the farming community and empathise with the difficulties that they are going through at the moment.

I speak as a son of a farmer. I am the eldest son, but I decided to go into something much less reputable — politics — and my brother took over the farm. That gives me some experience, though the Minister of Health is uniquely experienced to deal with the issue, having been a farmer himself and now the Health Minister. I agree with much of what was said. I thought that Mr Swann's commentary in the previous speech was extremely telling and gave a very interesting insight to the problems facing farmers. Farming has become a desperately lonely business.

When the Northern Ireland state was formed in the 1920s, over 100,000 people were employed in farming in Northern Ireland. Indeed, if you go into the Senate Chamber, you will see three motifs above the Public Gallery representing shipbuilding, linen and farming. Linen and farming employed over 100,000 people, and shipbuilding employed 35,000. Now, 75% of those people have gone, and, due

to mechanisation — of course, it is great to have labour-saving devices — many farmers, including my father and brother, spend a huge amount of their time out in the fields or in the yard totally on their own.

Another issue that has not been raised before but that is affecting a lot of farmers and causing huge emotional distress is that many sons and daughters who have got educated and have watched the life that their father has had — it tends to be the father rather than the mother — have decided that farming is not for them and that they are going to be accountants, journalists or bank managers. They have decided not to take on the family farm. Indeed, that is exactly what my own family is facing.

My brother has four children, and they have no intention of following in their father's footsteps. They have seen enough. That causes huge distress, because that farm has been with the Wells family for centuries — since plantation times — and we are very proud of it. However, it looks as though now, after many centuries of the Wells family farming that land, it will be gone. That causes huge distress to the farmers concerned.

One of my relatives recently said, "Farming is a wonderful way of turning grass into debt", and it is. In addition to all those other worries, there is a vast amount of debt on our farming community's shoulders. I accept that a lot of that debt is, of course, good, as it is the security of farmland. The one thing that has happened, which has been very noticeable during the recession, is that the value of farmland has actually held up very well. However, it can still be no fun at all working those long hours alone, knowing that all that you are doing is raising money to pay off debt and debt interest. That issue unfortunately still bedevils our farming community.

There is also a huge reluctance from people in the farming community to go to see their doctor. For various reasons, I have been in and out of a lot of doctors' surgeries in recent months, and I know that the one person who you never seem to see there is the local farmer. He is too busy. He has too many responsibilities and too many worries, yet, often, he — 99% of them are men — is the one person who should be there. I therefore applaud the initiatives that various voluntary and community groups have undertaken to bring the message to the farming community.

Indeed, in my local mart in Rathfriland, they bring the caravan along, and the nurses go into the mart where the men are all standing talking about sheep, hoggets or cattle, and they physically drag them into the caravan for tests. The shocking thing is that some of those tests are showing that the health condition of many of those men leaves a lot to be desired. For instance, tests for their cholesterol prove that some of them have very worrying levels. Indeed, in one case that I heard of recently, they had to actually advise the farmer to go straight to hospital because he had a blocked artery. We need to ensure that we step up that programme, because that will detect farmers in the place where you are guaranteed to get them, as the one place that a farmer loves to get out to is the mart to talk to his friends. He also needs to have that check-up.

Finally, many Members mentioned the work of the Níamh Louise Foundation. I have been to Dungannon twice to see its work, and I have talked at length with that charity. Indeed, I was here for the —

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

Mr Wells: It is great to see a mental health charity targeting the rural community, which for so long has been the Cinderella of this field.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Minister, I should say that it is clear that the business on the Order Paper will not be disposed of by 6.00 pm. In accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until it is completed.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank everyone who has spoken today on this important issue, particularly the Members who are responsible for bringing the motion to the Assembly.

International research shows that, in developing countries, rural dwellers tend to have poorer health and well-being than those in urban areas. However, in developed countries, the opposite is the case. As someone who comes from a farming background, I am well aware that rural life can have its rewards. However, we must not overlook the many challenges that rural dwellers face.

6.00 pm

I often listen to my father, who had 10 in his family. They all worked on the farm, along with a couple of labourers. Now, that farm would not sustain one person. Fundamental changes have taken place, to the camaraderie, to working with neighbours and all that. The integration that used to be the case does not take place on farms any more.

Deprivation is often associated in the public consciousness with urban areas, but there is significant deprivation in rural areas. Some of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland are in predominantly rural places. Most people will know that farmers are generally asset rich but very often cash poor. It is all well and good to have a farm of land, but that does not buy groceries at the end of the week and may not pay the meal bill at the end of the month.

Members have mentioned the difficulties faced by a number of farmers as a result of the single farm payment. I understand the real difficulties that poses for individuals. A lot of companies will rightly be expecting to get paid for products and services that they have supplied. Many farmers will have expected to be able to pay that, in good faith, on the basis of their single farm payment being received. Not aware that inspections had even taken place, they could not make any preparation with their bank. I understand that people would be put under additional stress as a consequence of not having received their single farm payment.

Those in rural areas have poor access to goods and services. Financial difficulties and low incomes, very often poor housing conditions in old, damp houses or not well heated houses, and social isolation are all problems for the rural dweller. For farmers in particular, the loss of control associated with weather and disease can be a particularly stressful issue. Those factors can all take their toll on a person's health and well-being.

I remember being up Slieve Croob at Hare's Gap. I looked over the countryside across the Mournes and Castlewellan forest; it was stunningly beautiful. Yet hundreds, indeed thousands, of animals were caught up in the snow, with farmers doing their best to get them out of it or to get them

food. They faced huge problems. Even now, having had a sustained period of rain, farmers who have been storing slurry would expect to be spreading it now, but some of them have the stress of full tanks with no prospect of the slurry going onto the fields for some time to come. Animals are potentially going into poor living conditions as a consequence of that. All those things can take their toll. That is why rural support networks and organisations can help farmers in times of difficulty.

At government level, we can help those organisations to deliver effective services by ensuring that we develop holistic programmes that properly address the broader health needs of rural populations. We can do that only by having strong working relationships across Departments. Of particular importance is that the Health Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development work together to improve the health and well-being of rural populations.

Projects such as maximising access in rural areas (MARA) and Farm Families Health Checks are good examples of shared initiatives between the Departments and the Public Health Agency that attempt to improve the broader health and social well-being of rural communities. Through the MARA project, people are visited in their own home and offered help to access services and benefits. Over 7,000 household visits have been carried out, generating around 14,000 onward referrals for services, grants and benefits. Those impressive figures clearly demonstrate the need for that type of service.

The Farm Families Health Checks programme is another important joint initiative. The checks were introduced last year by the Public Health Agency and DARD. Since then, basic health checks have been carried out on over 3,000 people at farmers' marts and rural community events across Northern Ireland, including many in the Northern Trust area, and I would have expected Mr McMullan to be aware of them. That level of throughput shows that the farming community is interested in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and has an appetite for information on how to be healthy. Clearly, where farmers can access healthcare advice in a place and at a time that is convenient to do so, they will do so.

As we move through the winter months, we look back to last March when so many areas were badly affected by extreme weather conditions. During that time, and in its aftermath, the farm family health checks and MARA visits were increased in the areas most affected. Practical support was necessary, of course, but the issue of mental health and well-being arose time and again.

This brings me to the difficult issue of suicide. Northern Ireland continues to be plagued by high suicide rates, and no part of society is immune from it. Indeed, farmers experience one of the highest rates of suicide in any industry. The continued high level of suicides in Northern Ireland will be addressed by further implementation of the Protect Life strategy and the development of the next suicide prevention strategy. The 'National Confidential Inquiry report into Suicides and Homicide by People with Mental Illness' published in July 2013 highlights the disturbing role of substance misuse, primarily alcohol, in suicides in Northern Ireland and the higher rate here than in Great Britain.

Many people here who face emotional difficulties use alcohol to rid themselves of the waves of negativity that they experience, but any relief gained in this way is merely temporary at best and generally leaves the individual more troubled and alone. Consequently, efforts to tackle harmful drinking are being strengthened.

We know the risk factors for poor mental health and well-being. I have already mentioned some of them. There are two related issues that can compound these risks in rural areas. The first is stigma and the second is the stoic nature of rural dwellers. The stigma associated with mental illness is abhorrent. It is also far too prevalent. Indeed, it is widely accepted that feelings of stigma associated with the use of mental health services remain stronger in rural communities than urban populations, and concerns over anonymity may have something to do with that.

Stigma is associated with shame. It is deeply hurtful and isolating. It damages people's lives by presenting an obstacle to help-seeking and recovery. We need to drive home the message that it is OK to tell others that you are not OK. The bottom line is that seeking help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. Indeed, the first step towards help should be celebrated as a success story rather than dreaded as a sign of failure. This is what the Public Health Agency mental health awareness campaigns focus on. The most recent campaign features a boxer and urges people talk about mental health problems that they may be experiencing. The advert deliberately depicts a physically strong character, to show that mental ill-health can affect anyone.

Stigma can also be reduced by increasing access to appropriate talking therapies in primary care, which is particularly important for rural communities. I mentioned the stoic nature of rural dwellers, and the cultural attitude that promotes independence and self-reliance is something we admire. However, it can discourage people from seeking help and it is something that we need to be aware of when developing services for rural communities.

Some time ago, I helped launch an evaluation report on the community network approach to promoting mental health and preventing suicide in the northern area. The report highlighted how this approach, which is rooted in partnership working and maximising community involvement, brings mental health promotion and suicide prevention into the heart of rural communities. I firmly support the community-partnership approach. Communities are best placed to know their local resources, issues and challenges. That intimate knowledge is vital in tailoring services and initiatives to address local needs and in finding solutions to these challenges.

I have also been promoting the partnership approach at government level, where I have been meeting regularly with my ministerial colleagues to ensure that public health is a priority for all Departments. This will be reflected in the new public health strategic framework, which will highlight the importance of connecting with others to promote health.

It is also vitally important that mental health services are provided in a range of settings. In keeping with the Bamford vision, the Department's priority for the development of mental health services continues to be focused on the improvement of community-based services across the region.

In line with the recommendations of the Bamford review, the provision of psychological therapies is being supported with investment of £6·5 million, including the development of primary talking therapy hubs at various locations. Transforming Your Care also supports that approach and will facilitate the development of locally based services in rural areas. Transforming Your Care sets out a commitment to ensure that people are able to receive the right care at the right time from the right people. A key part of that is through the development of local primary and community care infrastructure.

The Health and Social Care Board is finalising work on the proposed regional hubs and spokes model, and a number of hub projects are already under way. The service model for hubs and spokes encompasses a range of services tailored to local needs, with local commissioning groups determining what services should be provided for their community. Services that may be provided include community mental health teams. The new model of primary and community care infrastructure will enable the delivery of more services locally, including in rural areas.

Although the overall outlook for the farming industry is positive, we need to be able to support our farmers and rural dwellers in times of hardship and difficulty. It is important that we continue to work together to build on an existing package of measures and on the momentum already in place. That can be done effectively only if the Public Health Agency, DARD, the health trusts and rural community groups — the Niamh Louise Foundation was mentioned a number of times, along with other groups — continue to work in partnership. That approach will, therefore, continue to be a priority for my Department.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At the outset of the debate, Oliver McMullan touched on the vulnerable and isolating nature of farmers working in rural areas. He referred to the inclement weather, the livestock loss and the emotional impact that that had on farmers, along with the increase in production costs.

He referred to the fact that there was a great deal of stigma attached to mental health issues and that farmers have a tendency to conceal their stress, even from the closest members of their family. He talked about how DARD and the Public Health Agency help farmers, and he referred to health checks and lifestyle advice. He said that there was still a lack of information and an underuse of benefits and access to services. He also said that the centralisation of health services as envisaged under TYC would exacerbate that.

He said that there was a need for programmes for farming communities and that it was important for health trusts to go out into communities. He said that one farmer a week commits suicide and that the idyllic lifestyle that is portrayed in rural areas is not always accurate. He concluded by saying that a multiagency approach was very important to address that.

Paul Frew spoke after Oliver and said that it was a very timely debate. He drew on the fact that there has been a delay in processing single farm payments and that that was adding to the pressure on farmers and their suppliers. He talked on a very personal level and said that when a farmer comes to see him in his office he can tell by his or her demeanour that they are reluctant to seek help and that there is almost a sense of shame. He said that it was a very lonely business and that farmers were alone all day. In some instances, they even put the needs of their livestock ahead of their own personal and health needs. He referred to the impact of the horse meat scandal, the weather conditions last year and low farmgate prices. He said that it was very important for farmers to know that help is out there.

Joe Byrne, who spoke after Paul Frew, said that there was a range of pressures on farmers. Again, he referred to the weather and to farmgate prices. He cited DARD as another factor that had caused low morale in the farming community. He said that DARD must do more to alleviate the financial crises that farmers are experiencing; for example, getting payments processed more quickly and more efficiently.

He said that single farm payments are crucial for farmers and that the banks are breathing down their neck. He said that, unfortunately, DARD officials are sometimes seen as enforcement officers rather than advisers and that it was very important to break that stigma. He commended the work of the Breaking the Silence initiative and the role of the Niamh Louise Foundation and concluded by saying that there was a need for a joined-up approach between the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

6.15 pm

Jo-Anne Dobson again picked up on the theme of isolation and loneliness. She referred to the work of the Samaritans and said that a lot of farmers work alone and cannot share their problems, which causes stress, sometimes physical harm and even suicide. She shared with us what happened at the recent event in Craigavon at which people shared their testimonies. She said that charities should be the centrepiece of any solution. She called on the Health Minister and the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister to develop joint strategies and to put the charities centre stage. She said that it is important to develop a mental health awareness programme for people in rural areas. She also said that the motion will bring hope to people living in silence.

Judith Cochrane referred to the fact that 36% of the population in the North live in rural areas. She said that suicide rates were on the increase and that farmers were in the highest risk group. That is exacerbated by the many uncertainties that they experience in their business. She mentioned that, unfortunately, there is a great deal of stigma. She also said that there is a high level of self-reliance in the farming community, which makes farmers less likely to access services. She acknowledged that some initiatives were put in place to promote existing services. Again, she called on the two Departments to work together to develop new strategies.

William Irwin referred to the work ethic of farmers. Again, he referred to many of the following things that make their lives very difficult: severe weather; foot-and-mouth disease in the past; the single farm payment; the culture of self-help; and a reluctance to access services. He commended some of the initiatives taking place such as the health checks, roadshows etc. However, he said that more awareness of mental health issues is required.

Cathal Ó hOisín again touched on the theme of the weather in 2010, 2012 and 2013. He said that it had

caused catastrophic losses to farmers but pointed out that the Minister moved rapidly to deliver assistance and compensation to them. Cathal also talked about the role of the banks. He mentioned DARD, the Niamh Louise Foundation, which established the post of a suicide prevention officer in the mid-Ulster area, and social farming initiatives. He said that it is very important to develop therapies that are tailored to the agriculture sector.

George Robinson again drew on the weather theme and mentioned the vulnerability of farmers. He paid tribute to the role of the emergency services during last year's snow crisis. He said that the stigma that still surrounds poor mental health in communities is unacceptable. He said that we need cross-departmental programmes to develop and expand the services. He also said that it is very important to support rural areas. He referred to the importance of argifood in the economy.

Mickey Brady acknowledged that farming is hard work all year round. He drew on a rural/urban comparison and said that, in urban areas, there was a perception that people in rural areas are all well off and have big farms but that that is not the case at all. He cited these three compounding factors: the weather; crops; and fuel prices. He said that there was a well-established link between deprivation and poor health and that there are high risk levels for isolation among people in rural areas. Drawing on his past experience working in an advice centre setting, Mickey said that rural people, particularly those in the farming community, are less likely than many others to access such services. He also referred to the excellent work of the Niamh Louise Foundation.

Sean Rogers welcomed the debate. He talked about the long days and hard work involved and the economic and bureaucratic pressures on farmers. He reiterated Joe Byrne's reference to the role of DARD and to it sometimes being seen as an enforcement officer. Again, he called for a cross-sectoral approach as needed and joined-up thinking among the Departments, and he cited community transport as a good example. He said that it is very important that Departments listen at ground level. He said that there are some great initiatives centred on clubs. He mentioned the Men's Sheds initiative as well. He commended Breaking the Silence and other schemes for their good work and said that funding must be spread across the sector. He also said that farming is male-dominated and that it is very important to urge spouses to encourage farmers to access vital services.

Robin Swann touched on rural isolation and the link to health inequalities. He referred to the rural White Paper and said that the action points in it must be reinforced and implemented. He mentioned the role of important services such as Rural Support and cited their excellent work. He said that it was important to funnel support into existing organisations. Mr Swann also said that, for farmers, already long days were getting longer. They are forcing themselves into isolation rather than coming into the house to face their problems — it is easier to stay out in the yard or in the fields — but that causes physical and emotional stress.

Jim Wells regretted that the Agriculture Minister was not here today. He said that farming was a desperately lonely business and that, historically, when the state was created, linen, farming and shipbuilding were the three most popular industries or businesses of the day. He regretted that many farmers' children were not taking on farming as a career, which adds to farmers' stress. He said that debt accrues on the shoulders of farmers and that it is very difficult for them to make ends meet. He mentioned that farmers are reluctant to go to the doctor or seek help. He applauded the work of voluntary groups in bringing health checks to farmers' marts, and he commended the Niamh Louise Foundation for targeting rural areas. He said that tackling mental health in the industry had been a Cinderella for too long.

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

Mr McAleer: The Minister said that there had been many changes for farmers. He referred to there being a lot of deprivation in rural areas and said that farmers were asset rich and cash poor. He talked about their lack of willingness to access help and advice and said that the rate of suicide was quite high.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly recognises the detrimental impact the current financial situation, compounded by adverse weather conditions during the past year, is having on the mental well-being of those within the farming community; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to liaise with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward proposals to promote the mental health service provision available to farmers, agricultural and agrifood workers; and further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address the stigma of mental health issues and promote the development of therapies and practices best suited to supporting those working in the agricultural sector.*

Adjourned at 6.22 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 February 2014

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Craig: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning, the Minister of Justice made a pronouncement on the cost of policing parades and protests. The figure quoted is at variance with figures given to the Policing Board. Would it not be in order for the Minister to come to the House to give a breakdown of the figures?

Mr Speaker: The Member will know that that is a matter for the Justice Minister, and it is a matter that he should take up directly with the Justice Minister. Once again, I say to Members that it is for Ministers to decide when they need to or should come to the House. We really should move on.

Ms Ruane: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, this is the second day in a row on which points of order have been made. It appears that some of the Members opposite do not know that there is Question Time in the House. Points of order seem to be a bit of a pattern now. I wonder whether you are worried about that.

Mr Speaker: All Members from all sides of the House will find that, on occasion, there are points of order, or issues that are not points of order, raised in the House. I always question Members when they raise bogus points of order. In saying that, I have to add that, from time to time, there is a need for Members to get issues on the record. However, Members from all sides of the House should not abuse points of order.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Before we begin today's business, I inform Members that I will be absent from the House next week.

Ministerial Statement

Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to inform Members that I am today launching a 12-week public consultation on the draft strategic planning policy statement (SPPS) for Northern Ireland.

We all know that this is an exciting and challenging time for planning. In just 15 months' time, 11 new councils will be responsible for drawing up their own local development plans, making the majority of planning decisions and shaping how their areas will grow and develop in a way that responds to the needs and aspirations of the communities that they serve. The benefits of that approach are wide-ranging, from improved service delivery to gaining community buy-in; from supporting the creation of a shared society to delivering sustainable development. This new approach to planning provides a real opportunity to transform the look and feel of local areas and create places that reflect local culture and the environment.

The return of planning powers to local councils on 1 April 2015 will mean that Northern Ireland will follow a two-tier approach to planning that will enhance local democratic accountability. Through the transfer of powers to councils, communities will have greater opportunity to engage with their elected representatives and have a say in how their area will change and develop. In this way, our planning system will be more responsive to the priorities and needs of our local people. It will be more open, more accountable and more inclusive. Through working together, the planning system can be used to bring about positive change, economic recovery and a more sustainable future for all.

It is my job to ensure that the transfer of planning to local councils happens as seamlessly as possible and to deliver a new system that is ready for providing these benefits. In October, I affirmed to the Assembly my commitment to driving forward planning and local government reform. Last week, I laid a written statement before the Assembly in which I announced five key actions that I will be implementing over coming months. These actions will lay the foundations for introducing an improved planning system. I am pleased to be able to bring forward the first of these actions today by launching for consultation the draft strategic planning policy statement.

My aim is to create a planning system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose; a system that is less complex, more effective, more efficient and more customer focused.

This strategic planning policy statement will ensure we have a shorter, simpler strategic policy framework that provides clarity and certainty for all users of the reformed planning system. It consolidates some 20 separate pieces of planning policy into a single statement, reducing 800 pages of policy to fewer than 100.

The SPPS signals a new approach to the preparation of regional planning policy in the North. It outlines the reformed two-tier planning system and sets out a new purpose of planning and a new set of overarching planning principles. It explains the new local development plan and development management systems; consolidates existing planning policy statements (PPS); and includes new town centre and retail planning policy. Although the SPPS is largely a consolidation of existing planning policy provisions, there is an emphasis on improving them. I will outline some of the new elements it contains.

First, there will be eight new core planning principles, which will underpin delivery of the planning reforms set out in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. In undertaking their planning functions, planning authorities have to balance and integrate a variety of complex economic, social, environmental and other matters of public interest. The core planning principles will assist with this process, and reflect my expectations for delivery of the reformed planning system. This includes furthering sustainable development; improving health and well-being; and supporting good design, positive place-making and urban and rural stewardship. Other core principles focus on creating shared space; delivering spatial planning; following a plan-led system; and enhancing stakeholder engagement and local accountability.

Secondly, the SPPS explains the new development plan and development management system. The Planning Act transfers responsibility for producing local development plans from the Department to councils and ensures that they are at the core of planning decisions. Councils must prepare a plan strategy to set out their strategic vision for the future development and use of land in the plan area. A local policies plan must also be prepared. This will set out the council's local policies to support the plan strategy. The SPPS explains how the new local development plan system will promote greater efficiency, transparency, soundness, sustainability and accountability. Key elements of the new development management system are detailed in the SPPS. Those include a development hierarchy and schemes of delegation to streamline planning decisions; pre-application discussions to facilitate high-quality and timely applications; and pre-application consultations to allow applicants to inform and discuss proposals with communities.

A third feature introduced by the SPPS is a new strategic policy for town centres and retailing. The policy promotes a town-centre-first approach for the location of future retail and other town centre land uses and is consistent with the regional development strategy. It seeks to protect and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres and to foster a more sustainable approach to future retail provision.

Finally, the SPPS describes proposed transitional arrangements, which are considered necessary in the short- to medium-term to ensure continuity of planning decisions while councils finalise new plans for their areas. During the interim phase, councils will apply retained operational policies.

The draft SPPS has been subject to a number of impact assessments, including a strategic environmental assessment (SEA). That assessment, which considered the statement's impact on Northern Ireland's environment, was carried out independently by specialist SEA consultants acting on the Department's behalf. An environmental report that was published with the draft SPPS, makes a range of recommendations for mitigating and enhancing the SPPS to improve the overall environmental impact.

As part of the process of preparing the draft SPPS, my officials carried out a series of early stakeholder engagement events, independently facilitated by the Royal Town Planning Institute. Those events included meetings with key stakeholders, such as the business and local government sectors, and my officials sought comments from internal stakeholders.

To sum up, the SPPS supports my vision of creating a better environment and a stronger economy and of bringing forward a planning system that delivers for business, with timely decisions that encourage investment, facilitate employment and aid economic recovery. My new planning system will realise that the environment and the economy should not, and cannot, be at loggerheads. We need a system that protects the environment and fully recognises that a vibrant, sustainable environment can be a driver of prosperity and job creation. Similarly, a strong economy and a prosperous society can be good for the environment.

The SPPS will support and guide local plan making, the design and delivery of individual development proposals and the determination of planning applications and appeals. It will also influence how those functions are carried out.

This is the start of 12 weeks of consultation. I want everyone who is involved in the planning process, be they developers, planners, councils, communities, environmental groups or professional bodies, to work together to shape and influence this planning policy and the future planning system. I am keen for the final SPPS document to reflect all stakeholders' views. Therefore, during the 12-week public consultation, my officials will conduct a further round of stakeholder engagement events that will provide an opportunity to find out more about the SPPS and to ask questions.

Meaningful engagement with stakeholders is a vital part of the policy development. In support of the need for continuous improvement in how the Department serves its citizens, I am pleased to inform Members that the SPPS is being published as an online interactive digital consultation document that aims to make it easier for stakeholders to respond and to provide a better customer experience. This will be the first time that the Department has undertaken a digital-first approach. I encourage everyone with an interest to give us their views by using the digital consultation document. It is only through working together that we can ensure that we achieve an efficient and fit-for-purpose planning system that delivers for all.

10.45 am

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I am absolutely delighted to hear this announcement about the SPPS, and I certainly want to

thank the Minister and his officials very much. They have been working very hard in the past few months to produce this hefty but succinct — hopefully — document. I also congratulate the Department for the extensive process for consultation, because I am sure that there will be a lot of public interest and a lot of responses received.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, may I ask a question as a member of the Environment Committee rather than as its Chair? As the Minister will probably recall, during the ill-fated Planning Bill, with the agreement, I think, of his predecessor, I was to put forward an amendment on shared spaces. I am so glad that, as part of the core planning principles in the SPPS, shared space is going to be included. Will the Minister perhaps elaborate a bit on how the SPPS will promote shared spaces?

Mr Durkan: OK. I thank Ms Lo for her warm welcome for my statement and, indeed, the opening of this consultation period on the strategic planning policy statement. She thanked my officials, and I would like to do the same. They have indeed, as Ms Lo pointed out, been working very hard over the past few months to compile this document, which is hefty. It is also concise. However, it is not yet complete and that is why this consultation process is so important.

On the role of peace-building and shared spaces, I am aware that the Member had tabled an amendment to the Planning Bill along these lines, an amendment to which my predecessor was well-disposed, shall we say. As you know, I decided for legal, procedural and evidential reasons not to move the Planning Bill to Further Consideration Stage. However, that does not diminish my commitment to proactively promoting shared, safer and welcoming places and spaces through the planning system on a number of fronts.

Creating and enhancing shared space will be a core principle of the SPPS. Post-transfer of powers, planning authorities should utilise development planning, regeneration and development management powers to contribute to the creation of an environment that is accessible to all communities, socially and religiously mixed, has a high standard of connectivity and supports shared use of the public realm. Council local development plans will be required to take account of any good relations policies set out within a local community plan by considering the criteria of equality of opportunity, reconciliation, mobility and connectivity in their formulation.

Also, as project partners in the Queen's University Belfast, Peace III project, Planning for Spatial Reconciliation, my Department is working closely with Queen's research staff to explore and exploit opportunities for connecting this research with the process of planning and local government reform. Further guidance will be included in 'Living Places: An Urban Stewardship and Design Guide for Northern Ireland', which I issued for consultation last August and am finalising.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. He made reference in his statement to bringing forward a planning system:

> *"with timely decisions that encourage investment, facilitate employment and aid economic recovery."*

Given the commitment within the statement to the economy and economic development, I want to ask the Minister whether there is specific meat on the bones of that. Can the Minister point to any place within the statement that gives new or additional weight to planning decisions involving economic development or inward investment?

Mr Durkan: As regards meat on the bones, my written statement tabled before the Assembly last week outlined measures that I am taking to improve the planning system, all of which will go some way to creating more certainty in the system. From meeting developers, representatives of developer groups and the frequent objectors to developers and developer groups, I know that the one thing that everyone is crying out for is certainty. That is what will create certainty for investors and what will attract them. They want to know how long it will take for a decision to be reached, the likelihood of success and, therefore, whether to come here. It is my ambition and desire that investors will want to come here. It is important that we show that Northern Ireland is not only open for business but is good for business.

As regards the weighting of economic development as a consideration in planning applications, the new SPPS sets out the overarching core principles of the new planning system. It gives expression to important matters that are in the public interest, including furthering sustainable development and economic development. That core planning principle makes it clear that planning authorities should ensure that economic considerations are accorded appropriate weight in the making of planning decisions.

I am committed to ensuring that this new approach to planning policy plays its part in contributing to growing a dynamic, innovative and sustainable economy in the North. As things stand, consideration and weight are given to economic factors. However, it is not a determining weight, more a material one.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement but I am concerned about it. He is putting weight on economic recovery, but he also stated that this is about consolidation of the planning policy statements. Some of those statements are not fit for purpose, and I will give you two examples. In relation to the Hillsborough —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to a question.

Mr Boylan: I will certainly, Mr Speaker. The proposed Hillsborough Golf Course and Country Club development and the application by DMAC in Tyrone could create over 350 jobs. The criteria in the existing policies mean that there are difficulties with those applications. Will this planning policy statement address the concerns that people have with those applications when it comes to the creation of jobs and economic recovery? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist suimiúil sin. I thank the Member for that interesting question. I fully intend for this statement to provide greater certainty and opportunities for economic development, as outlined in my previous answer.

I am reluctant to get drawn into the specifics of particular planning applications, although I am aware of both applications to which the Member referred. They are at different stages in the planning process. One has been refused and is awaiting a deferred office meeting, and I am

not sure whether a decision has been made on the other one. Both have very differing sets of circumstances, which I would be happy to discuss with the Member following this morning's session. I accept his concerns. This is the launch of a public consultation period. This is a draft SPPS. He may think that it is very "drafty", in which case I invite him to do his best to plug the holes in it.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Colum Eastwood to speak, let us be careful that we do not pull the Minister into individual planning applications. Let us have questions on the statement.

Mr Eastwood: Thanks for that guidance: I will keep my question suitably broad. Will the Minister outline the changes he has made so far to improve the planning system?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Eastwood for that broad question. I will give him a broad, in no way prepared, answer. *[Laughter.]* I recognise that the planning system can and should do much more to unlock development potential, support job creation and aid economic recovery. I want to create a better environment and a stronger economy. My aim, as I have stated — maybe ad nauseam — is to create a planning system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose, works to achieve that and delivers for business with timely decisions that bring investment and jobs but not at the expense of our environment, planet or people.

This is an exciting and challenging time for planning. In just 14 months' time, our 11 new councils will be responsible for drawing up their own development plans, making the majority of planning decisions and shaping how their areas will grow and develop in a way that responds to the needs of their local communities. It is my job to ensure that we transfer planning as seamlessly as possible and ensure that the new system is in the best possible shape for transfer.

Just last week, I made a written statement to the Assembly setting out five key actions that I want to focus on to bring the new system to life over the coming months. I want to shorten and simplify policy, which is why I am here today, by moving to the SPPS rather than the 20 separate policy publications. I want to initiate key reforms to the planning system. Although the Planning Bill, as originally intended, would have allowed us to do many of those on a legislative basis, we can set measures in place without legislation, such as new local development plan preparatory work; the new hierarchy of development arrangements; extending pre-application discussions; and encouraging more widespread pre-application community consultation. Better-informed applications will be processed more quickly.

I especially want to tackle consultees' response times. Members will be delighted to hear that I want to do so, particularly with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in my Department. I want to improve customer service and access to case officers — I know that that is another bone of contention for Members — so that queries can be addressed as quickly as possible. I want to ensure that all those with responsibility for delivering the new system have the capacity to do so.

These measures will benefit all users of the planning system, including communities that want to input in a genuine and meaningful way to development plans for their areas and to be consulted before applications are submitted. Developers will also benefit because, as I said, they will have more certainty through speedier decisions and outcomes. The environment will benefit from better-informed decisions, and the Department will benefit in the short term. Councils will reap benefits in the longer term through improved efficiencies and performance. These actions have received widespread support and were welcomed by a number of organisations, including the Confederation of British Industry, the Construction Employers Federation and the Institute of Directors.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for the statement. I welcome the new strategic planning policy statement. It is a wee bit difficult to ask about specifics because we have only the statement in front of us and not the actual document. Did the Minister have to make any changes to the strategic planning policy because of his actions in having to withdraw the Planning Bill?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Elliott for his question. As outlined in my previous answer, a lot of the changes proposed in the Planning Bill, as intended, can and will be implemented, but not through legislation. I suppose that you are more interested in what is not in it than what is, so I will chat about the aspects of the Bill that have not been implemented through the SPPS and what will happen to the planned changes.

Some reforms, which will not have a legislative footing until the 2011 Act is commenced, can be brought forward and tested administratively. Pre-application community consultation is already being tested with developers on a voluntary basis. The Windsor Park stadium redevelopment is a prime example. That application was granted planning permission only 11 weeks after it was received by the Department and had not attracted any objections from the public.

11.00 am

I know that the pre-application community consultation does not necessarily mean that there will not be any objections — our colleagues from West Belfast will be aware of that. I will continue to encourage this pre-application community consultation in other proposals.

We have also been working closely with statutory consultees through service level agreements to improve response times to planning application consultations. We will continue to do so in advance of a statutory time frame for responses, which I hope to introduce separately.

Inevitably, some elements will require legislative provision: for example, enhanced powers to determine applications, shorter time limits for submitting planning appeals and increasing penalties for a range of offences. These will commence in 2015, but, in the interim, a wide-ranging package of capacity building measures for the new arrangements will ensure that we are all ready for the transfer of the reformed system in 2015.

Mr Campbell: The Minister said in his statement that he wanted:

> *"to create a planning system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose."*

That is strong on alliteration, but people will want to know more. If his draft policy statement proceeds and becomes operative, will large-scale planning applications that have the potential to deliver thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland, such as the one outside Lisburn and one near Londonderry, be delivered, taking account of

any objections, in good time so that the economy can be regenerated and people in those areas can benefit as a result?

Mr Durkan: I just thought of another "f".

As I said, this is about creating speedier decisions and greater certainty on outcomes for developers and developments of all sizes and in all areas. I am not aware of any such current application for a development outside Lisburn. I do not want to get caught up in particular applications, but I am not sure that there is a live application for a development outside Lisburn that would meet that description. However, I assure the Member that all steps will be taken to ensure that quick and proper decisions are made on all applications. With the new hierarchy of development, resources will be allocated accordingly to such applications.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Might the draft strategic planning policy statement contribute to the opening up of possibilities in rural communities that have been hamstrung by the out-of-date zoning of industrial land? In many cases, area plans are way out of date. In places such as Fintona, in County Tyrone, there is suitable land for industrial development, but, because of the out-of-date nature of the area plans, things cannot happen.

Mr Speaker: Is there a question somewhere?

Mr McElduff: Might we see the opening up of possibilities under this strategic approach? I thank the Minister for his statement, of course.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I thank the Member for his question. Yes, I am hopeful that it will open up possibilities. I have responded to questions from other Members by saying that this is a draft policy statement, and I look forward to input from all Members. The list of respondents on how the statement can be improved will go way beyond the membership of the House.

In last week's debate in the Chamber on PPS 21, I pointed to this consultation period as an opportunity to improve that policy. I am aware of other difficulties in rural areas, such as that which the Member has outlined. I view this as a tremendous opportunity for me as Minister and, indeed, for you as Members to shape planning policy for the years to come.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his statement. My question follows on from some of the questions from my colleagues on building and securing economic prosperity and moving forward on planning. I note the Minister's intention that we will have a planning process that is:

"fast, fair and fit for purpose."

Where is the synergy between the area plans, such the northern area plan in my constituency, which has been on the go since 2001 —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr Storey: I ask the Minister where the synergy is between the area plans, the statement and the way in which he is intending to reform the Planning Service.

Mr Durkan: Work has commenced between departmental officials, local government officials and soon-to-be shadow council members on the formation of new area plans. It is a very important phase. Indeed, I said that it is an exciting time for planning. It is also a very challenging one, because, in the transition between the existing raft of planning policy statements and the implementation of the SPPS, there will be a period in which we look at existing, retained policy statements. That is what we will be using to draw up the new local area plans. Obviously, the role of local government in that cannot be understated. However, it is vital that the Department retain an oversight role to ensure, for example, that one council cluster is not, in its area plan, proposing something that will be hugely detrimental to a neighbouring council or councils. "Synergy" is the word that the Member used, and we will need to use a lot of energy to ensure that that synergy does exist. I look forward to his cooperation in doing that.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's statement, and I wish his objectives well. From talking to investors coming to Northern Ireland, one thing that strikes me is the need for policy certainty, and I hope that the statement can bring about a situation in which policy certainty can be created. There is a gap at present, and it relates to the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP). Can the Minister provide some detail on why BMAP has not yet been adopted?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Maginness for the question. I was asked a few questions on BMAP at my previous Question Time, and it has been the subject of much correspondence from other Members and, indeed, from developers and people outside of the House. My Department submitted BMAP to the Department for Regional Development for assessment against the regional development strategy 2035. I can confirm that the plan was awarded a certificate of general conformity on 21 October last year. I recognise the importance of the plan for the region's future development, as well as the need to ensure that it is adopted and published in its final form as soon as possible. I have sought agreement from my ministerial colleagues that my Department now adopt and publish the plan.

Mr Beggs: The Minister is consulting on very significant changes to the planning system, condensing the many statements into a single strategic planning policy statement. Will he outline the schedule that he foresees for adopting the new SPPS and the subsequent necessary training of planning officers and councillors? Will he ensure that there will be a fair and robust planning system suitable for devolving to local councils in the future?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Beggs for the question, and I reiterate that this is about more than condensing existing policy. I view it very much as an opportunity to improve planning policy here. However, the question about the timeline is a pertinent one.

Today, we see the start of a 12-week consultation period on the draft document. I would very much like to be able to bring the final document back before the House before the end of this year. I know one thing for sure, and that is that we need to do so in advance of transfer on 1 April 2015. I would like to do so well in advance of transfer so that the new system can be road-tested.

The question of capacity building is a very important one, and it is one that I am asked increasingly often at the moment, as I am doing a tour of statutory transition committees. I recall from my time on Derry City Council that often, during a planning committee meeting, councillors

would rub their hands and say, "I can't wait to get planning" when they did not agree with a recommendation from planning officers. I am seeing an increasing reluctance to accept planning powers among councillors now as the sheer weight of responsibility that will come with that function dawns on them. For that reason, it is essential that we provide capacity training for councillors. It is vital that they have not just the competence to make sound planning decisions but the confidence to do so.

My predecessor secured £3 million from the Executive to allocate directly to capacity building. I think that it is safe enough to assume that the vast majority of that money will be spent on capacity training in planning, in particular. Some capacity-building events have already been held and have been well attended. However, we cannot really ramp that up until after the elections when we will know who is on the shadow councils and, therefore, who, on a personal basis, will be taking on those new powers.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement. The Minister referred to the issue around the policy promoting a town-centre-first approach for the location of future retail and other town centre land uses. Can the Minister put a bit of detail on how he hopes that will be delivered, taking on board the concerns that many have in town centres about out-of-town development? Can the Minister comment on how he feels that those two things can come together, given the concerns that retailers have in that respect?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for the question. Now that the document is out for consultation, I fully expect PPS 5, which deals with retailing and town centres, to be one of the most thumbed chapters of this document. It is one that I receive quite a lot of correspondence on, and I know that all Members in this House will also be lobbied strongly on it.

A consultant team led by GL Hearn carried out a comprehensive review of existing town centres in the North last year. A key aspect of the work was engagement with local stakeholders, including MLAs, on the future of city and town centres and retailing. The updated evidential context and the consultants' recommendations on possible future planning policy direction have been reflected in the SPPS. The new draft strategic town centres and retailing policy aims to support and sustain vibrant town centres across the North, consistent with the retail development strategy 2035.

The policy objectives are: to secure a town-centres-first approach for the location of future retailing and other main town centre uses; to adopt a sequential approach to the identification of retail and main town centre uses in local development plans and when taking decisions; to ensure local development plans and decisions are informed by robust and up-to-date evidence in relation to need and capacity; to protect and enhance diversity in the range of town centre uses appropriate to their role and function, such as leisure, cultural and community facilities, housing and business; to promote high-quality design to ensure that town centres provide sustainable, attractive, accessible and safe environments; and to maintain and improve accessibility to and within town centres.

Obviously, a lot of the work that has to be done, and that is ongoing, to protect and promote town centres falls outwith my Department's remit. However, I am keen and, indeed, happy to work with other Departments such as DSD, DRD and DFP to ensure that we do all that we can to protect and enhance the vitality of our town centres.

11.15 am

Mr Craig: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will start by keeping myself right with you. I will refer to paragraph 4 of the statement, which states:

> *"The return of planning powers to local councils on 1 April 2015".*

I hope that the Minister can confirm that that is not an April Fool's joke. More seriously, with the granting of powers to local councillors, they will become decision-makers, whereas, at present, they are lobbyists in the planning process. There is a massive conflict of interest between those two roles. Minister, can you give the House assurances that clear guidance will be given to new councillors on that conflict of interest that now lies in their new role?

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Craig. First of all, I assure the Member that it is not an April Fool. If it does not happen, I will be the one who looks the fool, so hopefully not. Mr Beggs asked about capacity building, and that hit exactly on what Mr Craig is asking. In my answer, I said that I understand that the councillors are now a bit more reticent about receiving the responsibility for making planning decisions than they were a few years ago. That is because of the realisation of the difficulties that it will cause them in their role as public representatives.

Of the £3 million that is for capacity building in local government reform, I fully expect that the majority of it will be spent on planning training. That will be a key aspect of it. It is a lot more difficult when you have the responsibility to make a decision than it is to call for something or to criticise someone for not making something happen. There is also the potential conflict of interest that could arise and that will be created for councillors who have always been poachers until now but who will be forced to take on a gamekeeper role.

That is why, as part of the Bill on the reform of local government, I expect quite a lot of focus to be on the establishment of planning committees in the new councils. As it stands, councils are set up differently. In Derry, for example, all members of council sit on the planning committee. I no longer expect that to be the case, but it is certainly something that we will keep a very close eye on.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. Can he tell us about the vexed issue of fracking? Would a fracking prospecting licence application be considered by a local authority, a central planning directorate or a combination of both? Where are we with that?

Mr Durkan: That is a "boring" subject. *[Laughter.]* I thank the Member for the question. Given the controversy surrounding fracking, I would fully expect — if not insist — that that would be a matter of regional significance and would therefore be treated as an article 31 application. So, any decision on that would still be made centrally.

My position is reaffirmed in the draft SPPS that there should be a presumption against the exploitation of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction until the Department is satisfied that there is sufficient and robust evidence on all environmental impacts. There is ongoing work in DOE and by DOE and NIEA, in conjunction with the Environmental Protection Agency and our counterparts in the Republic, to enhance knowledge of the fracking process.

That could ultimately, I suppose, suggest refinement of that position. In the meantime, it is proposed that the policy position as expressed in the draft should be retained. However, as I said, it is a draft, and we will use the consultation period to take on board the views of others.

Mr Allister: I do not know whether the Minister said that his statement had been approved by the Executive. However, commonality might disappear with the devolving of planning powers to 11 different councils. For example, can we expect to see differing and contradictory approaches across councils to something like wind farm blight, where some councils might embrace the folly of the most expensive form of energy while others might protect consumers and the countryside from that blight? Is there going to be the opportunity for differing approaches on an issue like that?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Allister for his question. He did not hear me say whether or not I have consulted the Executive on the draft. I have not. Obviously, however, before publication of the policy in final form, I will bring it to the Executive for consideration and approval.

The issue of consistency, or fear of a lack thereof, is a very real one, and one that I expressed to officials as recently as this morning. It must again be reinforced that the Department will retain an overarching and policy responsibility for planning matters and will be integral in the drawing up of local area plans with the new councils and new councillors. Obviously those will have to be drawn up bearing in mind planning policy. As expressed on a previous occasion in the House, it is my intention to bring forward a land use strategy for the whole of Northern Ireland, which, again, will help to determine applications such as those for wind farms, to which Mr Allister refers.

Mr Agnew: Like many others, I welcome the Minister's statement. He refers to after the devolution of powers to councils and states that our planning system will be more open, accountable and inclusive, which of course I welcome. The one word that is missing is "transparent". Does the Minister accept that, for as long as parties fail to publish who donates to the party, the planning system cannot be transparent and, indeed, will continue to be open to corruption?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is well outside the ministerial statement. It is very unfair to ask the Minister to comment on donations to political parties in Northern Ireland. I think that we should leave it there.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement. Mr Allister touched on my question, but I will ask it anyway. The Minister will be aware that concerns have been raised in Committee about the inconsistent approach by planners across Northern Ireland. How will the single strategic planning policy statement lead to a more unified approach in the application process, in particular as functions are transferred to councils?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mrs Cameron for the question. The previous question I answered dealt with fear of inconsistency under the new system. However, this question deals with the impression that there may be inconsistency in our present system.

Obviously planning policy is there as a guide for planners. However, planners ultimately have to make decisions on applications. I have no doubt that, on occasion — in fact, on many occasions — planners differ in opinions. That is why the group system exists in divisional planning offices whereby planning officers will discuss and, I suppose, debate planning applications on their merits or otherwise before formulating an opinion, which will then come to council; where elected members will disagree with it as well in many cases.

It is important therefore that, where possible, policy is adhered to. However, I believe that policy should also allow the flexibility for planners to be more creative, particularly when the powers will be going to local government. It is important that they are responsive to the needs and desires of local communities. Mr Allister used the example of wind farms. His concern is about how an inconsistent approach might impact there. Given that the buck will stop with elected representatives, any fear that something will be imposed on a community against its wishes might well be unfounded.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Mo buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement. He touched on PPS 21. Will he give us an assurance that the SPPS will explore further opportunities for single dwellings in the countryside to accommodate non-farming country dwellers?

Mr Durkan: Ná habair é, agus go raibh maith agat as an cheist. In my earlier answer to the Member's colleague Mr McElduff and, I suppose, on the back of the debate that we had in the Chamber last week on PPS 21, I mentioned the opportunities that it affords to rural dwellers of non-farming and farming backgrounds alike. During that debate, statistics were aired that indeed showed the likelihood of success of applications for single dwellings in the countryside and that vast improvements have been made. Certainly, PPS 21, as it stands, is a huge improvement on the overly prohibitive PPS 14. Subsequent to my predecessor Alex Attwood's working review of the policy, further improvements along the lines that the Member would like to see have been made.

Last week, I said — and I will say it again this week — that this provides an opportunity to Members, planning experts and members of the public to have their input into planning policy and how we move forward with it. If the Member believes that improvements can be made, we will certainly look forward to considering them.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of the anomalous situation whereby people in the countryside were awarded funding for small businesses from DARD through the rural development programme but had difficulty getting planning permission from his Department. Bearing in mind that the new rural development programme is under consideration, will the new draft planning policy take that into consideration?

Mr Durkan: I am aware that this is another difficulty that faces, and is felt in, rural communities. In response to the previous question, we are talking about making it possible for people to live in rural communities. It is also important that we make it possible for people to work in rural communities. We have an open door and an open book. I am looking forward to taking into consideration any matters that Members or indeed anyone wishes to raise.

Executive Committee Business

Reservoirs Bill: Second Stage

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Reservoirs Bill [NIA 31/11-15] be agreed.

The purpose of the Reservoirs Bill is to introduce a legal and administrative framework for regulating reservoir safety in order to reduce the risk of flooding as a result of dam failure in the North of Ireland. When enacted, the legislation will provide assurance that people, the environment, cultural heritage and economic activity are better protected from the potential risks of flooding from reservoirs.

11.30 am

The Bill will regulate reservoirs that are structures or areas capable of holding 10,000 cubic metres or more of water above the natural level of any part of the surrounding land and that are created wholly or partially by artificial means. These will be known as controlled reservoirs. To assist you in visualising what 10,000 cubic metres looks like, it is the volume of four Olympic-sized swimming pools.

There are a number of exclusions from the legislation, including natural lakes, canals, quarry ponds, sewage lagoons and slurry pits. The legislation will make it clear that reservoir managers are responsible for reservoir safety and will require them to commission qualified engineers to supervise, undertake routine inspections and oversee any remedial works in reservoirs. Managers should not view those duties as an unnecessary regulatory burden but rather as an assurance that the safety of the reservoir is being managed and, therefore, their liability in the event of a dam failure may be limited.

In order to ensure that the legislation is proportionate, the level of regulation to the reservoirs will be determined by the degree of risk to people, the environment, the economy and cultural heritage. The management regime will, therefore, be related to the potential consequence of reservoir failure. The Reservoirs Bill is entirely focused on the management of reservoirs to prevent an uncontrolled release of water as a result of a dam failure. It does not deal with any other aspects of reservoirs, such as drowning, the security of public water supply or water quality, as those are outside the remit of my Department.

Before I set out the key features of the Bill, I will outline the background and the need for legislation. The EU floods directive requires that all significant flood risks are managed in an appropriate manner. To identify the potential sources of flooding on significant flood risk areas, my Department carried out a preliminary flood risk assessment in 2010. That assessment identified that 66,000 people live in the potential inundation area of the 156 impounding reservoirs that are capable of holding 10,000 cubic metres of water or more. I am sure that you will agree that that is a significant number of people, and we should be in a position to provide assurance to them that they are not at imminent risk due to dam failure.

It is worth saying at this time that there have been a number of incidents in the North of Ireland due to dam failure at reservoirs in the past: 1822 in Keady; 1876 in Carrickfergus; 1902 in Belfast; 1971 in Derry; and 1980 in Hillsborough. The most recent incident took place in 1998 when flooding in the Doagh area was attributed to the collapse of a spill weir and resulted in a number of houses being flooded. Fortunately, none of those incidents resulted in the loss of life. However, the same cannot be said for England, Scotland and Wales, where 352 lives have been lost as a result of dam failure between 1852 and 1930.

The year 1930 is important in reservoir safety terms as that was when the first regulation was introduced. Since then, there has been no loss of life across Britain as a result of a reservoir failure. However, that has not stopped the legislators and policymakers seeking to improve reservoir safety. The 1930s legislation was replaced by the Reservoirs Act 1975, and that was further amended in England and Wales by the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 and is being replaced in Scotland by the Reservoirs (Scotland) Act 2011.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for giving way. There is a unique situation in the Foyle constituency, where we have a not-for-profit organisation managing two reservoirs in Creggan Country Park. That would put additional resource pressures on organisations. Will you look at that unique situation? It is grand for a Department to fit the costs that you are expecting of them — rightly so — but it is putting undue pressure on a not-for-profit and charitable organisation. Will the Minister comment on that?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is quick off the mark. I will come to that point later. I have also been contacted by the group that you mention, and my colleagues have raised the issue with me. I will address that point as I go through my opening remarks.

There are a lot of similarities in the legislation that I have just referred to in England, Scotland and Wales and the Reservoirs Bill that we are debating today. They all seek to be proportionate in their management regime by adopting a risk-based approach to reservoirs with the capacity threshold of 10,000 cubic metres or more. The capacity threshold of 10,000 cubic metres is generally agreed by reservoir engineers as the volume that has the potential to result in loss of life and significant damage to property.

Most of the impounding reservoirs in the North of Ireland are over 100 years old, and comments made at stakeholder events held as part of the policy development for the legislation indicate that many have not been subject to routine inspection and, therefore, are in need of maintenance. It was also evident at those events that reservoir managers are totally unaware of their common law liability in the event of dam failure.

The legislation will, therefore, establish a framework for what is considered to be a reasonable management regime of a reservoir, which complies with industry best practice. It will also provide assurances that the safety of reservoirs, and hence the risk of flooding, is being appropriately and proportionately managed.

At this stage, I wish to thank all those who attended stakeholder and information events and responded to the public consultation exercise, and the members of the Institution of Civil Engineers' reservoir safety advisory group, who provided excellent technical advice. I also thank the Chairman and members of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee for facilitating presentations from my officials, for their comments, which

have helped to shape the policy and the Bill, and for taking time out of their busy work schedule to visit Kiltonga reservoir in Newtownards. I very much appreciate the input of all the stakeholders, individuals and organisations who contributed significantly to the Bill's development.

The Bill contains nine Parts, 121 clauses and four schedules.

Part 1 sets out the definition of a controlled reservoir and, importantly, what types of structures will not be regulated by the legislation. That is central to the legislation. It is, therefore, important to stress that it is structures or areas designed or used for the collection and storage of 10,000 cubic metres of water or more above the natural level of any part of the surrounding land that will be known as controlled reservoirs and subject to regulation. It will also include smaller reservoirs that, individually, do not meet the volume threshold but where, if water can flow between them, the combined capacity is 10,000 cubic metres or more.

The Bill also contains a power by regulation for my Department to provide that a smaller reservoir may be regulated if it is established that it poses significant risk or will have a widespread impact. That provision is only precautionary at this stage and is unlikely to be used by the Department.

Part 1 also defines the term "reservoir manager" as the person with responsibility for reservoir safety and, therefore, charged with ensuring that an adequate management regime is in place. The registration system that will apply to controlled reservoirs and the risk designation process to be undertaken by the Department are also detailed in that Part.

The risk designation will determine the management regime to be applied to a reservoir and is principally based on the potential consequence of reservoir failure on human life, economic activity, the environment and cultural heritage. The Bill provides for three classifications of risk: high, medium or low. That will determine the levels of supervision and inspection required by reservoir engineers. Basically, reservoirs designated as high risk will require more supervision and inspection than a medium-risk reservoir. Obviously, reservoirs designated as low risk will be required to be registered but will not be subject to the supervision and inspection requirements of high-risk and medium-risk reservoirs.

Part 2 sets out the supervision, inspection and record-keeping requirements for high- and medium-risk reservoirs. Such reservoirs that have been inspected prior to the commencement of the legislation may have their reports recognised, provided they meet certain requirements. That may reduce the initial regulatory and financial burden on some reservoir managers.

Part 3 sets out the requirements for the construction or alteration of a controlled reservoir and defines terms such as "abandonment" and "discontinuance". Abandonment is when a reservoir is made to be no longer capable of holding water above the natural level of any part of the surrounding land, generally by the removal of the dam structure. Discontinuance is when the reservoir is capable of holding some water but not 10,000 cubic metres of water above the natural level of any part of the surrounding land. In those cases, the requirement of the legislation would no longer apply to the reservoir.

Part 4 deals with other requirements such as incident reporting, flood plans and the display of emergency information.

Part 5 provides for a means of arbitration between reservoir managers and their engineers. So, for example, when a reservoir manager disagrees with the direction in a safety report, inspection report or recommendation as to the date of the next inspection, he or she can challenge that by referring it to a referee. That ability to challenge should provide reservoir managers with an assurance that reservoir engineers will act reasonably, with professional integrity and abide by their professional code of conduct.

Part 6 provides the Department with a range of powers such as the ability to enforce the commissioning of engineers, to take safety measures and to step in to undertake emergency works to prevent an uncontrolled release of water from a reservoir. The Department will also have the power by regulation to create a system of stop notices, enforcement undertakings and a suite of civil sanctions as an alternative to prosecution proceedings.

Part 7 enables the Department to establish one or more panels of reservoir engineers who will play an important role in the supervision, inspection and construction of controlled reservoirs. The legislation will allow for transitional arrangements whereby reservoir engineers appointed under the Reservoirs Act 1975 may be appointed to the panels. That should alleviate any initial concerns that there may not be enough qualified engineers in the North of Ireland when the legislation commences.

Parts 8 and 9 contain miscellaneous and general provisions, including consequential and minor amendments. I do, however, want to draw particular attention to the power for my Department to introduce a grant scheme by regulation. I will be willing to consider the need for such a grant scheme if, following the first inspection, safety works are required. As you will be aware, any such scheme will be subject to budget cover and Executive approval. Although the scope and conditions of the scheme will be considered at that time, it is very likely that any scheme will be limited to providing financial assistance for works required in the interest of reservoir safety. That takes on board the question asked by groups that have contacted us during the consultation about their responsibilities, given that they are community and voluntary organisations. General maintenance or other works due to neglect are therefore unlikely to be funded, but we can take a look at the wider grant scheme by regulation.

My Department will be responsible for administering and enforcing the legislation, and it is proposed that a dedicated unit, known as the reservoir authority, will be established to undertake that role.

Before Members debate the principles of the Bill, I emphasise that this is very much a risk-based approach to the management and regulation of reservoirs. It will ensure that each controlled reservoir will be subject to a proportionate supervision and inspection regime, depending on its risk classification. That will enable assurance that the potential risk from flooding as a result of dam failure is being appropriately managed. I am satisfied that the potential risk of flooding to people, the environment, cultural heritage and economic activity will

be significantly reduced by the implementation of the Bill. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her address to the Bill. I rise as Chairperson of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee to speak on the Reservoirs Bill. I speak in the expectation that, at the close of the debate, and assuming that the Bill passes this stage, it will be referred to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development for its Committee Stage.

A few weeks ago, the Minister introduced the Bill to the Assembly as a Bill to protect the public from the risk of flooding arising from reservoirs. The Bill's contents and policy aims have been outlined by the Minister. With nine Parts, 121 clauses and four schedules, it is a highly technical Bill, and not one that makes light or easy reading. It has come about because, if all 151 controlled reservoirs in Northern Ireland flooded or failed, 66,000 people would be at risk. Now, the likelihood of all 151 reservoirs breaching at the same time and without notice must be an extreme one, of course. Nevertheless, we now have to have a 75-page Bill to deal with it.

That leads me on to the first point, which various members of the Committee have mentioned about the Bill: is this in fact a sledgehammer to crack a nut? That is certainly an issue that the Committee will wish to explore with witnesses and experts as we undertake our detailed scrutiny of the legislation and its impact.

In my speech today, I will, on behalf of the Committee, outline the work that the Committee has done to date on the Bill. I will also outline some of the key issues raised by the Committee to date, and which we expect to fully explore during the Committee Stage. Finally, I will briefly outline who the Committee will take evidence from and why.

The Committee has been engaged for some time with the Rivers Agency, which, of course, is leading on the Bill. The total dam breach of a reservoir is recognised as a possible source of flooding that has the potential to cause catastrophic damage to those living and working in the reservoir's inundation area. Hence the need for legislation to prevent that happening in Northern Ireland.

The Committee has been told that the proposals for the Bill are designed to create a legal and administration framework to reduce and manage the risk from flooding from reservoirs. The intention is that the Bill will be based on industry best practice and that it will require operators and owners to carry out their duties in a manner that ensures, as far as is reasonable and practicable, the safety of their structures, without an unnecessary regulatory burden. It will be based on a risk-based approach for the management and regulation of reservoirs to protect the public.

The Committee has received oral briefings on the policy development and progress of the drafting of the Bill on a semi-regular basis during this mandate. During one of those briefings, the Committee asked that Rivers Agency assess the impact of the proposed reservoir legislation on those reservoirs that are regarded as community assets; assets that are used by local communities for social and recreational purposes. The Committee requested that information because it was concerned that some reservoir owners may wish to drain or empty their reservoir, or reduce the amount of water, in order not to fall under the legislation. In doing so, the reservoir owner may remove a community asset.

The result of the work that Rivers Agency undertook on that aspect was presented to the Committee in April 2013 and provided members with sufficient detail to begin to assess the impact that the legislation might have on the community, social and recreational uses of reservoirs. That information is also on the DARD website if any Member wishes to find out any more about reservoirs in his or her constituency.

11.45 am

The Committee also undertook a site visit, as the Minister mentioned, to Kiltonga reservoir just outside Newtownards. That reservoir was given as an example of a community asset that the public widely use for recreational purposes. Kiltonga reservoir is in public ownership. In that case, it is owned by DARD and seems to be very well maintained. Thus, the risk that is posed to a very large area of Newtownards is minimised. The reservoir and its surroundings are managed in partnership with the local council regarding paths and enabling public access. That outlines, in brief, the work that the Committee has done to date on the Bill.

I will now briefly outline the main issues that have arisen for the Committee and that we expect to explore in detail during Committee Stage, if we get there. Is the Bill proportionate to the risks that are involved? Has the Bill been gold-plated in any way? Is the proposal to define a controlled reservoir as one that is capable of holding 10,000 cubic metres or more of water appropriate? What about the costs to the private sector and third sector in complying with the Bill? What potential impact will it have on planning policy and household insurances? What about grant aid to ensure that reservoir owners can comply with the legislation? How will disputes and appeals be managed? What are the secondary legislation provisions in the Bill, and are they proportionate and appropriate? Members, that is not a definitive list, and we fully expect further issues to arise during Committee Stage.

Let me take a few minutes to explain some of those issues in a little detail. As I mentioned, the legislation will place new operational requirements on the owners and managers of 151 structures that are capable of holding 10,000 cubic metres or more of water above the natural level of the surrounding land. The legislation will place a regulatory requirement around reservoirs to try to prevent failure of the structure and thus flooding. We do not disagree that this is required, but we want to make sure that the regulatory requirements are appropriate and proportionate to the risk and impact of a reservoir flooding. The Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, with its experience of the agriculture and agrifood sector, has seen how primary legislation, secondary legislation and EU legislation in particular can sometimes be gold-plated to the detriment of business.

That point is linked closely to the next key issue, which is the definition of 10,000 cubic metres. The Committee has heard that the rest of the UK currently has legislation that uses a 25,000 cubic metre definition. The Scottish Parliament has passed the Reservoirs (Scotland) Act 2011. Under that Act, the defining level will come down to 10,000 cubic metres, but that has not been enacted or commenced as yet. So, we will want to explore what the

defining level should be for Northern Ireland, and we will want to explore what the consequences of different levels will be on issues such as numbers of controlled reservoirs, costs and the burden to the owners.

The anticipated costs that reservoir owners will have to bear to comply with the legislation is an area that the Committee is likely to have some concerns with. We are aware that ownership of reservoirs is roughly at 76 in the public sector, 59 in the private sector, nine in the third sector and seven with ownership unknown. We know that the single largest owner is Northern Ireland Water (NIW). It and, we assume, most other public body owners are already operating to the spirit of the proposed legislation. Subsequently, we do not expect that the operating requirements for that group will be either too onerous or will have new financial implications. That may not be the case for the private sector, most of which comprises private individuals, and the third sector, which involves bodies such as fishing clubs, social enterprises and charities. I do not want to suggest that those groups have been operating their reservoirs in an unsafe manner, but they most likely have not been operating to the spirit of the proposed legislation. They are maybe not even aware of the legislation in GB.

Yet very soon, as soon as this Bill is passed and commenced, they will have to pay for inspecting engineers, supervisory engineers and a rigorous repair and maintenance programme, if that is considered necessary. The cost of that may come as a shock to some of those people and owners. The initial consultation, undertaken by Rivers Agency, provided an outline of estimated costs, ranging from £2,000 to £4,000 for an inspection by an approved engineer, and that could happen twice a year for a high-risk reservoir. Remedial work could range from concrete repairs costing £15,000 to some extensive work that could cost anything between £75,000 and £150,000. Rivers Agency is very clear that those are only rough costs and the need for such works on a regular basis will vary considerably, depending on the structure and its condition. Nevertheless, there is some evidence to suggest that private owners and charity owners of high- or medium-risk reservoirs could be facing additional charges of between £6,000 and £7,000 or more a year. To the private individual owner or small local charity, such costs are substantial and could make them go out of business. So, please be assured that the Committee will explore such costs in great detail with the relevant witnesses.

Rivers Agency has recognised that this legislation may well have a detrimental financial impact on private owners and charities. Within the Bill, it has proposed a grant scheme to be enacted if necessary. I suspect that it will be a critical issue. However, a legal basis for a grant scheme is no good if the funds to back it up are not in place. So, we will be exploring how much Rivers Agency might consider it will need on an annual basis for such a grant scheme and where it thinks the funding might come from. I will take a little bit of licence here and go so far as to say that the Committee will need definitive assurances that any potential grant scheme will be funded before it can be truly content with the Bill as it stands.

Linked to that issue is that of operating requirements or the extent of the administrative and financial burden. The requirements for inspection and maintenance are linked to the risk assessment. There are three levels of risk: high, medium and low. The requirements under each level vary according to the risk. The Committee will want to assure itself that the requirements at high- and medium-risk level are appropriate and not unnecessarily burdensome financially. There also appears to be very little difference in the operating requirements at high and medium risk, and that will need to be explored at Committee Stage.

Another major issue that taxes some of the Committee members is the impact on community assets and community use of reservoirs. We have heard that from Members' contributions, even at this early stage. Reservoirs and their environments are often very pleasant landscapes and used for a variety of activities, from walking and family outings to boating and fishing. Access is often free of charge. The Committee is concerned that the legislation may cause reservoir owners and managers to consider discontinuing the reservoir by reducing its capacity or taking it under the 10,000 cubic metre threshold or abandoning the reservoir so that it no longer holds water above the natural level of the surrounding land. If that happened, it could mean the loss of significant amenities to the local community. That is one of the reasons why the Committee asked Rivers Agency to carry out the community assets survey.

Some of the other issues that have been mentioned in the Committee meetings but have not yet been explored in great detail include the potential impacts on household insurances, once the reservoir flood inundation maps are made public and, indeed, what account Planning Service will take of such.

The cost to Rivers Agency to develop, implement and eventually police this legislation has also been discussed at the Committee, and we will obviously wish to explore the dispute and appeals mechanism in some detail to assure ourselves that it is fair, cost-effective and capable of acting in a timely manner.

I will now briefly outline the work programme that the Committee has proposed to undertake. We will speak to as many owners or managers of reservoirs as we can. The ownership of the 151 reservoirs that are likely to come under this legislation has already been mentioned as follows: 76 or some 50% are owned by the public sector; 59 or some 39% by the private sector; nine or some 6% by the third sector, that is the National Trust, angling clubs, social enterprises, charities etc; and seven or some 5% are orphaned or the ownership is unknown. The single largest owner is Northern Ireland Water, with 48 reservoirs. The Committee, therefore, will take evidence from that organisation. We will explore all the issues I mentioned earlier with Northern Ireland Water. We will also want to explore the implications for reservoir safety of the proposed sale by Northern Ireland Water of up to 18 reservoirs. The production and testing of a plan to cope with a reservoir breaching and flooding will also be of interest to the Committee.

Although there are reservoirs in practically all council areas, only 10 councils are likely to become reservoir managers as defined by the scope of the Bill, with those councils owning or being responsible for the reservoir. The councils are Ards, Banbridge, Belfast, Craigavon, Carrickfergus, Dungannon, Fermanagh, Lisburn, Newry and Mourne and Newtownabbey. The Committee decided, therefore, that it needs to hear from local government about what the legislation means for it. The Committee

will request written evidence from all councils that own reservoirs, and it will take oral evidence from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and from Belfast, Craigavon and Newry and Mourne councils. This is particularly important as council-owned reservoirs are also likely to be community assets. We will also wish to hear about the potential cost to the ratepayer for an increase in the operating regimes of councils regarding reservoirs and the plans they have in place to cope with any reservoirs that breach or cause flooding. That leaves nearly 50% of reservoirs that are owned by the private sector and third sector, by which I mean a combination of individuals, private sector companies, angling clubs, social enterprises and charities. The Committee will hear from two angling clubs that own reservoirs, and it has invited two other charitable and social enterprise owners of reservoirs as well.

The inspection and supervisory regime, as well as the recommendations for the maintenance required, will be undertaken by a panel of engineers drawn from the Institution of Civil Engineers. They also have a role to play in the dispute and appeals mechanism. As the majority of costs relating to inspection and supervision will arise from the panel of engineers, I imagine that the Committee will be interested in exploring cost issues in some detail. We also hope to take evidence from local government and private sector owners in Scotland and/or England by videoconference about what it is like, and how much it costs, to live under similar legislation in those jurisdictions.

Reservoirs are important parts of our environment. Many are in areas of outstanding natural beauty or of special scientific interest. We will explore that aspect and the decommissioning aspects with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). We have already identified one private owner, and we hope to identify more in the coming weeks, from which to receive oral and written evidence. I am sure that, as the weeks go on, further issues might come to the surface that we will wish to explore in further detail.

That completes what I wish to say on behalf of the Committee. I will now take the opportunity to say a few words as an MLA for North Antrim. I will be brief. Most of us — North Antrim is not alone in this — have reservoirs, sometimes many, in our constituencies. There will be different levels of risk and different sizes of population around reservoirs, which will, of course, increase or decrease the risk, depending on the size of the population. It is important that safety comes first. It is important that we protect life and property. Like many MLAs, I have witnessed at first hand how flooding can devastate a family. It takes a house to be flooded only once to have dire consequences for a family. Every time it rains, they are on tenterhooks. Every time a river increases in size, those families are nervous. There should be no difference in the potential threat that a reservoir holds for the flooding of those properties. Sometimes, properties, households and communities do not even know the risk that is being placed on them by a reservoir. Sometimes, communities might not even be aware of a reservoir and the potential flooding of their area.

It will all depend on the contour of the land, the size of reservoir and the size of the population. We understand that, but the most important thing is that the legislation and the need for it are balanced by the proportion of risk. It is very important that we get this right and have in place legislation that will meet that risk.

12.00 noon

We all live with risk every day. As soon as we walk out of the house, we are involved in risk. It is about managing risk, and that is what we have to get right. We have to ensure that the balance is there: the risk must be managed, but doing so must not increase the burden on the owners, ratepayers or the public. There is a balancing act here, and I stress to the Department and the Minister that we need to make sure that the legislation is not gold-plated and that it is not burdensome to the point where we lose some of our best community assets. We have to manage risk, and we have to do so in a way that is best suited to Northern Ireland, not other areas, be that GB, the Republic of Ireland or anywhere in Europe. It must be suited to Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland alone.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Bill. We are very lucky here in the North that dam failures are a rarity. As many as 66,000 people live in potential inundation areas, so the message is that prevention is better than cure. We welcome the steps being taken to improve reservoir safety and reduce the possible loss of life and damage to property.

It is also important to point out, and I am glad to note, that a risk-based, proportionate approach is being taken in looking at the potential consequences of the unlikely event of a dam failure. I understand that many of the dams or reservoirs are very old — indeed, some are over 100 years old — and have not been subject to regular inspection.

I share some of the concerns raised previously, particularly about voluntary organisations using reservoirs for social activities. In my community, the reservoir, which is not subject to this legislation because it is a lake, is a centrepiece of community development activities. I appreciate personally the importance of that natural asset to communities throughout the country.

I am glad to note the Minister referred to a grant scheme by regulation should, after inspection, safety measures have to be implemented. I will track that with great interest as the Bill proceeds through its various stages.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. Considering that there has been no legislation on reservoirs in Northern Ireland prior to this, the Reservoirs Bill is important. For many reasons, it is timely that this is addressed fully, both in the Agriculture Committee and the Assembly.

As was stated earlier, the EU requires that there be such legislation. England and Wales have had legislation in place since 1930, and Scotland's legislation, which has been in place since 2011, is being implemented through the Scottish Environment Protection Agency. There is no legislation on reservoirs in the Republic of Ireland.

Reservoirs throw up a difficulty in dealing with them because of their variety of owners. One third are owned by Northern Ireland Water, one third are loosely in public ownership and the other third are loosely in private ownership. So it is important to have a regulatory system that fits all types of ownership. All 151 impounding reservoirs in Northern Ireland are 10,000-plus cubic metres, the variety to which the legislation will apply.

As the continuity of supply of water to the public is vital, it will be important to have a grant aid system to help owners who are not in the financial position to upgrade structures to acceptable standards. The Bill needs to provide the powers to do that. Nearly all the reservoirs in Northern Ireland are over 100 years old. New capital investment will be required in the future as engineer inspections become mandatory.

Although the main purpose of reservoirs is to provide the public with water, many are also considered to be community assets and not only provide recreational and leisure facilities but have tourism benefits and offer vital amenities. Others are used for economic and social activities. As has been said, examples are the Ligoniel reservoir in Belfast, the Creggan Country Park in Derry and, indeed, in my area, the Loughmacrory lake in Omagh district that was mentioned by Mr McAleer. Many also have environmental or built heritage protections. Thus, it is important to consider the direct and indirect impact that any legislation would have on the reservoirs.

It is important that the Bill protects the users of the reservoir without putting too much unnecessary burden on owners. It is important that any legislation ensures that reservoirs are safe for users without putting unnecessary burden on the owners of the facilities. Dam bursting and consequent flooding are the nightmare scenarios that must be taken into consideration and provided for.

It is important that the Bill reflects the aspirations not only of DARD but of other agencies, such as Northern Ireland Water and the Planning Service. Again, it is important that the level of administration is kept to a minimum, as many of the private owners may be active farmers or landowners, who are already subject to many rules and regulations and much administration. It is also necessary that those farmers or landowners are not put under more strain to upgrade reservoirs to DARD-required standards without grant aid. Some of the reservoirs are in isolated locations, and virtually nobody accesses them other than the farmers and those who check them.

There are a number of reservoirs in my constituency of West Tyrone — Lough Bradan, Loughmacrory lake, and Glencordial. Both Loughmacrory lake and Lough Bradan are used for leisure activities, and all are in areas of great beauty. I know how much people enjoy using those facilities. It is therefore important that any legislation accommodates the various uses of these reservoirs and their surrounding areas.

Safety is important so that the reservoirs are safe for their various uses. However, it is important that this is in proportion: one system will not suit all. It is also important that the costs associated with monitoring the reservoirs are kept to a minimum. Also, who will take responsibility for these costs, because the Bill provides for a panel of reservoir engineers?

In Northern Ireland, we have an integrated water capture, water processing and water distribution system that provide a quality water supply to almost 100% of homes. Unfortunately, some homes in upland areas are still not provided with a public water supply. Our integrated water system has been brought together over the past 40 years. We have a unique water capture system of five water capture zones across the North, through the infrastructural system of natural lakes and reservoirs. Northern Ireland Water is a very good water management organisation that is in public ownership. The Rivers Agency and DARD now have to deal with the EU requirement in relation to the risk of flooding from reservoirs.

The proposed legislation needs to be sensitive to the owners, the community and the users of those facilities. I welcome the Bill today.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. It has been a long time coming, and has moved along very slowly in the background since I first joined the Agriculture Committee. Nevertheless, it was right not to rush the Bill through the Assembly, as the Department encountered issues during the consultation stage. By taking an open approach, it had the opportunity to hone and refine the contents of the Bill. I will refer more to that shortly.

The policy intent of the Bill has been discussed, so I will not go through it again. What I will say is that, of course, I agree with the broad objective of ensuring that Northern Ireland's reservoirs are properly maintained and pose no significant risk to human health or life. I think that we can all agree on that.

People need reassurance that these large bodies of water, which are often sitting above their homes and built to store huge volumes of water, are stable. Thankfully, none of Northern Ireland's reservoirs would be considered dangerous at this moment in time. Nevertheless, it is right to put in place the proper safeguards to ensure that the situation remains like that.

Many of our reservoirs were constructed a long time ago, especially during the industrial revolution. They were built in a different age, when the focus for some would have been on the generation of power rather than the safe storage of water for decades to come. Tragedies across the water spurred authorities there into action, even if it took a while. However, for some reason Northern Ireland was left behind.

Although there have been no significant breaches here, it would be remiss of me not to mention that reservoirs can still be dangerous, especially with people using them as leisure facilities. Unfortunately, over recent years we have seen their deadly power. Tragedies in these waters, including that at Annalong last year, may not be the focus of the Bill, but it is important that we recognise that other safeguards may also be necessary for our waterways.

I pay tribute to the Polland family in particular, who, through their grief, wrote to me urging action on safety measures at reservoirs and quarries. Minister, I wrote to you on this issue, as well as to the Environment Minister. Although this is not directly linked to the Bill, perhaps you would agree to take their views on board.

Although our reservoirs may be unregulated in the sense that those in England, Scotland and Wales are regulated, we have a number of pieces of legislation that mention them. Those include the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and the Drainage (Northern Ireland) Order 1973. Importantly, though, neither requires reservoirs to be maintained to a particular standard. Thankfully, over the years a common sense approach has been taken to the maintenance of many of our reservoirs, and we have avoided the tragedies on the scale that has been experienced in other places across the UK.

We were told during introductory briefings by DARD officials that Northern Ireland Water, for instance, already follows similar standards to those in the 1975 GB legislation. It is a fact, however, that even those reservoirs that are in public hands have few accompanying duties placed on their owners. However, any responsible owner of these structures, which hold huge volumes of water, must accept that they should have some responsibility to ensure that they are safe. Having said that, however, I do not believe that full responsibility can be placed entirely at their feet. Many of these reservoirs will have passed through private hands, sometimes down through families, in addition to the many that public authorities own but are now surplus to requirements. Indeed, we are now seeing Northern Ireland Water in the process of selling a number of its reservoirs.

A reservoir, although potentially dangerous, can be a great asset to an area or organisation. A number have been converted into some of our very best fisheries, for instance, and we have excellent examples of successful and beautiful fisheries dotted in reservoirs across Northern Ireland. On that point, Northern Ireland Water should consider the future benefit to communities when selling its reservoirs. I know that alongside the Richmount Rural Community Association, we have worked so hard in Upper Bann with Northern Ireland Water to convert a disused sewage works into a community nursery. That is an example of Northern Ireland Water working responsibly with the community for the good of all.

The definition in the Bill of a controlled reservoir will not discriminate between owners, whether they are farmers, Northern Ireland Water, councils or any other body. If they meet the volume limit, the Bill will carry requirements, so I trust that Northern Ireland Water, alongside DARD, will be keeping potential new owners of reservoirs fully up to date on what will be expected of them. As a direct consequence of the Bill, some owners, whether new or long-standing, face having to pay for visits from engineers to inspect reservoirs. Some may even decide to drain their reservoirs to below 10,000 cubic metres so that they will fall outside the scope of the Bill. The Minister's views on that would be appreciated.

The Bill should not be resented, and I do not think that it will. However, although the Assembly has the job of deliberating on the Bill, it will be the owners or managers of the 151 reservoirs concerned who will have to live with the day-to-day decisions that are made in it. A one-size-fits-all approach would be entirely wrong for the Bill, and I believe that the Department fully recognises that. For instance, its initial proposal for either high impact or low impact reservoirs was far too broad-ranging and would have meant too many reservoirs being subject to excessive requirements out of precaution because no middle option was being made available. It was crucial that those concerns were listened to by the Department during the consultation exercise, and it now proposes high-, medium- and low-risk categories.

12.15 pm

Unsurprisingly, many of the reservoirs that are determined as being high risk are in urban areas, so it is only right that they are properly maintained and have an appropriate level of supervision. Equally, those determined as being low risk will simply have to register and display signage that states who owns it and who to contact in the event of failure. Importantly, they do not face the prospect of paying for regular engineer inspections. However, I hope that owners of those structures will still use their judgement to determine if and when repairs are necessary.

There are a number of issues in the Bill that, I hope, will be thrashed out in more detail over the coming stages. One such issue is the power that the Department is proposing that will enable it to call in smaller reservoirs if it deems it necessary. I am not opposed to that as it is important that the flexibility exists to allow intervention on smaller structures that may still pose a risk.

However, I urge the Department to ensure that the Bill's drafting and, more importantly, its subsequent regulations stand up against the threat of legal challenge. The Minister may say that she does not envisage that power being used, but it is best to get issues like that right the first time around.

The issue that I want to conclude on is the power in the Bill that will enable the Department to bring forward a grant support scheme. I welcome that, because, as I have said, many of the owners of our reservoirs will have no idea about where to look for professional engineering opinions or about how to go about making any necessary repairs. How much support would be available or where it would come from will not be decided until after the Bill comes into operation. However, I hope that the Department is already looking into options available to it. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some idea of what she anticipates being included in the grant scheme.

The Bill was clearly heavily prompted by the EU floods directive, but the Department will now be judged on how it liaises with the people most affected by it. So far, the lines of communication appear to have been adequate, with the exception of our local councils. At a time of significant reform in local government, the Department will have the difficult task of ensuring that its voice is heard on the Bill. There is time for the Department to persevere. I hope that the lines of communication with the owners in the past remain open, even more so as the Bill enters its Committee and Consideration Stages.

I welcome the overall intent of the Bill. However, it is entirely in the hands of the Minister and her Department to ensure that its provisions can be adopted and implemented with the broad support of the 150-plus owners and managers of our larger reservoirs.

In closing, I come back to my point about safety measures, as raised with me by the Polland family. I would welcome the Minister's assurance that she will continue to work with her Executive colleagues in that area.

Mrs Cochrane: I too speak in general support of the Bill as presented. The need for the Bill is clear, since there is no formal legislation that covers reservoirs in Northern Ireland, unlike in GB where reservoir safety has had its own legislation since 1930.

The European floods directive requires member states to identify, assess and manage potential flood risks. Therefore, the policy objective of the Bill is to ensure that we can comply with that directive by introducing a risk-based approach to management and regulation of reservoirs to protect the public from flooding.

The Bill proposes a number of things. First, the establishment, under DARD, of a reservoir authority.

Panels of civil engineers would be appointed to supervise, inspect and construct controlled reservoirs under the Bill's provisions. DARD would then establish and maintain a register of controlled reservoirs that would be available for public inspection.

Other proposals in the Bill are that high-to-medium risk reservoirs will be required to have a supervising engineer at all times, and there is a requirement to maintain records of water levels, leaks, repairs etc. DARD could also make flood plans for reservoirs. These controlled reservoirs would have to have emergency response information displayed.

As others said, 151 reservoirs will come under the scope of the Bill. Many of them are currently under public or Northern Ireland Water ownership. Northern Ireland Water should have the funding available to cover necessary maintenance. Indeed, it already maintains reservoirs under voluntary regulation matching the UK legislation requirements.

An area of concern, however, relates to the reservoirs that are not under statutory ownership. Angling clubs, not-for-profit organisations, individuals etc who own reservoirs may find the regulatory regime arising from this Bill onerous and may perhaps seek to dewater, reduce levels or drain completely and abandon reservoirs with the resulting environmental impact. It is important that we look carefully at the potential impact of the Bill on these private and third sector owners and explore options for DARD to bring forward a grant scheme to help them meet the requirements of the Bill if passed.

It will also be important to ensure that there is a joined-up approach involving the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, Planning NI, the Rivers Agency and other bodies to safeguard the environment and ensure the safety of reservoirs. As we look at the Bill in more detail, we must ensure that it sets out clearly how abandoned reservoirs will be managed. We must also consider what issues may arise once the legislation is in place should Northern Ireland Water, for instance, start selling disused reservoirs as their duty of care to stop flooding will pass to new owners as a result of the legislative safeguards.

Overall, the Bill seems reasonable. It is necessary to meet the EU floods directive and to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK. I support the principles of the Bill and look forward to looking at the issues that I and others have highlighted in further detail at Committee Stage.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I thank the Minister for her opening remarks in introducing the Bill. I will keep my remarks brief and to the areas that affect the Committee for Regional Development.

Members will be aware that Northern Ireland Water, an arm's-length body of the Department for Regional Development, owns quite a few reservoirs throughout Northern Ireland. It is my understanding that officials from NIW will brief my Committee and the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development should the Bill pass to Committee Stage. My Committee may also wish to make a further contribution to the development of the Bill at that point.

I am aware that the Department for Regional Development expressed its support for the principles of the Bill in correspondence to the Agriculture Committee in January 2012. The Department and NIW contributed fully to the consultation process on the Bill and queried a number of issues, including seeking consideration to be given to NIW, as the operator of the majority of service reservoirs in Northern Ireland, having a construction service reservoir engineer in its employ. I would appreciate it if the Minister could indicate whether those queries have been amicably resolved to date.

Northern Ireland Water has 71 structures under its ownership that will fall within the Northern Ireland Reservoirs Bill, making it the largest single owner of structures that will be affected. There are a significant number of reservoirs in private ownership. They will be subject to the requirements of the new Bill. I will be interested to hear how the Minister intends enforcing the requirements of the Bill, particularly in the event that a private owner attempts to drain a reservoir to a level below the 10,000 cubic metres stipulated in the Bill. Deliberate circumvention of the regulations to avoid the safety works proposed in the Bill needs to be prevented. The requirements of the Bill need to be enforced.

As I indicated , I am aware that Northern Ireland Water warmly welcomes the Reservoirs Bill, which is being introduced to:

> *"Make provision about the regulation of the management, construction and alteration of certain reservoirs, in particular in relation to their safety to collect and store water; and for connected purposes."*

Northern Ireland Water is, like its predecessor, DRD's Water Service, committed to ensuring the safety of the public of Northern Ireland. It has, since 1975, been managing its impounding of dams in line with the Reservoirs Act 1975 in England and Wales.

All of NIW's physical assets are already compliant with the regulations that fall within the new Bill. I am confident that any further work necessary to ensure their ongoing compliance will be undertaken within the specified timescale. This further work will require that NIW develops and implements new documentation on how each site is being managed.

The principal objective of the Bill is to introduce a risk-based approach to the management and regulation of reservoirs in order to protect against the risk of flooding. I note that, thankfully, no fatalities have been reported in Northern Ireland because of dam failure. It is important, however, that we do not rest on our laurels. We witnessed the recent severe floods in England and Wales and, indeed, those that impacted on our constituents. The Bill, through regulation, seeks to improve the safety of our dams and remove risk to the public. I support these efforts and the principles of the Bill. I look forward to further engagement with the Committee for Regional Development at Committee Stage.

The Committee for Regional Development supports the principles of the Bill.

Mr Irwin: This is an important issue that requires a specific focus from the Department and the Executive. Over the past number of years, there have been no fixed regulations for the maintenance of reservoirs to a recognised standard. The Bill aims to provide these as part of a response to the EU floods directive, which requires DARD to assess all potential flood risks — hence the focus

on reservoirs and the obvious flooding potential associated with breaches of dam defences.

These are important issues, especially given the history of wall failures over the past 100 years across the UK. Notably, however, that has not been the case in more recent times, which shows that public and private owners are more alert to the dangers and risks when large volumes of water are held. That said, it is important that reservoirs are legislated for. That is where the Bill enters the agenda and seeks to plug the gap, if Members will pardon the pun, in the regulation and maintenance of such infrastructure.

I spoke on this matter in the early stages of the discussion in the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development. I have some concerns that private owners of reservoirs in areas with a particularly low risk of damage to the public or the environment will be subject to an overly onerous set of regulations, which, in many cases, would become financially impossible to meet. With a low to non-existent risk, it is questionable what any maintenance over and above that which the owner already undertakes would achieve.

Certainly, where the larger reservoirs are concerned, in light of the lack of legislation and where significant risk has been established, it is proper that some controls are available to ensure that those facilities are of a standard that addresses any risk to the public and the environment. The Bill must strike that balance. It must ensure that European directives are complied with but in such a way that they are not overbearing, financially or from a management perspective, on the lower-risk installations.

I look forward to further opportunities to contribute to the debate in the Committee.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after 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 debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Museums

1. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the current links between National Museums NI and the Northern Ireland Tourism Board. *(AQO 5454/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Museums play a central role in helping to deliver on the objectives of the Tourist Board's strategy to 2020. The Tourist Board recognises the important role that museums play in our tourism offering here and the benefits of partnership working. NITB has provided significant levels of financial support towards a number of museums-based projects. These financial links include providing £482,000 of capital funding for the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and the Ulster American Folk Park over the past five years. Of this amount, £257,000 was for the discovery farm at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, and £225,000 funded the Rogan and McCallister houses at the folk park in Omagh. In addition, NITB provided £40,000 of funding for the successful bluegrass festival at the Ulster American Folk Park over the past three years.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Minister for her response. The Minister will agree that museums are an integral part of the tourist industry, as indeed is Exploris in Portaferry in my constituency. Now that a strategic business plan has been produced for the future of that wonderful facility, what part will the Minister and her Department play to assist in the continued existence of a new and revamped Exploris?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am waiting for the revised business plan to come before the Department. I am glad to see that significant progress has been made since the Member last asked this question. It is still up to each of the Departments that currently do not have a role in Exploris — as the Member is aware, I am not responsible for marines — to see what role they have and to see how that money will come forward, if at all.

Miss M McIlveen: Can the Minister advise whether National Museums Northern Ireland has sufficient moneys in its budget to take advantage of any links with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may be aware that some of the zero-based budgeting exercises with the arm's-length bodies (ALBs) are currently under way. Museums has just been completed, but we still have to come back on things. I am conscious of the fact that Museums has, in line with a target set out for it, raised some of its own capital, but, from what I have seen thus far, the plans are reliant on Departments — not just DCAL, but others. Indeed, Museums is trying to strengthen links with other

Departments to ensure that funding not only continues but increases over the years.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister explain why DCAL supports W5, which is a regional educational museum, but not Exploris, which, in my opinion and that of the people of south Down, is a similar place?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I recognise that Exploris has an important tourism aspect, and it has educational and environmental implications to its product. As I said to Mr McCarthy, while my Department has no remit for marines per se, by comparison, W5 is a science centre that is an integral part of the wider Odyssey Trust Company project, which the Department of Education and, latterly, DCAL were instrumental in developing. The Member may not be aware, but Museums, which is, obviously, one of DCAL's funded bodies, set up W5 activities, and its funding is covered by legislation under museums. In April 2012, we transferred ownership of W5 to the Odyssey Trust, so the W5 aspect was firmly wedged within the DCAL family product. As I said, I am waiting for a revised business plan for the future of Exploris to come in front of not only my Department but those of other Executive colleagues to see what way we will take it forward, if at all.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí cuimsitheacha in leith sin. Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answers on this.

It might be worth putting it on record that the ETI Committee, of which I am Chair, was the only Committee that took the time and trouble to go down and find out for itself and lobby on behalf of Exploris. I hope that others can learn from that and maybe commit to doing that too.

In the context of the question, can the Minister please advise whether any collaborative work has been done by Museums NI and the Tourist Board on the Tourist Board doing that bit more to highlight upcoming attractions and events that are being held in the museums, rather than just advertising museum opening times?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. In my answer to Kieran McCarthy, I said that the Tourist Board had provided funding for events and activities. That needs to continue, particularly when it looks at tourism and the DCAL opportunities, especially in rural areas outside the cities of Belfast and Derry. The bluegrass festival in Omagh is very successful. That is an example of collaboration and helping others in the decade of centenaries, and that will continue. I hope to see those links strengthened to the end of this mandate. It should be put in a better place for future funding, because it is important that we provide a better wrap-around approach to investment, particularly in tourism and culture, arts and leisure.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 14 has been withdrawn.

Football Grounds: Funding

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding is currently available to upgrade facilities at Irish League football grounds. *(AQO 5455/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Executive previously endorsed the development of subregional stadia as a priority area of spend in the next comprehensive spending review (CSR), which is in 2015-16. So, funding for the development of a subregional association football stadium has yet to be finalised, and no decision on or timescale for funding has yet been made on that basis. However, in the meantime, I have commenced preparations, and the early planning phase on the delivery of the subregional programme, which will allow the necessary programmes to develop from one stage to another, will take place in advance of future funding being made available from 2015-16 and beyond.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that update. Can she confirm whether she or her Department has made any promises of funding to any clubs in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I confirm that I have not made any decisions yet on any of the potential subregional facilities. I am waiting for a facilities management plan to come forward, and, on the basis of that and of the recommendations for the plans, I will test them to see how robust they are to make sure that they meet the needs. On that basis, I will make the decision, but none has been made by me thus far.

Mr G Robinson: Can I ask the Minister whether any delay in the stadium development at Windsor Park will impact on the second tranche of money going to grass-roots football?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I could not quite hear the first part of the question. I think it was, "Was any of the money from Windsor Park going to have an impact" —

Mr G Robinson: I asked you whether any delay in the stadium development at Windsor Park will impact on the second tranche of money going to grass-roots football.

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is no delay in Windsor Park, and there will not be any delay in Windsor Park. There will also be no delay in Ravenhill or Casement Park. In advance of securing the funding for the subregional stadia, which I anticipate I will do, I will not sit and wait for that funding to drop into my Department; I am getting on with the plans. I do not anticipate any delays at all.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. How will the decisions be made on what football grounds will benefit from subregional funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sure that the Member heard the response that I gave to Tom Elliott. The decisions on any of the subregional facilities will be made by me. Where the process or any distribution of funding under the subregional stadia programme are concerned, as the Member will be aware, we are waiting for strategic outline business cases. At the outset, that should reflect the needs for the facilities strategy. It then goes into the whole technical processes of outline business cases and so on and so forth. At the end of the day, the decision around the subregional programme will be made by me, and it will, as I said to Tom Elliott, be based on identified need and robust business cases. It has to make sure that it will have a long-lasting legacy, not just in soccer but in the communities where those facilities will be built and developed.

Mrs McKevitt: Has the Minister any plans to introduce funding for the Irish League football clubs that wish to purchase defibrillators and, if they do, for training in the use of those?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will be aware, as part of the legacy of the World Police and Fire Games, defibrillators were certainly transferred to schools and, I understand, some sports clubs, although I am not in possession of a breakdown of exactly where they all went. The popularity of defibrillators, training and awareness raising around health and safety, unfortunately for many schools and those involved in sport and physical activity, has meant that people are now looking for those. Sport NI, as the Member will be aware, is bringing forward a new series of grants, and that is something that they could have a look at. I have been in discussions with many clubs and some schools around how we can ensure that those facilities are available at first hand, particularly when there are lots of children involved.

Irish Language: Funding

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat. Ceist uimhir a ceathair.

Mr McNarry: What question is that?

Mr D Bradley: Question three.

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following the announcement of the new funding model by Foras na Gaeilge, which establishes six lead Dublin-based Irish language organisations, how she plans to ensure that local Irish language organisations are included in the funding and work of the six lead organisations. *(AQO 5456/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: Ná bí buartha, Dominic; tá a fhios agam sin. My response is to Dominic's question, which was question 3, is that, following an extensive review of the current core funding arrangements, which began in 2008 with discussions and consultations and included a public consultation, Foras na Gaeilge has announced the names of the six lead organisations that will now lead services in the six thematic areas across the island. The purpose of the review was to ensure the effective delivery of services to language communities consistent with Foras na Gaeilge's statutory obligations and to make best use of available resources.

To ensure that there is Northern-based representation in the delivery organisations, Foras na Gaeilge, in accordance with the approved business case, will agree criteria with the lead organisations to ensure that up to 25% of staff will be based in the North. They will also have to demonstrate that their boards include members from the North.

Although the core funding will cease under its present format at the end of June, there will be opportunities for organisations in the North to apply for funding from Foras na Gaeilge for individual projects and programmes that meet identified needs outside those provided for by the six thematic areas. The language development forum will also include representatives from the North and South. Foras na Gaeilge has appointed a project change management adviser who will provide assistance to the six lead organisations. The adviser will also provide advice and guidance to the non-lead organisations about their future funding options.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members about the use of telephones. We are getting an awful lot of feedback at the Table.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. Is dócha go bhfuil a fhios ag an Aire cheana féin go bhfuil eagraíochtaí Gaeilge anseo sa Tuaisceart, ar nós Forbairt Feirste, Pobal, Altram agus Ultach, go bhfuil siad gan dóchas a bheith acu as an phróiseas nua seo. An dtig liom a fhiafraí den Aire cad is féidir léi a dhéanamh le misneach a thabhairt do na grúpaí sin go mbeidh siad istigh sa líon maoinithe?

I hope that my Irish is up to the standard required by my learned friend here to the left.

Mr Allister: It is better than the Minister's, anyway.

Mr D Bradley: I will offer a translation. I am sure that the Minister is aware that there is a high degree of dissatisfaction among some of the language groups here in the North like Forbairt Feirste, Pobal, Altram and Ultach. They are not hopeful about the new process. What can the Minister do to ensure that those groups have enough confidence that they will be included in the funding net?

2.15 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat. Mar pointe eolais, tá Gaeilge mhilis agat. You have very good Irish. I am not going to answer the remarks made from the Bench, because I think they are offensive to you, let alone to me.

I thank the Member for his question. It gives me an opportunity to repeat again that there is still an opportunity for the four groups — three of which are eager, I understand — to try to fit into the new arrangements and be reflected. One group decided, for whatever reason, not to apply and has not indicated to me that it has any intention of applying to any of the lead organisations in a partnership. I am willing to make sure that those who are eager to protect the value of their work, which needs to be protected across the island, enter into partnership with other groups. The change manager, provided by Foras na Gaeilge, needs to be integral in that transition. I will continue to work with Forbairt Feirste, particularly on the work it is doing around the development of an Ceathrú Gaeltachta.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer.

An dtig liom iarraidh ar an Aire cé hiad na phríomh-ghrúpaí nua? An bhfuil teacht le chéile déanta ag aon duine de na grúpaí bun-mhaoinithe anseo, nó an dóiche go dtiocfaidh siad le chéile?. Who are the new lead organisations? Have any of the core-funded groups here merged, or are they likely to merge?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Of the lead organisations, Gaelscoileanna will have responsibility for Irish-medium and Irish emerging education. Conradh na Gaeilge will have responsibility for awareness raising, language protection and representation. Gael Linn will have responsibility for education and the English language sector for adults. Oireachtas na Gaeilge will have responsibility for supporting the use of Irish and the establishment of networks. Glór na nGael will have responsibility for community and economic development. Cumann na bhFiann will have responsibility for the development of opportunities for the use of Irish in networks for young people. So far, Comhluadar has amalgamated with Glór

na nGael, and Comhaltas Uladh, which is already affiliated to Conradh na Gaeilge, has reached an agreement with Conradh on language awareness raising, protection and representation. Foras na Gaeilge has asked both lead organisations and those not chosen thus far to begin talks to ensure that the skills and knowledge are retained. As I said in response to Dominic Bradley's main question, the opportunities for other groups who have yet to amalgamate are still there. I encourage them to explore ways in which they can not only secure the work that they do but future-proof and protect the language.

Mr Swann: Minister, have you any intention to review the current funding structures for the Ulster-Scots bodies that exist? As an aside, do you recognise Ulster Scots as an official language?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am surprised at the Member asking that question, given that, at one stage, he sat on the CAL Committee. He should have a working knowledge that Ulster Scots is protected in legislation. Ná bí silly. Do not be silly. At some stage, we will review the working arrangements between the Ulster-Scots Agency and the ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots to make sure that the work it does still provides value to the community, not only value for money on the investment we have made but by taking on board the ideas, projects and themes that are emerging through its work. It would be best served if you, coming from your community, gave them a bit more support, rather than making cheap, silly remarks.

Lord Morrow: On the announcement of the new funding model, will the Minister tell us, in some detail, the amount of money that she is making available? Is she funding the Dublin groups directly?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I did not catch the last part of your question: what about the Dublin groups?

Lord Morrow: Directly.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member should be aware — he is a former Minister — that those arrangements are done through North/South body arrangements.

Lord Morrow: I never served on them.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You should have. If you had, you would have known the answer to that question. There is another example of people putting public money and faith into elected representatives. Either way, I will write to the Member with the exact figure for the core funding arrangements, and I will write to him about the exact amount of money for Ulster Scots so that he will have the correct figure to hand if he needs to use it.

Arts: Budget

4. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what proportion of her departmental budget is allocated to the arts in the remainder of the budgetary period. *(AQO 5457/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I take the Member's reference to "the arts" to mean budget allocations to the Arts Council — I thank her for that clarification — and to NI Screen, the creative industries, the City of Culture and a number of smaller areas in the Department. This is how the Department records and reports on its arts allocation.

The allocation to the arts in 2014-15, the final year of the current Budget settlement, for resource is £15·4 million or 16% of the total resource budget. In the current and preceding year, that proportion climbed to around 22%, with major contributions being made towards the City of Culture and its legacy. The allocation for capital spend in 2014-15 is very modest in comparison at £249,000. I should emphasise, however, that the capital investment trends cannot follow the regular pattern that was there previously. Capital spend on the arts throughout the current CSR period from 2011-12 to 2014-15 will amount to £7·12 million. As the Member will be aware, significant capital investment was made to ensure that the Crescent Arts Centre, the MAC and the Lyric Theatre were all completed.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that supporting Northern Ireland's artists boosts both our culture and the economy and that we should seek to increase funding to exploit that in coming years? What impact will the zero-based budgeting exercise that she referred to in a previous answer have on the arts sector?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I suspect that the Arts Council would probably look forward to the answer to that question. With the zero-based budgeting exercise, we need to ensure that all the ALBs attached to DCAL provide value for money, first of all, and that the money that they are provided with is used to deliver services against the DCAL plan. If the Arts Council, for example, wants to do other projects, it needs to ensure that it meets the policy and direction of the Department, which, thus far, it has.

The Arts Council certainly wants to champion and take forward support for artists. I will look at how it does that and at how that investment and support will increase year in and year out. Certainly, spend in the arts has a direct impact on economic development. The Member will remember from last year the World Police and Fire Games in Belfast and the City of Culture and the Fleadh Cheoil in Derry. Those are the best examples that we have that investment in the arts can help the economy.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Substantial amounts of money obviously go into the arts in the south Belfast area. Will the Minister indicate, however, what projects or money might be poured into less well-off areas — if you want to put it like that — such as Sandy Row and, indeed, Taughmonagh?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I was waiting for clarification of which parts of south Belfast he was talking about. I am also keen to ensure that the zero-based budgeting exercise puts investment into the areas that the Member has just outlined, including communities that probably have not received what, they feel, is their fair share of investment in the arts thus far. I am happy to write to the Member. I will write to the Arts Council to find out exactly what money has been spent in his constituency and will forward that information to him. Whatever is there, I hope that it will change in the future. I hope that investment, particularly in working-class areas, increases and that people feel that they can access and participate in the arts.

Mrs Overend: The funding of the arts in urban and rural areas is important. Will the Minister inform the House how much funding has come to my constituency of Mid Ulster?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to write to the Member with details about the funding that has gone to her constituency. I appreciate the principle of the question that she asked about ensuring that there is a spread of investment in the arts and other members of the DCAL family. As I said, I will write to the Member and give her those details.

Mr Eastwood: In light of the current discussion and debate on the need for a permanent gallery at Ebrington, is the Minister supportive, and what work will she do with OFMDFM to ensure that we have an internationally recognised art gallery at some place on the Ebrington site?

Ms Ní Chuilín: When I was in the Member's constituency last week, Ebrington was one of the places suggested as a permanent art gallery, and the retention of Buildings 80-81 has certainly received some prominence. As the Member is aware, they are not within my gift; they are within the gift of OFMDFM. However, rather than waiting to see the outcome of that, I am looking at the potential for other sites around the city of Derry, not only for art galleries but for exhibition space that can be part of the permanent legacy of the City of Culture.

Sport: Funding

5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the recommendations made by Sport NI on the recognition and funding available to sports with differing or no governing bodies. *(AQO 5458/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: Along with Sport NI, the sports councils in England, Scotland, and Wales have a governing body recognition policy that aims to recognise a lead organisation for the governance of a defined sporting activity. For applications to be recognised, they can be made only by an organisation that claims to have a governing body. It is, therefore, not possible for a sport without such an organisation to apply. Any governing body can apply. However, under the current policy, the sports councils will recognise only one body per sport as the lead organisation.

Sport NI may be in a position to provide funding that will support the delivery of an activity for which there is not a governing body. That will depend on issues such as the purpose for which the funding programme has been developed; the criteria for the funding; the level of risk and regulation required for the activity; and the ability of the applicant to deliver on the objectives of the funding programme.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister advise which sporting bodies are currently going through the recognition process?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The only sporting organisation going through the recognition process is kick-boxing. At present, none of the sports councils in England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland or here recognises kick-boxing as a sporting activity. Therefore, there is currently no governing body. However, I am led to believe that the recognition process is well under way.

Mr Lyttle: The Minister may be aware that urban sports are among the fastest growing sports in Europe, and we have a fantastic urban sports facility in T13 at Titanic Quarter in Belfast. However, it is self-sustaining and has no funding body. Is the Minister willing to visit T13 with a view to helping to advise on the development of urban sports in the region?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have visited T13, and I have visited the Odyssey to see the Giants and other aspects of the complex on many occasions. I am happy to facilitate a meeting with the Member and representatives from urban sports, T13 or anybody else involved. In areas of work that are self-sustaining, it is particularly important that we do not take them for granted or ignore the potential for further participation. It is important that that is not forgotten, particularly for children who cannot afford access to urban sports.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We are still getting feedback from mobile telephones in the Chamber. I remind Members of the rules.

Mr Allister: Today's 'News Letter' reports extensively on the support of a very prominent figure in the world amateur boxing fraternity — Mr Ray Rodgers of Golden Gloves — for the Sandy Row club and, in particular, for the establishment of a Northern Ireland association of amateur boxers. Would the Minister care to join in giving her support for such an enabling organisation in order to enfranchise and open up opportunities for all young boxers in Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Unlike the Member, I have not had time to read the 'News Letter' or any other paper for that matter. I am too busy getting on with my work to peruse gossip. The Member will also be aware of an independent report on boxing that did not recommend a separate authority for boxing in the North.

The Member keeps bringing this up at every Question Time — fair play to him; he is consistent — and he is given the same answer. He needs to stop messing about with politics and sport. It is unbecoming of any elected Member. *[Interruption.]*

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We now move on to topical questions.

Irish Language: Project Funding

1. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to confirm that project funding for the Irish language will be available to groups that are not recipients of core funding. *(AQT 661/11-15)*

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. An féidir leis an Aire a chinntiú go mbeidh maoiniú togra don Ghaeilge ar fail do na grúpaí siúd nach mbeidh bunmhaoiniú acu.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is yes. Project funding will continue to be available. It has been available year on year and will remain available until 2014. It is very important that groups that are not recipients of core funding have certainty about the opportunities to apply.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that she will join me in reiterating that the Irish language, contrary to some misreporting in the media, is for everyone, regardless of which community or, indeed, country in the world they come from. Will she assure us that support, particularly for smaller groups, will continue to provide added value to their work?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Bhuel, aontaím leat go hiomlán. I totally agree with you about the need to make sure that the Irish language belongs to everyone. Given some of the speculation and media coverage on funding for the Irish language, I want to reassure some of the smaller groups out there that programme funding and funding for smaller groups doing specific work is still available. I want to make sure that that support and opportunity continues not just in 2014 but beyond.

Giro d'Italia

2. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what role her Department has played and will play in the planning for the Giro d'Italia, one of the most popular international sporting events, watched by millions around the world, which will, in three months' time, pass through the constituency of North Antrim, where we will all be donning pink shirts for an event that is particularly great for the local area, given the growth in cycling clubs over the past couple of years. *(AQT 662/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Perish the thought that everybody in North Antrim will be wearing pink shirts, especially pink Lycra, but we will not go there. *[Laughter.]* The Giro is hugely important, and it is a huge opportunity for us all. DCAL, through Sport NI, has been working closely with not just some of the local government bodies, which I visited last week, but other small groups and bodies, which are looking forward to the Giro coming to their area. I support the Member's sentiments: it is a huge opportunity to have an international sporting event come to these shores.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. I will not take any offence at her comments about Lycra.

It is crucial that we have a cycling legacy at the other end of the Giro and that we aim to target other events such as the Tour de France to hold opening stages here in order to build further on cycling as a sport in the North and across the island. Further to that, how will the Minister keep Members informed about the progress plans for the Giro?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member will be aware, that is primarily in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's remit. However, the legacy for cycling is firmly in my Department's remit. My Department has met Cycling Ulster, some of whose representatives are from North Antrim, but they are from all over. I have had discussions with my colleague Leo Varadkar and his officials on the potential new business cases for a velodrome and on what we can do across the island. As the Minister with responsibility for this jurisdiction, what I can do is provide better facilities for cycling in the North. I wish everybody all the best with their preparations for the Giro.

Arts Capital Funding: Newry

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans she has to correct the imbalance in arts capital funding for Newry city. *(AQT 663/11-15)*

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Agus seo í mo cheist don Aire. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí di cad iad na pleanannaí atá aici leis an mhíchothromaíocht atá ann i gceantar an Iúir ó thaobh maoinithe caiptlíochta do na healaíona a cheartú.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member may be aware that I have visited Newry on several occasions. I have certainly met some of the arts organisations. Indeed, as a result of those discussions, we were able to support Sticky Fingers Arts, which is happening this week. The lack of capital investment has certainly been raised. I anticipate those discussions increasing this year. If DCAL or any other Department need to look at capital investment, particularly around arts provision, even in partnership or conjunction with other Departments, that is something that we will be happy to do. The Member will also be aware that this is a long process. I am waiting on, and will have meetings with, the Sticky Fingers project around future capital needs and potential needs, but one thing is clear: organisations need to come together and act in partnership and concert to make sure that Newry gets what it deserves.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. An féidir liom a fhiafraí den Aire an bhfuil socrú ar bith déanta aige le déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an Ghaelscolaíocht san áireamh nuair a chuirfeas a Roinn polasaí nua chun tosaigh, mar atá molta san athbhreithniú ar an Ghaelscolaíocht? Will the Minister's Department or, indeed, an arm's-length body of her Department, be willing to be a partner with other partners in Newry city to deliver a major capital arts project?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Again, I thank the Member for his question. Just to repeat myself on capital provision for arts and leisure, it is unthinkable that DCAL or a member of the DCAL arm's-length family would not be part of that, but we need to make sure that when we are having discussions, we are having them with all the partners in the city and that we make sure that the city acts in concert. To be honest, I do not think we are there yet. I think that we will get there. After a round of discussions, we need to start working out what people want, how they go about getting it and what we can do to help them.

Fish Ladder: Ballyshannon

4. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she has had with Inland Fisheries Ireland to ensure that there is an adequate and functioning fish ladder at the dam in Ballyshannon. *(AQT 664/11-15)*

I was down for question 9 in questions for oral answer, but we never got that far, so I have asked the Minister that one now.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not too sure. I do not have the response here; I have it in my folder. The fish ladder is there to try to make sure that the fish kill, particularly in those rivers and in relation to the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) substation, is reduced. That will continue around discussions with inland fisheries and my Department. We have tried to have discussions with the ESB about reducing the fish kill in that area. Certainly, it is important that we take measures for that reduction to make sure that salmon and other species have an opportunity to go upstream.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for her response. A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, this is a topical issue. Cathal Ó hOisín and I met the chairperson of the Enniskillen fishing group today. The Minister will be aware that there are widely held concerns about the impact of the dam and the ESB operations in the area on the travel of salmon in the Erne. Will the Minister advise the House

on whether she is willing to engage in discussions at a ministerial level with her counterparts in the Oireachtas with regard to trying to resolve those issues, given that the ESB is a semi-state company?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can give the Member that assurance. Certainly, I hope to have a meeting at the end of spring to have that concluded. For the Member's information, I did try to have discussions and meetings with the ESB around this, and they did not provide any outcome. I do not find that acceptable. Certainly, I am keen to pursue this because I have responsibilities under European obligations to make sure that salmon are conserved, and the ESB has responsibility not only to people but to species, flora and fauna in their neighbourhood. We all have responsibility to make sure that we do what we possibly can and not to have a detrimental impact. I am not convinced, thus far, that the position and conservation measures around salmon are being taken seriously or even that ESB is aware of how serious this is.

Irish City of Culture 2016

5. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any discussions that she has had regarding the potential for Derry to submit an Irish City of Culture bid for 2016, given that she has indicated that she is broadly supportive of the Irish City of Culture. *(AQT 665/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, I have not had any formal discussions with either Derry City Council or anyone else about their approaches or my support — it is, at this stage, support — for the Irish City of Culture for 2016. By 20 December, anybody I had met in the city had made known their view that I should support the bid for Irish City of Culture for 2016 or 2018, or whenever it is.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her support for the City of Culture and for the bid. Can she give us assurances that the process will involve a wide range of stakeholders, particularly from the community and voluntary sector, as we move forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can give that assurance about my Department. I am sure that the Members and other residents in the city of Derry can stand over the fact that, when DCAL made its investments and continued its support, we engaged in a genuine and real way in an inclusive partnership with people from the community and voluntary sector. We will ensure that that continues in anything that I or, indeed, our arm's-length bodies are involved in in the city or surrounding areas.

East Belfast Arts Festival

6. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether any discussions have taken place with the East Belfast Arts Festival, given that, last year, she encouraged the festival to engage with her Department much earlier this year. *(AQT 666/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member brought representatives from the East Belfast Arts Festival to meet me last year, and, from that, we have made a small investment, albeit at a late stage. I am keen for that investment to continue, and I am also keen to make sure that the partnerships between east Belfast and west, north and south Belfast continue. To that end, I will fairly soon meet a collective of people who are involved in arts and festivals — east Belfast is part of that — and I am happy to keep the Member updated on any developments that come from that.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for her support so far. Could she ensure, at those discussions, that the arts festival looks at a longer-term strategy of maybe three to five years?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Certainly. We have had discussions with the West Belfast Festival, and I know that it has a good working relationship and strong partnership with the East Belfast Arts Festival. I expect that that is at the top of the agenda for sustainability, particularly, but not exclusively, for arts in working-class and inner-city areas. I would be surprised if it is not looking for at least five to 10 years' support. The discussion will focus on how we do that and, I am sure, on other things that it will raise. However, as I said in a previous response, I am happy to meet the Member again, and I will certainly keep him updated in between.

Cultúrlann Cairde Teo: Armagh

7. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the Cultúrlann Cairde Teo project in Armagh city. *(AQT 667/11-15)*

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that we have had ongoing and continuing discussions with Cultúrlann Cairde Teo in Armagh city. He may also be aware that DCAL funding was offered for the development of the Cultúrlann. I know that that funding was dependent on match funding from other sources. I am not too sure about developments on that, but my investment was, I think, in the region of £150,000. So, I look forward to seeing the Cultúrlann in Armagh city developed.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her response. Will she assure the House that opportunities for cultural hubs are developed in communities outside Belfast and Derry?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am keen to make sure that not just cultural hubs but, indeed, facilities, services and investment in the provision of public services are developed outside Belfast and Derry, particularly in smaller towns and villages and in newer cities. The cultural hubs, particularly in the Member's constituency, are vital not just because of what they provide but in the context of a shared future, reconciliation, creative industries, inclusion and working with children and young people, older people and people who have been excluded. From what I have seen across the city in Belfast and, indeed, outside it, those hubs provide excellent opportunities for people to do very good activities, to put down roots and to give them access where they did have not have it before.

2.45 pm

Education

Orangefield High School

1. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Education what options are being considered for the future use of the Orangefield High School site. *(AQO 5469/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): As indicated in my announcement of 14 January 2014 on east Belfast development proposals and area planning, Orangefield High School will close on 31 August 2014. The Belfast Education and Library Board is considering a range of options for the future use of that site. Following consideration of those options and engagement with relevant stakeholders, clarification on the future use of the site will be provided by the board. In the event that a viable alternative use is not identified, the site will be declared surplus and disposed of in accordance with guidance issued by Land and Property Services.

Mr Copeland: I ask the Minister for his assessment of any changes that he would have made to the original plan, in the area planning process and the development proposal process, in order to better reflect the needs of the local community.

Mr O'Dowd: At the end of the day, it is up to the managing authorities. In this case, the Belfast Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board were involved in the development proposals. I have to say that they should have been brought forward much earlier. Orangefield has been left in limbo for a very considerable period without any firm decisions being made about its future. I had to make the unfortunate decision to close it. Had interventions been made earlier by the managing authority, a different outcome may well have taken place.

In relation to the entirety of the planning process, I have reflected that it would have been much more useful had all the schools in the area been involved in the discussions on the planning process, regardless of sector. That might have been of huge benefit to the planning proposals. However, I believe that the decisions that I reached in the 14 January announcement are the correct ones and give a stable environment for education to be planned and the way forward in that community.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his update. He may be aware of significant parental anxiety that has followed his announcement to amalgamate Newtownbreda and Knockbreda High Schools in south and east Belfast. How will the Minister reassure those parents of the plans that he has in place in relation to that particular proposal? Is he willing to meet with a delegation to listen to concerns in more detail?

Mr O'Dowd: Had we continued with Knockbreda and Newtownbreda as two separate schools, both would have suffered as a result. The proposal to amalgamate is the right way forward. I pick up a certain commentary on my proposal to close Newtownbreda. However, the more people say that out loud, the more they miss the exact point. They send out into the community a misconception that the school is closing. The school is reopening in a new guise. The school is going to continue to provide high-quality education to that community and beyond. People should look at the positives in the proposal on the way forward and should not bring it forward as a negative story. Educational provision has been secured in the area at post-primary level for generations to come. That is the benefit. I am more than happy to meet a representative group of parents, or representatives from the community, to discuss the proposals. I will not be overturning my decision, but I will be happy to outline how it will be implemented.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call any other supplementary questions, I remind Members that the original question is very site specific.

Mr McKinney: As has already been articulated, the Minister is aware of the enormous anxiety that has been caused to Newtownbreda and Knockbreda in relation to this proposal. Our offices have been inundated with people reflecting those concerns. This might be helpful. Will the Minister now take the opportunity to dispel any notion that the Orangefield site will be used as a new site for Newtownbreda or Knockbreda schools?

Mr O'Dowd: I respectfully suggest that, had your offices expressed the views and commentary of the people before I made a decision and, indeed, expressed concerns about the failure to plan properly for education in that community, it may have been more beneficial than expressing it afterwards. I am not the decision-maker in the matter of where or whether the school will be relocated. I asked the two boards to discuss future provision in the area in much greater detail and to decide, based on all the evidence before them, whether the school needs to be relocated and where it should be relocated to. I am not interested in postcodes. I am not interested in the postal address of any school. I want to ensure that schools are in the right place to provide education to the young people of the community they are there to serve.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I will keep my question all-site-specific. What work has the Minister's Department done in and around the overarching framework for community asset transfer?

Mr O'Dowd: The Department for Social Development is leading on the Programme for Government commitment to support social enterprise growth in the broader community sector. A key element of that is to develop and implement a policy framework for community asset transfer. The Minister for Social Development brought a paper before the Executive on 30 January in that regard. My Department continues to work with my Executive colleagues and other Departments to ensure that community asset transfer is brought forward, that it is to the benefit of communities and that, where appropriate, assets are transferred to the community for the betterment of it.

Markethill High School

2. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the recent inspection report on Markethill High School. *(AQO 5470/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: I am always eager to read the reports produced by the Education and Training Inspectorate. I am particularly pleased when, as in the case of Markethill High School, the inspectors recognise and celebrate very good quality education provision, which is led effectively and results in very good outcomes for the young people in the Markethill and surrounding rural areas.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his reply. There is ongoing discussion about a possible new school build for Markethill High School. Will the Minister give an indication of the possibility of a new school build for Markethill?

Mr O'Dowd: I asked the education and library boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to bring forward proposals for possible future builds. I am not in a position to announce the outcome of the discussions

or any of the proposals that the boards or CCMS brought forward. I hope to be in a position at a latter stage of the spring to bring that announcement to the Assembly. I am not in a position to make any specific comment about Markethill High School or any other school, for that matter.

Extended Schools Programme

3. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Education to outline any plans he has to increase funding to the extended schools programme. *(AQO 5471/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: During the 2013-14 year, £12·4 million was made available for the extended schools programme. Work is ongoing to finalise budget allocations for 2014-15, but I fully intend to maintain extended schools funding at a similar level to 2013-14.

Looking forward, the education budget will not be known until the outcome of the 2015-16 Budget process, which has to be agreed by the Executive and the Assembly. Any decisions about the level of future extended schools funding will be taken in the context of the 2015-16 Budget outcome for education.

Mr Spratt: Will the Minister join me in recognising the great potential there is to make greater use of school buildings for community purposes, and, indeed, that it can be done through the extended schools programme?

Mr O'Dowd: I will. I have no hesitation in promoting the greater community use of school buildings. Recently, I launched a guidance document; along with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure who also launched a document on sports clubs and greater linkages between sports clubs and our schools estate. The extended schools programme is an excellent way of integrating schools more into the community and drawing parents and others into schools to encourage them to use school facilities and become more involved in their children's education. The community use of schools is a programme that I very much support.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Minister, how concerned are you that school principals are being overburdened as a side effect of this worthy policy?

Mr O'Dowd: We have set out best practice in the guidance. The guidance is there to assist school principals and boards of governors to open up their schools more to the community. There is a great demand for greater access to facilities, particularly to schools after hours, and particularly in communities where there are inadequate community facilities.

The guidance sets out simply how schools can and could open up their facilities. It refers to insurance issues, rental policies etc, and I believe that the guidance has taken some of the burden off boards of governors and principals.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. The development of parenting skills and encouraging parents to get involved in their child's learning were an integral and valuable part of the extended schools programme. Does the Minister have any plans to extend that aspect to all primary schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The option exists for all primary schools, although I accept that extended schools is directed at schools in areas of highest deprivation to assist them in tackling the challenges that deprivation brings to education. However, many schools outside the extended schools programme run programmes on relationships with parents and communities, expansion etc. The current budget restricts me to a certain degree on how much funding I can make available to the extended schools budget. I have no plans at this stage to expand the eligibility criteria.

Irish-medium Education Review

4. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of the Irish-medium education review. *(AQO 5472/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: The aim of the review is to ensure that Irish-medium education is fully and appropriately supported as an integral part of the education system and contributes to the building of a shared future for all our citizens, based on equality. I am pleased to say that the vast majority of the recommendations in the review have been fully or very substantially implemented.

The current position is that, of the 24 recommendations, 15 have been implemented, with a further seven showing substantial progress. Only two recommendations have not made significant progress, but these relate to developing Irish-medium primary provision through a federation model. As time has progressed, educators have been able to develop and share best practice across Irish-medium primary provision through less formal structures and ways than a federation model, as originally envisaged in the review.

These approaches are proving successful in the stated review aim of creating and maintaining sustainable Irish-medium primary education. The ongoing implementation of the recommendations continues to contribute greatly to the vibrancy and success of the Irish-medium sector at preschool, primary and post-primary school stages. Although significant progress has been made, I am keen to identify where more needs to be done to develop this important area further and to ensure that education in the sector is of the highest quality.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. An féidir liom a fhiafraí den Aire an bhfuil socrú ar bith déanta aige le déanamh cinnte de go bhfuil an Ghaelscolaíocht san áireamh nuair a chuirfeas a Roinn polasaí nua chun tosaigh, mar atá molta san athbhreithniú ar an Ghaelscolaíocht?

I thank the Minister for his answer. Is there a process in place in his Department to ensure that any new policy emanating from it is Irish-medium proofed, as recommended in the review of Irish-medium education?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. Yes, all policies in my Department are proofed across the sectors, particularly for Irish-medium education. It is ensured that they are adaptable to and appropriate for the promotion and facilitation of Irish-medium education. I think that that is one of the reasons why we have seen such a dramatic rise in the number of young people attending Irish-medium provision. The numbers have risen from 2,695 in 2002-03 to 4,627 in 2012-13. We have supported that development through direct financial resources and through resources for teaching the curriculum and provision around the curriculum. We engage with the Irish-medium sector, as with all sectors,

regularly and continue discussions as to how we can further support and facilitate that sector.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers up to now. An dtig leis an Aire sonraí a thabhairt ar fhás an Ghaeloideachais le blianta beaga anuas? Will he detail the growth of Irish-medium education over recent years?

3.00 pm

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. There has been a dramatic rise in Irish-medium education over recent years. As I outlined to Mr Bradley, there has been an increase from 2,695 pupils in 2002-03 to 4,627 pupils in 2012-13. There are now 29 stand-alone Irish-medium schools — 28 primary schools and one post-primary school — and 10 Irish-medium units attached to Catholic maintained schools — seven in primary schools and three in post-primary schools.

Since 2009, DE has made capital investments totalling just over £7·6 million in the Irish-medium sector. In addition, on 25 June 2012, I announced new school projects in the Irish-medium sector: an £11·9 million investment in Coláiste Feirste; and a £2·5 million investment in Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin. Two further Irish-medium projects revealed in my 22 January 2013 announcement are at an early stage of progression.

The Department continues to react to the growth of the Irish-medium sector. We will continue to carry out our statutory duties in the sector and to engage with it on our statutory duty to facilitate and promote Irish-medium education.

Mr Lunn: Given that the Irish-medium and integrated sectors were both referenced in the Good Friday Agreement and that his Department has the same statutory obligation to encourage and facilitate both movements, will he consider a review of the integrated system similar to the one that has been spoken about today?

Mr O'Dowd: In previous responses, correspondence and, indeed, statements to the Assembly, I have set out my obligations and work on facilitating and promoting integrated education. I have not been asked to carry out a review of integrated education to see whether that will facilitate its advancement. However, I am happy to consider that and have further discussions with the Member and supporters of the integrated sector.

Minority Languages

5. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the recent Council of Europe report on the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and its implications for his Department. *(AQO 5473/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: I noted the recent Council of Europe report on the implementation of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. My Department is considering the references to education here in the North of Ireland and looking at what action we can take to ensure that we meet our obligations under the charter.

My Department has already made a great deal of progress in the area: the Irish-medium education review that I have just mentioned aims to ensure that Irish-medium education is fully and appropriately supported as an integral part of the education system; schools can teach the Irish and Ulster-Scots languages, literature, culture and history at primary and post-primary level; my Department has provided funding for the production of teaching resources for Irish and Ulster-Scots languages; the development of special educational needs provision for Irish-medium education; the establishment of an advisory group on the strategic development of Irish-medium post-primary education; the creation of an Irish-medium education early years specialist post in Altram; the introduction of the community relations, equality and diversity in education policy; and the introduction of a Department of Education languages policy for Irish, which sets out the administrative services that my Department offers in Irish and informs those who wish to use Irish how they may communicate with the Department through the Irish language.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline what additional duties or obligations the charter places on him as a Minister? Essentially, will he develop his point about how the charter specifically impacts on education?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. As he will know, and as I said in response to a previous question, there is an obligation on us under the 1998 Act. Part II of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages sets out high-level objectives and principles that are to be pursued in support of regional and minority languages. That applies here to Irish and Ulster Scots.

Part III of the charter lists more specific measures that must be taken to promote the use of regional or minority languages in public life. Here, that applies only to Irish. Under Part III, DE has either a specific or a collective responsibility with other Departments under article 8, which deals with education, or article 10, which deals with administrative authorities and public services. So obligations to promote minority and regional languages are placed on us by the charter. That is taken very seriously by my Department.

Mr Humphrey: The Minister will be aware of his Department's funding and resource responsibilities for the Ulster-Scots Agency. Given what he has just said, what extra resources will he put into the education system and sectors across Northern Ireland to promote Ulster-Scots education? Indeed, given the ongoing disparity in funding between Irish and Ulster Scots, what more can he make available to help to address that?

Mr O'Dowd: My Department funds on the basis of need. The Member will be aware, and I have said this in answer to previous questions, that we have a thriving Irish-medium sector. We have over 4,000 children being taught through the medium of Irish, and that number continues to grow. We have over 20 specific Irish-medium units or schools. Unfortunately, we do not have any for Ulster Scots.

I make funding available for the promotion of Ulster-Scots material and have engaged with the Ulster-Scots Agency. I asked it to come back to me with further details for support. I await that response, but I am happy to engage with anyone who is promoting Ulster Scots to see whether we can work closer together to promote the Ulster-Scots language or culture. I have a phobia of neither.

Mrs Dobson: Given his party president's statement in 2003 that:

"the language is still central to our political project",

how is the Minister, as Education Minister for all children, depoliticising the Irish language?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member spends more time studying my party leader's speeches than I do, so I do not know in what context or where the party leader said that, but keep studying his speeches anyhow.

The Irish language has been politicised not by those who advocate it, wish to speak it, wish to learn it or wish to respect it but by those who wish to prevent it from being spoken, prevent it from being learnt, prevent it from being used or prevent its identity from ever being acknowledged.

I am currently learning Irish because I believe that it is part of what and who I am. Many other people learn it because they believe that it is part of what and who they are. However, it does not belong to me, my party or my political beliefs. It belongs to everyone on the island of Ireland, regardless of their political or religious affiliations or none, and the best way, to use your term, to depoliticise it is for people to respect it for what it is — a language — and for everyone to take ownership of it. Then no one can claim ownership of it.

Mr McGlone: Ní thiocfadh liom ach aontú leis an Aire ins an mhéid a dúirt sé ansin. Is le gach aon duine an teanga agus agus ba choir rud a dhéanamh í a leathnú amach i measc an phobail i gcoitinne.

I thank the Minister for, and support him fully in, what he is just after saying about the Irish language. It is there for everyone. It belongs to no one, or to no section of the community in particular. It is there for us to gain understanding of our history, background and environment.

Le theacht ar ais chuig an cheist maidir le tuairisc Chomhairle na hEorpa, ba mhaith liom a fháil amach ón Aire i dtaobh cibé taighde atá déanta lasmuigh den Roinn maidir leis an tuairisc: an féidir leis an Aire an t-eolas sin a roinnt linne go poiblí.

What analysis has the Department done of the recent Council of Europe report, and can it make that analysis publicly available so that the rest of us can have a look at it?

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. I have asked my officials to study the report and to report back to me on its findings. I have been concerned by certain media reports highlighting alleged failings by my Department in its promotion and facilitation of Irish-medium education, and I certainly want to clear those matters up. Where there are failings, we need to deal with them, correct them, move on and ensure that they do not happen again, but, once my Department has completed its review of the report, I will be more than happy to publish that and share it with Members.

Literacy and Numeracy

6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Education how his Department improves literacy and numeracy in deprived communities. *(AQO 5474/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: Through the implementation of 'Count, Read: Succeed', the literacy and numeracy strategy, the aim is to raise standards and close achievement gaps. The strategy sets out the central role of teachers, supported by parents and school leaders, in their work to raise standards. Improvements have been made at Key Stage 2, GCSE and A level. However, we still have too many young people who are underachieving.

Funding has been allocated to specific programmes to further improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy in socially disadvantaged areas. Those include the Delivering Social Change programme to employ additional teachers, a community education initiatives programme, a literacy and numeracy continuing professional development (CPD) Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 project and the special educational needs CPD literacy project for primary schools. I have also provided additional funding for area learning communities to increase the capability in post-primary schools to improve literacy and numeracy levels amongst disadvantaged pupils.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is engaging with a number of post-primary schools in a programme to raise standards in English and mathematics. There is also an important role for parents and local communities in addressing educational achievement. The Education Works advertising campaign is aimed at informing and reminding parents of the importance and value of becoming more involved in the education of their children.

Both the community education initiatives programme and the extended schools programme have a focus on positive educational outcomes.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that literacy and numeracy issues in communities of high deprivation are often intergenerational, what is the Minister doing with other ministerial colleagues to address those issues, where children, unfortunately, are not supported sufficiently by their parents?

Mr O'Dowd: In my original answer, I referred to the Delivering Social Change programme, which is a subcommittee of the Executive. I have secured funding through that, in coordination and collaboration with OFMDFM, for the appointment of numeracy and literacy teachers to schools. Around 273 recently qualified teachers have been appointed to post-primary and primary schools. That is proving to be very successful.

I also have sponsored a programme, along with the Social Development Minister, in relation to nurture units in primary schools, and there are a number of other initiatives that I am looking at in conjunction with my ministerial colleagues. As I have reported to the Assembly, I have worked quite closely with the Health Minister on a number of the programmes that he has developed on working with young mothers and their families to create an educational environment in the home.

So, there is a lot of work going on. Of course, if we had greater budgets across the Executive, we would like to do much more work, but I am satisfied with the level of cooperation thus far.

Mr G Robinson: Given the work of learning communities, such as the one that you will see on your next visit to Limavady later this week, how important is that work in improving literacy and numeracy?

Mr O'Dowd: I was wondering how you were going to get your constituency into this one: fair play to you.

Area learning communities have proven to be very valuable in sharing skills bases and knowledge between schools on how to tackle the issue of numeracy and literacy and sharing the best practice and the advantages that it brings. I have provided funding specifically to the area learning communities to develop projects on numeracy and literacy, and they have proven very successful. I would like to see the area learning communities developing their work further and developing their collaboration further. When we come to finalising the budgets for the next comprehensive spending review in 2015-16, I will be keen to ensure that area learning communities continue to be funded in such a manner.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Given the large amount of initiatives on illiteracy and innumeracy, if we were to go for absolutely no one — zero — to be illiterate or innumerate, would the Department have a process for annually counting how many people are illiterate or innumerate?

Mr O'Dowd: We have regular assessments within our schools system, and we are trying to improve on that through the levels of progression to see how our young people are progressing through the school system and to ensure that their needs are being met. The nature of this issue is that problems should, and can, be identified in nursery school and in primary school, and they should be dealt with in those phases of education. It is regrettable if any young person reaches post-primary school without having their numeracy and literacy deficit recognised or aided, or with no scheme put in place to assist them.

3.15 pm

I believe that the systems that we have put in place are continuing to ensure that more and more young people's lives are not blighted by an absence of numeracy and literacy. However, I also believe that we have to improve how that is measured. As you say, at any given time of the year can we express how many children are below the levels that we are concerned about? I believe that, if we could make progress on levels of progression, we would be able to achieve that goal.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister detail the level of additional funding that has been targeted at numeracy and literacy projects in recent years?

Mr O'Dowd: Delivering Social Change and improving literacy and numeracy has had £15·56 million added to it. The community education initiatives will have £2 million over the next two years. The literacy and numeracy CPD key stage 2/3 project will have £2 million over two academic years, and the post-primary sector will get an additional half a million pounds per annum over the three years to further support area learning communities. So, substantial additional amounts of money are being placed to tackle numeracy and literacy. However, the core function of educational funding is to improve numeracy and literacy. So, surely everything that we fund has to be about improving a child's numeracy and literacy skills.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. That ends the period for questions for oral answer. We will now move on to topical questions.

Holy Trinity College, Cookstown

1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Education for a progress report on the planned newbuild for Holy Trinity College, Cookstown. *(AQT 671/11-15)*

Tá mé ag iarraidh a fháil amach faoin dul chun cinn i dtaca le Coláiste na Trionóide ar an Chorr Críochach.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as an cheist. Following representations from CCMS, the Department's area-planning team has confirmed that it is reasonable to proceed with planning that is based on a school with 1,300 pupils. That increase in enrolment is subject to an approved development proposal. CCMS has indicated that development planning will issue such a proposal for consultation next month. The Department is scheduled to meet with the school on 10 February to commence work on an economic appraisal with the help of expert resources that have been secured from the SEIB.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as an fhreagra sin. Thanks very much to the Minister for that response. Does the Minister have in mind any projected date for when the tenders for this project might issue?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no fixed date in mind for when the tenders for this project should issue. It will depend on the work on the economic appraisal. I would like the economic appraisal work to go through as quickly as possible, because I am keen not only to get the schools built but to get money out the door and into our economy and to create the infrastructure. However, we have to cross each hurdle as it presents itself. The economic appraisal is the next hurdle, and, as I said, my officials will meet with the school on 10 February.

Schools: Common Funding Formula

2. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Education for an update on his deliberations on the reform of the common funding formula for schools. *(AQT 672/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: I am at a very advanced stage in those deliberations. I hope to be in a position to share the consultation responses with the Education Committee this week. I see that the Chairperson has left the Chamber. As the Member will be aware, there were around 15,000 consultation responses. It took a considerable amount of time to work our way through them, but we have done that now. I also have to consult with a body known as the Local Management of Schools (LMS), which is the employing authority for schools. That meeting is scheduled to take place on Wednesday. I hope that my officials are in a position to meet the Education Committee next Wednesday and that a decision can be made thereafter.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he outline how any additional funds will impact on educational attainment outcomes?

Mr O'Dowd: My primary objective throughout this process has been to ensure that we direct our resources to where the most need exists and to where they will have the most impact. Time and time again, we are shown that social deprivation is closely linked to educational underattainment. Therefore, we have to tackle it. If we wish to create a more just and equal society and to give everyone an equal chance in life, as set out in

the Programme for Government, we have to direct our resources to do that.

I have had the opportunity to inject the £15·8 million additional funds, which was not recorded on the schools' budgets that they received earlier in the year and caused understandable concern. I am now in a position where I can confirm that no school will lose any funding as a result of the changes that I have made. I will put a contingency fund in place where it is necessary to do so to ensure that no school loses out in the first year of the funding round. I am confident that the losses have been reduced substantially to any school that would lose funds thereafter.

Education and Library Boards: Pressure

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Education for reassurance that he is actively reviewing the situation, especially the vacancy control policy in place since 2006, whereby the education and library boards are increasingly under pressure to deliver policy with decreasing numbers of staff, which is having a negative impact on schools. *(AQT 673/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: The best way to review this matter is to bring the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) forward and make it work. I have had a paper with the Executive since April 2013 seeking agreement on moving ESA forward, but there has been none. The best way to give certainty to the education and library boards and to education staff is to bring that policy forward. However, I can no longer continue on the basis of uncertainty in relation to those staff.

It is only right and proper that, if we place demands and expectations on our staff, they are in a position where they are motivated to do so and where they believe that they are being valued by me, as the Minister, the Department and the employers. I have committed to a review of vacancy control and a review of the numbers of staff who are currently working in the education and library boards. I will work with the boards to ensure that they are adequately staffed going into the future and that those staff who have been affected by vacancy control are dealt with in a proper manner.

Mrs Hale: With the denuding of the Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) and the consequential lack of input across all our schools, will the Minister review the personnel available to that service and will he inform us of the outcome of the recent meetings that he had with the Association of Northern Ireland Education and Library Boards?

Mr O'Dowd: I largely informed you of that in my previous answer. In my recent meeting with the association, I informed the boards that I was prepared to take a look at vacancy control and at the impact of redundancies on the boards, and that we had to take significant measures to shore up the boards as a result of the failure of the Executive to deliver ESA.

CASS will be included in those discussions. I want to have adequate support networks in place for our schools to ensure that schools and teachers have every support available. However, we also have to bear in mind that substantial investment will be required. Substantial investment has already been made in letting 400 staff go from the boards and reducing senior management in the boards. That is all public money that has been spent. I may now be standing on the brink of having to spend more money rehiring staff and reconstituting senior management in the boards, all because the Executive have failed to agree on ESA, which is very disappointing. We cannot continue the way we are; our boards cannot function as they currently are.

Knockbreda/Newtownbreda High Schools: Amalgamation

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on the amalgamation of Knockbreda High School and Newtownbreda High School. *(AQT 674/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: As the Member will be aware, I made an announcement in the House on 14 January for the amalgamation to take place by August 2014 or as soon as possible thereafter. The boards are now working on making that proposal a reality.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his very brief answer. Will he assure me and the parents of the pupils who are going to be affected by the amalgamation that those pupils will receive the highest standard of education and will not be disadvantaged by any of the necessary changes, given that many of them will be affected for the entirety of their secondary education?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no difficulty in giving the Member those assurances. I made the decision to amalgamate those schools in order to ensure that high-quality education was and would continue to be provided in that area.

I believe that my decision was the right one. I understand that the Member has an Adjournment debate down for discussion in the next number of weeks and I have already agreed to meet the Member to discuss the matter in more detail. The operational process for this is for the South Eastern Education and Library Board, and my Department is in close liaison with it on this matter. I assure the Member that my Department stands ready to give any further assistance required to ensure that we have a smooth transition to the new amalgamated school.

Schools Estate: Shared Access

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on shared access to schools estate facilities by local community groups and sports clubs, following his answer to a question from Mr Spratt in which he stated that he had launched a joint shared access strategy with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure. *(AQT 675/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: In fairness, we launched the strategy only several weeks ago. My part is for the community use of schools, and the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has responsibility for sports clubs etc. There is commonality between them. We will come back to this within a year. We will go back to schools and take a survey to see which schools have taken up the opportunity to open their facilities to greater community use. At the end of the day, it is a decision for the boards of governors.

In previous discussions with schools, concerns were raised about issues to do with insurance, rental policies and access to schools afterwards etc. Through the strategy we have issued, we have case examples of that. We set out how those hurdles can be overcome and

how schools can reassure themselves that they are not placing themselves under any further liability in relation to insurance etc. I believe that schools can and should open up their facilities to greater community use. I want to see how this policy develops before changing course and direction. As I said, it has been out for only a number of weeks.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. Although there are some successful partnerships out there, will he acknowledge that there remains some work, perhaps a substantial piece of work, to be done to encourage some in the sector to support the strategy?

Mr O'Dowd: I think it stands to the benefit of individual schools. They need to be part of the community, and they need to be accessible for longer than from 8.30 am to 4.00 pm. People living around a school need to have ownership of it, whether they attend the school or not.

If you are looking to encourage pupils to attend your school, if you are looking to encourage ownership of your school and if you are looking to encourage the community value of your school, the best way to do that is to open your doors and allow local sports clubs, local youth clubs and pensioners' clubs, whatever it may be that is happening in your community, to come in. If such clubs need a room to go into in the evening, why should it not be in the local school? I believe that, in our current policy, we have dealt with all the barriers that were once there, and I encourage schools to read the policy closely. If they have any questions, they should come back to my Department, and we will clarify those for them.

Boys' Model: Teacher Intimidation

6. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Education what support the Department has put in place to assist the teacher at the Boys' Model who has been the target of sectarian intimidation because of her role as a Sinn Féin councillor. *(AQT 676/11-15)*

Mr O'Dowd: The most important support given to the teacher thus far has been from pupils at the school. The courage and vision that many pupils have shown in their public pronouncements through social media sites is commendable in relation to, it has to be said, a very small minority of people who are running a hate campaign against the teacher.

I welcome the fact that, even though it is belated, the majority if not all of our political parties have now come out and condemned the intimidation. I welcome the fact that community leaders and community groups in the area have come out and condemned the intimidation and want to see only the best for the young people at the Boys' Model moving forward. On your specific question, I understand that the education and library boards have been meeting the boards of governors and trade union representatives and may also have met the teacher herself to discuss the way forward.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that there is an incredible irony in the objections to a Sinn Féin councillor working as a teacher in a state school when successive Sinn Féin Ministers have put substantial investment into state schools, including the Boys' Model? Those investments have improved the quality of life and made the prospects much better for many Protestant children.

3.30 pm

Mr O'Dowd: It is worth remembering that the objections came from outside the school, not from the pupils or teaching staff in the school. Those who made the objections clearly need to be educated in the broadest sense of the word. I stand by my record of supporting education in Protestant working-class communities, and I know that my predecessors can stand by their record of supporting education in Protestant working-class communities. As we move forward and see the outcome and results of the common funding scheme, it will be shown that, where there is need, we will support it. We will not judge it on the basis of creed but will support it on the basis of need.

Executive Committee Business

Reservoirs Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

> *That the Second Stage of the Reservoirs Bill [NIA 31/11-15] be agreed. — [Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development).]*

Mr Allister: In introducing the debate, the Minister said something that surprised me greatly. She said that the Reservoirs Bill was required because of the EU floods directive. She said that the EU floods directive requires all flood risks to be assessed. Two other contributors to the debate perpetuated that myth when Mr Byrne and Mr Irwin told us that the EU floods directive requires this legislation. It does no such thing. The EU floods directive does not relate whatsoever to reservoir holdings of water. The EU floods directive relates to coastal and river basin flooding, and it requires assessments on those two things.

Anyone who has read the directive will see that article 4 talks about assessments that are necessary for each river basin, so it is a total fallacy to try to build the justification for the Bill on the EU floods directive. Confirmation of that is found in the regulations that transposed the directive into our law: the Water Environment (Floods Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 No 376. Nowhere in those regulations is there any requirement for assessment relating to risk of flooding from reservoirs. It is just not there.

I was amazed, therefore, that the explanatory and financial memorandum should also peddle the myth. Paragraph 6 states:

> *"The European Community Floods Directive requires member states to identify, assess and manage potential significant flood risks."*

That is correct, but it is in the context of river and coastal flooding and not in any other context. The explanatory and financial memorandum continues:

> *"The preliminary flood risk assessment to comply with the Floods Directive identified a potential risk from total dam failure of 156 impounding reservoirs having a capacity".*

The preliminary flood risk assessment did not comply with the floods directive when it made that finding. All the floods directive required it to do was to make an assessment of river and coastal flooding. There is no reference in the EU directive or in the regulation to any threat about impounded water. That is a fantasy that the Rivers Agency or someone else has created as justification for empire building in laying a foundation for the Reservoirs Bill. It is just not in the regulations or the directive, so I begin by expressing my amazement that it has been built on that false premise.

It is interesting that the Rivers Agency preliminary flood risk assessment, which it produced in December 2011, begins by stating in the executive summary:

> *"The principal aim of this report is to deliver the Preliminary Flood Risk Assessment (PFRA) for Northern Ireland as required by Article 4 of the EU Floods Directive."*

Fair enough, if it restrains itself to that. There is, then, I think, an acknowledgement from those who drafted it that they were pushing out the boundaries, because it goes on in the second paragraph to state:

> *"Therefore, as the potential flood risk from impoundments has already been determined to be 'significant' and shall be effectively managed through a legislative mechanism the assessment of the flood risk from this source is not specifically covered within this report."*

Nor should it be, because it was not required under the EU directive or under the regulations. However, we find a whole edifice built on our being told that, because there is an EU directive that requires us to do it — there is not — we have to produce the Reservoirs Bill.

Let us look at the justification for bringing 121 clauses and a massive tier of bureaucracy, inspection and cost to some relatively modest reservoirs and impoundments of water. The justification is said to be public safety, and, fair enough, we should all be concerned about that. However, let us look at the history outlined in the explanatory leaflet. In 150 years, there have been five incidents of water escape from impounded water, none of which threatened life. There was something in 1876, in 1902, in the 1980s, in 1985 and in 1998. Yet, on that basis, we proceed with a Bill to build a structure on the presumption of the total failure of every impounded piece of water. That is how they arrive at the figure of 66,000 people being at risk: by assuming that every reservoir will burst at the same moment. That really is stretching the justification for the Bill.

You would think, from reading some of the commentary, that we were going to introduce something novel, such as liability on the occupiers of these impoundments of water. Such liability has existed for decades. There was a very significant legal case called Rylands v Fletcher, which established the liability of anyone who controls any dangerous thing — impounded water has been found to be a dangerous thing — that escapes. So there is no issue but that liability lies with the occupier or owner of the reservoir, be they a public body or private individual. So the legislation does not bring something new in that regard; the legislation brings a new, oppressive tier of regulation. I think that it was the Chairman of the Committee who asked whether it was a case of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. It most certainly is, and it is a very huge sledgehammer to crack a nut.

One might not be so concerned about Northern Ireland Water (NIW) and other public bodies that might own reservoirs, but one is concerned for the private individual who is now required to employ structural engineers, get regular reports from them and expend a huge amount of money. Why? To tick the boxes of the 121 clauses in the Reservoirs Bill. It is over-legislating by a huge degree. There was some talk yesterday in a debate on tobacco about the undesirability of over-legislating. The Reservoirs Bill is a classic illustration, I believe, of over-legislating.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I hear his arguments and have certain sympathy with them. He has illustrated how liability is with the owners and managers of the reservoirs at present. However, if a reservoir were to breach and fail, and someone were to die or property were to be damaged, would any existing legislation stop that breach from happening? I know that people would be liable and held to account after the incident. However, would this Bill not, in a way, prevent something from

happening? I take the Member's point about the Bill being a sledgehammer to crack a nut, and that is something that we have concern with. We dare not get to the point at which we over-legislate. I sympathise with his arguments, but is there anything in law to prevent a reservoir from bursting?

Mr Allister: The Occupiers' Liability Act imposes obligations on any owner-occupier of any property to keep it in a safe state. If owner-occupiers fail to keep their property in a safe state, they are liable. Therefore, in legislation, through the Occupiers' Liability Act, and under the rule in Rylands v Fletcher, there is no doubt that the occupier will be liable if the bank bursts and the water comes down, and there is resulting damage to farms or individuals. There is that liability.

This legislation will not deal with what happens if the owner-occupier turns out to be unable to meet the liability. Of course he should have insurance, but what if he did not? I would have a lot more sympathy with the legislation if it were building in safeguards about compulsion for insurance or bonds. However, it seems to me that the Bill goes overboard with regulations. To find that it is built on a misunderstanding of the floods directive — that is a pretence that is used — for me, compounds that.

I have severe reservations about the Bill. The House should think long and hard before it goes down the road of legislating for a massive 121-clause Bill and all the regulation that comes with it.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to make a few very brief comments on the Bill. I agree with the Member who spoke previously that it is a huge Bill to deal with what I take to be a very minor issue.

It appears that one of the key elements of the Bill is the management of risk. It is important that risk be managed in a way that is cost-effective, is not choked up with bureaucracy, does not place a financial burden on any farmer who may have a reservoir on his land, and is delivered with some common sense. Perhaps the difficulty that we have is that a lot of the Bill is so overburdened with bureaucracy and delivered in a way that a lot of people cannot understand.

3.45 pm

As other Members mentioned in their contribution, a number of our reservoirs are considered to be in excess of 100 years old. I have no doubt that there may be a requirement for some safety measures to be carried out to any of them that have been lying idle for a number of years. I suppose that that is where the question lies: who is then responsible for the upgrading of such reservoirs to a satisfactory standard and meeting the financial cost that is associated with that work? Perhaps that needs to be looked at.

A number of reservoirs have been extensively utilised for community development and have proved to be a tremendous asset in those communities. Again, that type of development needs to be encouraged further by the Department, should that be for tourism or some aspect of health and well-being. I believe that some of those reservoirs could be further developed. Again, there are those that provide fresh water to many homes in our constituencies. They need to be continually protected. I note that clause 9 requires the Department to establish and maintain a register of all such controlled reservoirs.

As I look through the 121 clauses of the Bill, which deal with controls, management, inspections, reports, certificates and reviews of reservoirs, not to mention the disputes that may arise, I hope that it will not turn into another burdensome, bureaucratic piece of legislation, but rather that it will be something that is flexible in nature to allow effective and efficient delivery.

I do not believe that there is a need for 121 clauses in a Bill to deal with reservoirs. As a member of the Agriculture Committee, I, with other Committee members, will certainly thoroughly scrutinise the various clauses at Committee Stage. Hopefully, the end result will prove productive. As I said earlier, I do not believe that there is a need for all of those clauses in the Bill. I am certain that we will look at that closely when the Bill comes through Committee Stage.

Miss M McIlveen: I probably find Mr Allister's assertions with regard to the EU floods directive to be the most interesting this afternoon. I look forward to the Minister's response to those comments. I certainly have sympathy with his arguments, particularly if the Bill is just about regulation based on a misunderstanding.

It is also important that we are not complacent: just because a reservoir has not yet broken its banks does not mean that it will not happen in the future. Given the age of many reservoirs, we have to be cognisant of that. Obviously the best way to prevent that is to ensure that an adequate system of inspection and regulation takes place, but we must also make sure that that does not become too onerous.

It is also important that if the legislation is passed, it does not have the unintended consequence of reducing the number of those assets that we have which have environmental, leisure and other benefits. Certainly, as Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I can say that the Committee looks forward to considering the culture and leisure aspects of the Reservoirs Bill that will be of interest to it. The Committee will be particularly interested in the impact that the legislation might have on angling clubs, particularly those that own reservoirs. The Committee is also interested in the impact on recreational and leisure activities where the legislation may cause an owner to consider discontinuing a reservoir.

The Chair of the Committee for Regional Development made an important point which needs to be addressed, which is in relation to enforcement and how the Minister will deal with those who attempt to circumvent the regulations by draining reservoirs below the level that is stipulated by the Bill in order to avoid the need for compliance. Certainly, in my constituency of Strangford there are a number of reservoirs. I am delighted that the Agriculture Committee, before my time on it and without my influence, chose to visit Kiltonga and was able to appreciate it as an important community and environmental resource.

Other reservoirs, such as Lough Cowey outside Portaferry, are currently under the management of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, but owned by Northern Ireland Water, as many reservoirs here are. It has, however, been identified by Northern Ireland Water as being surplus to requirements. Although it has not been advertised for sale yet, that will undoubtedly happen eventually, as will

be the case for Portavo reservoir near Donaghadee. Understandably and perhaps regrettably, despite the potential, particularly at Cowey, there does not appear to be a great deal of interest from local councils in Ards or north Down in acquiring them as assets, nor is there any desire from other public bodies to take them on.

So, in those circumstances, Northern Ireland Water would be looking to the private sector to take ownership of those reservoirs. However, it may be a concern that, if a balance is not struck, we may be regulating those reservoirs out of the market. That is not to say that regulation, inspection and repair are not required; after all, safety is absolutely paramount.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that, although the council is not interested, there are certainly sporting and community groups around Lough Cowey that would be interested in having it as a provision for sport and leisure activities?

Miss M McIlveen: Mr McCarthy will be aware that I have a relationship with Ards and Down Salmonid Enhancement Association (ADSEA), which has a project looking at a potential fish hatchery on the site.

I will return to the comments that I was making about safety being paramount. I also note from the presentation that the Department gave to us that it is probably more concerned about the number of reservoirs that lie in private ownership. That is because those that are in public ownership are under fairly stringent inspection. However, cost must also be taken into consideration, and it has to be a factor for those private owners. As a result of the regulations, it is possible that landowners may drain reservoirs or seek to abandon their ownership. Is there a means by which the impact of that can be minimised?

The Chairman and others highlighted this issue, but it is important to know what grants or funding schemes can be put in place for owners or to know, perhaps, what social enterprises are currently in ownership of reservoirs that fall under the scope of the Bill but that cannot afford the initial inspection or the needed repairs.

One example that comes to mind in my constituency is the Golden Glen on the Mountain Road, which was bequeathed to the wildfowlers by the Londonderry estate and is now run by the social enterprise, TAGIT. Being a social enterprise, it is a not-for-profit organisation and would simply not have the resources that are needed to carry out major works to the reservoir, which would fall under the auspices of the Bill. TAGIT has been doing an enormous amount of fantastic work on environmental improvement in Golden Glen and on youth diversionary work. It is inconceivable that something could not be done to ensure that those efforts are not undermined.

I would like to look into those issues in greater detail as we progress through Committee Stage. However, at this stage, I do not wish to repeat previous comments, as I am conscious of the rest of today's business in the House. So, I greatly appreciate the need to look at the legislation. I hope that a common-sense approach —

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. She raised the very important point about draining reservoirs or owners and managers reducing levels in reservoirs. Although it could be the cubic metres of water that do the damage if the reservoir were to breach, there could be reservoirs that have the capacity to hold much more water than they currently do. Therefore, they could also be deemed a risk. Will the Minister clarify whether it is the actual amount of water in the reservoir or the reservoir's potential capacity? In other words, if an owner drains a reservoir by a couple of feet, will that still be under the legislation?

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Chairman of the Agriculture Committee for those comments. I look forward to the Minister's response. It leads to the fact that we need a common-sense approach to the legislation, and I look forward to the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Ms Michelle O'Neill, to respond.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am usually very assiduous about staying for a Minister's reply when I have spoken in a debate, and I was particularly anxious to do that today because of the points that I raised. Unfortunately, however, I have a meeting that I must attend at 4.00 pm. So, I want to alert the House to the fact that I may not be here when the Minister is dealing with all the points, and I apologise for that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We note the apology; thank you.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful to Members for their contributions. They have been absolutely valuable and informative. Some of the issues also reflect the concerns that stakeholders raised during the policy development stage and in the consultation on the policy proposals that underpin the Bill.

I will pick up on some of the key points raised today. If the Bill gets through its Second Stage today, we will look forward to the Committee Stage, during which there will be a full and frank exchange on all the issues outlined.

Members raised a number of common issues. First, it is clear that almost all Members who spoke generally supported the principles of the Bill. However, there is a worry that it is gold-plating or that we are using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. So, I really want to take on that point from the outset. Throughout the Bill's policy development, I made sure that I stressed to officials that the approach should be proportionate to the risk posed by the reservoirs. That is why controlled reservoirs will be designated as being high, medium or low risk. I am sure that you will agree with me that structures that present the highest risk or could cause the greatest impact should be subject to significant regulation, while, by comparison, those that pose a very low risk should only be registered with little or no other requirements.

I want to pick up on a point in Mr Allister's lengthy contribution about why we are making the legislation and why it is unnecessary, which is a misconception. This is very much a preventative approach. I will correct your assertion that this is not required: it absolutely is required. The EU leaves it to member states to determine what is a significant flood risk. For us, significant flood sources are, in particular, rivers, sea, surface water and reservoirs. You referred to Rylands v Fletcher.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: I want to finish my point.

Rylands v Fletcher applies when you determine liability after a failure has occurred. If that is how you would prefer to make legislation, let us wait until someone loses their life or someone's property is severely damaged. That is not the case. As I said, it is very clear to me from the directive that it is up to member states to establish what they need to do.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: When I have finished my point.

When I have taken a decision on the legislation that needs to come forward, it has been based on the risk. I am happy to give way.

Mr Allister: Article 2 of the floods directive interprets what is covered in terms of a flood. There is no reference in the definition to anything outside river flooding and coastal flooding, none whatsoever. The Minister says that she interprets it as including impounded water, but she cannot do that and root it in the directive, since it is not there to start with.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member says, "Let us not do anything, because we have not had any significant events in the past number of years. Let us just sit down and wait for something bad to happen and then we will legislate when there is a public call for it". This is very much a preventative approach. The EU directive is relevant to that. It is about taking a protective approach based on risk and not being disproportionate. It is very much based on risk. That is what we are trying to do.

Many Members today expressed concerns about the affordability of the legislation, particularly for third sector or not-for-profit organisations. I want to put it on the record that I have absolute sympathy for those organisations and recognise the services that they offer to the wider community. Although the Bill allows for a grant aid scheme, I wish to explore in more detail the possibility of meeting the cost of public safety measures. It also needs to be emphasised that any grant aid scheme may well be outside the current CSR period. However, as I said, I am content to look at that, particularly with organisations that feel that they will be adversely affected.

Picking up on a point raised by the Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, I encourage any organisation concerned about the future requirements of the Bill not to unnecessarily draw down their reservoir without seeking advice from a suitably qualified engineer or, indeed, our officials. Given that many of those structures offer wider community benefits, we need to ensure that any decisions are well informed and are taken for the benefit of all those concerned. On the issue of capacity, it is about the capability to hold water not the actual volume of the water that is impounded.

Finally, I obviously welcome the comments made by the Chairs of both the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and the Regional Development Committee. Scrutiny of the Bill is extremely important. I am pleased that issues such as the 10,000 cubic metre capacity, the need for reservoir engineers in NI Water and the frequency of inspections will all be examined, and I hope that we will then have an agreed outcome. I am content for my officials to present on the detail of the Bill to the Regional Development Committee, if it helps and if the Committee would like that to happen.

Again, I thank Members for their contribution to the debate and for raising their questions and issues. I am confident that the Bill will provide an assurance that reservoirs are safe and that the potential risk of flooding as a result of a reservoir's failure will be managed appropriately. My officials and I look forward to working closely with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development when it begins its detailed and important scrutiny of the Bill, should the Bill pass the Second Stage. I commend the Bill to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That the Second Stage of the Reservoirs Bill [NIA 31/11-15] be agreed.*

4.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Public Service Pensions Bill: Final Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

> *That the Public Service Pensions Bill [NIA Bill 23/11-15] do now pass.*

I apologise for being late into the Chamber; I thought that I would give everybody a little bit of a break in a very busy day. I am always trying to accommodate and be helpful in that way, Mr Speaker.

First, I thank the Chairperson and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee for their detailed scrutiny of the Public Service Pensions Bill. The Committee has taken evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, including trade unions and officials from my Department. I am grateful for the Committee's efforts to give this important Bill priority at Committee Stage. I also thank Members of the House for their support to date and look forward to their continued support today.

The Bill now has 38 clauses and nine schedules and is complex legislation in its scope and impact. Having been extensively quoted by Mr Attwood at Further Consideration Stage, I thought that I might at least quote him, not extensively, at Final Stage, in perhaps a more favourable quote than the ones that he hand-picked at Further Consideration Stage. However, I agree with Mr Attwood's comments at that stage last month when he said that the Bill is:

> *"arguably the most significant legislation to come before the Chamber thus far in this mandate." — [Official Report, This Bound Volume, p108, col 1.]*

I remind Members that the Public Service Pensions Bill provides framework enabling legislation for the reform of public service pensions in Northern Ireland. The Bill gives effect to the recommendations from the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission led by Lord Hutton. That review considered what needed to be done to have sustainable public service pensions, given the increases in longevity and associated costs. Two elements are at the core of the reforms: first, to move from final salary pension schemes to a new career average revalued earnings scheme model; and, secondly, the introduction of a link between normal scheme pension age and state pension age. The reforms will apply to a range of public servants, including civil servants, local government workers, teachers, health service workers, the judiciary, firefighters and police officers. As I mentioned several times at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage — I will repeat it again — on 8 March 2012, the Executive agreed to commit to the policy for a new career average revalued earnings model, with pension age linked to state pension age, to be adopted for general use in the public services schemes and to adopt that approach consistently for each of the public sector pension schemes, in line with their equivalent scheme in Great Britain, and not to adopt different approaches for Northern Ireland.

In total, 41 amendments were tabled at both consideration stages. Some were minor and technical in nature. I tabled nine amendments, all of which were accepted by the House at Consideration Stage. An amendment for firefighters was supported by all Members at Consideration Stage. That change means that normal scheme pension age for firefighters may be in the range of 55 to 60 rather than specifying that they must be 60 as originally proposed. I have made it clear that flexibilities exist at secondary legislation stage for all schemes. Those flexibilities mean that account can be taken of the particular needs of that workforce.

A number of amendments were adopted at Further Consideration Stage. On the local government pension scheme, the implementation date is put back one year to 1 April 2015. The local government pension scheme, although funded, is nevertheless part of the overall programme of pension reform. I reiterate that that change in the implementation date must not have any implications for the Executive Budget. I note Minister Durkan's confirmation that the delay will not have any financial consequences.

I welcomed, as did all Members of the House, the proposed new clause on the police pension scheme. I understood and shared Mr Allister's concerns about the inconsistencies in police pension scheme legislation for pensions paid to police widows on remarriage.

The Assembly also agreed amendments to clause 10, which deals with pension age. In Lord Hutton's report on public service pensions reform, he recommended that the link between the state pension age and normal scheme pension age should be regularly reviewed to make sure that it is still appropriate, with a preference for keeping the two pension ages linked. The amendments to clause 10 give effect to that recommendation. The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review every two years following the commencement of clause 10. A report must then be laid in the Assembly within six months of that review having started. Following such a review, the Department of Finance and Personnel may introduce an order to provide flexibility in pension age. Once again, I must make it clear that a review led by my Department will not mean that I, as Finance Minister, will provide any funding for changes. The thrust of the reforms is to contain the cost to the taxpayer and the public purse. Any variances must therefore be contained in the overall cost envelope. Any sector that exceeds that will need to make up the shortfall to Her Majesty's Treasury.

I welcome any points of clarity that might be sought by Members or, indeed, questions that Members may have about the Bill.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): A Cheann Comhairle, I welcome the Final Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill. Members are aware that the Bill will affect upwards of 216,000 employees in the public service, which is over 30% of the total workforce across the North. Those affected include teachers, health service workers, civil servants, local government workers, firefighters and police officers.

As Members are also aware, the Committee collected a significant body of evidence in advance of the formal introduction of the Bill and throughout Committee Stage. Members of the Committee scrutinised not only the policy intention of the reforms but the operational aspects of the detailed provisions, as well as examining the technical

drafting of the Bill. That resulted in a wide range of issues and queries being raised with the Department for clarification and assurance, as well as proposals for specific amendments. Output from that work was set out in the Committee report, which, I believe, helped to inform the subsequent debates at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage.

Originally, of course, the Executive deliberated on whether the reforms should be taken forward by way of a legislative consent motion (LCM), thereby handing responsibility and control to Westminster. I am mindful that that issue was reflected on when the Assembly was debating and agreeing the amendments to improve the Bill. Suffice it to say that, had we taken the LCM route to legislate on this important and sensitive matter, the Committee would not have had the opportunity to conduct such detailed scrutiny of the Bill or to recommend or table amendments. I firmly believe that the rigorous scrutiny and quality of debate that Members have afforded the matter across the House — in Committee and plenary session — provide yet another example of the added value that can be achieved when we, as locally elected and accountable representatives, work collectively and constructively to tackle difficult issues and shape outcomes to meet local needs.

The Committee, at the outset of its scrutiny, was mindful that, although public sector pension policy is a fully devolved matter, the convention has been to broadly follow parity. More particularly, it was mindful that there could be costs to the Executive through varying from measures taken by Westminster to achieve savings. A key finding of the Committee's scrutiny, however, was the variability in the estimates of the financial penalty — they ranged from £262 million to £300 million — that the Treasury has confirmed it will apply, should the public sector pension reforms provided for in the Bill be delayed or not implemented in line with Britain. The Committee accepted that, given the existing financial framework for devolution, not proceeding with the reforms would place substantial pressure on the Executive's Budget and, in particular, on the funding available for delivering priority front line public services. That said, given the significance of the reforms, particularly in light of the predominance of the public sector in the North's economy, the Committee considered that, in expecting the Executive to follow parity on this devolved matter, the Westminster Government should have provided a macroeconomic appraisal of the Hutton reforms at a local level. Therefore, perhaps ensuring that the local impact of Westminster-led policy initiatives affecting devolved matters is fully costed well in advance offers a lesson for the future.

It was clear from the evidence to the Committee and subsequent debates and amendments that one of the most contentious impacts of the reforms arises from clause 10. In particular, there is an automatic linkage between normal pension age and state pension age for public servants generally and, as previously drafted, the fixing of normal pension age at 60 for firefighters. The Committee was unable to agree the clause as originally drafted and recommended that it be amended to provide sufficient flexibility to enable evidence-based decisions to be taken at scheme level on whether certain public service roles, especially firefighters, should have a lower normal pension age than that set in the Bill. From the evidence presented to the Committee, it was clear that the jury was still out on whether there should be a firm and substantiated basis for setting the normal pension age of certain physically or, indeed, emotionally demanding roles, not least that of firefighters. Some of the amendments agreed at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage should, therefore, go some way to providing the flexibility that the Committee had called for, to be able to respond appropriately to the outcome of current or future reviews that will inform thinking on fitness requirements and pension ages for particular public sector roles.

4.15 pm

In the course of its deliberations, the Committee noted that clause 13 specifies that defined benefits schemes with a pension fund must require actuarial valuations of the fund. It also requires that the responsible authority appoint a person to report on whether such a valuation is in accordance with the scheme regulations, consistent with other valuations and at the applicable rate of employer contributions that is set. However, the clause, as drafted on introduction, simply required that the person appointed

> *"must, in the view of the responsible authority, be appropriately qualified"*

whereas the accompanying explanatory and financial memorandum, which has no legal status, described the review as being an "independent person" undertaking an "independent verification". Therefore, the Committee decided that the clause did not go far enough to assure the independence of the appointed person and therefore tabled its amendment. I welcome that, at Consideration Stage, the amendment was agreed, and it now forms part of the Bill. It was a non-contentious but nonetheless important improvement to the legislation.

From its consideration of whether the Bill provides for sufficient checks and balances on Departments' powers to make pension scheme changes under subordinate legislation, the Committee recognised that there was a balance to be struck in requiring the higher level of Assembly scrutiny, in the form of the affirmative resolution procedure. Members were also mindful of the fact that, under the negative resolution procedure, Committees or individual Members would have the option of tabling a plenary motion for annulment praying against the scheme changes that had given rise to concerns. In that regard, the Committee called for further assurance from the Department that it would observe the 21-day rule for any proposals that it made for negative resolution regulations that made scheme changes under the Bill. On behalf of the Committee, I therefore welcome the Minister's assurance that it is the Department's intention to observe that important rule. I advise the other applicable Committees to seek similar assurances on the issue from their Department.

Finally, on behalf of the Committee, I acknowledge the contributions of the stakeholders, including the various trade union representatives, in informing the Committee deliberations. I also acknowledge the responsiveness of DFP officials in seeking to provide clarification, explanation and assurances on issues that arose from the evidence. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

I will now give my party's perspective on the Bill. The Bill outlines the importance of devolution and local legislative scrutiny. It seems a long time ago that there was some argument among Ministers about the issue.

All in all, this has very much been a worthwhile exercise. There is flexibility in the Bill that was not there before. As the Minister said, the SDLP amendments at Further Consideration Stage, I think, have given the Minister the power to change schemes if certain exceptional circumstances justify it. I urge the Minister to consider using that power as is necessary.

We proposed our own amendments to clause 10 that were not accepted. They sought to set regulations through clause 10 that, we believe, would have been more acceptable. We have received significant praise from firefighters across these islands for our party's amendments that ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in the Bill to take evidence and future evidence bases into account when setting pension age. In Scotland, England and Wales, there has been a degree of tension between the legislatures and the Fire Brigades Union because of the lack of flexibility in the Bills that passed through their respective Houses.

Some of us in the House have a bad habit of nodding in deference to anything that the Government in London put before us. The lesson from the Bill is that that has to change. As local representatives, we should seek a fair deal for our constituents, and we should give as much consideration as we can to the impacts of significant legislation such as the pensions Bill. The local scrutiny involved in the Bill through all its stages has certainly been a worthwhile exercise. I think that I can speak for all the Committee in saying that.

Mr Girvan: I am in favour of the Bill moving forward with the amendments that have been made and accepted at earlier stages. As it stands, I appreciate that, if we do not move ahead, there is a difficulty in that Northern Ireland would have to meet the bill. Some of the figures that were mentioned were quite horrific. It would have an ongoing cost to the Northern Ireland Executive of up to £300 million and rising.

Mention was made of the legislative consent motion, which could have dealt with moving this forward in a quicker way, but it would not necessarily have been right. I think that we have identified and seen some flexibility which has been suitable for certain sections that we felt were being adversely affected, such as the firefighters, as has been mentioned, and how that has been amended to give flexibility between the ages of 55 and 60. That is in clause 10.

Another area that I feel has been very helpful was an amendment that introduced clause 30 to the Bill, which allows widows and widowers of RUC officers to avail themselves of a pension and not lose it when they remarry. I think that that has moved ahead quite well.

As far as Committee Stage is concerned, I felt that there was quite a good engagement with the unions and feedback from the Department in relation to how we could meet in the middle ground somewhere. Some unions presented their case better than others, and I think that that has been represented in the Bill before us today, because some of those recommendations were included and carried forward in the Bill.

As for some of the other aspects, I appreciate that there is flexibility for Departments, should they wish to make amendments to certain sections, to do so under secondary legislation. I appreciate that we were all lobbied on some of those areas. If those Departments feel that they can, and they do want to, they can actually deal with that through secondary legislation.

The Bill as presented today has allowed for us to move ahead. Some other amendments were made to clause 10 which allow for a review of this every two years. I appreciate that that is provided. There were some amendments that, needless to say, we did not all agree on, but we got there eventually. We have to deal with it and move ahead before it becomes a cost burden to the Northern Ireland Executive. That is all I have to say at this stage.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm deis cainte a bheith agam i gcéim dheiridh an Bhille. I am pleased to address the House on the Final Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill. I agree that, to some extent, the Bill has benefited from the rigours of the legislative process here, especially in the Consideration and Further Consideration Stages.

The original intention was that the Westminster Bill, with a few modifications, would be nodded through under the veil of a legislative consent motion, but thankfully that did not happen. I think that we are better off for that. Mr Attwood, my colleague, ensured at the Executive table that that did not happen, and I think that we owe him a debt of gratitude for that.

One of the most controversial aspects of the Bill is the alignment of the normal pension age, when public sector workers will receive their pensions in full, with the state pension age. Through amendments tabled at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, the SDLP attempted to decouple that link as presented in the Bill. I suppose that we achieved a limited amount of success with an amendment to clause 10 that could allow the normal pension age to be lower than the state pension age, although that is not guaranteed.

There was a further addition that allows for a biennial review and assessment of how the arrangements affect scheme members and for a report on that to be laid before the Assembly. I suppose that those are improvements that strengthen the Bill from the point of view of pension scheme members.

At this time, we do not know the outcomes of the Working Longer review or what effect that will have on employment. For example, we already have over 6,000 qualified teachers who have not yet gained full-time employment in education. If we take teachers as an example of a group that will be affected by the Bill, we see that, traditionally, we have had schemes that allowed older teachers to exit the profession and younger qualified teachers to enter it. The number of those schemes has gradually been reduced, and I expect that they will eventually be no more.

When the Bill comes fully into effect, any teacher who wishes to leave the profession early will be subject to an actuarial reduction of their pension. I think that that will help to ensure that fewer and fewer teachers will exit the profession early and that, therefore, fewer and fewer younger teachers will enter it. I suppose that you could extrapolate that and say that, across the professions that the Bill covers, staff will be forced to stay on until they reach the higher state pension age, and that that will have subsequent implications for the employment of younger people. I do not believe that enough work has been done, if any, on the implications of the Bill on employment and the economy.

Early in his contribution, the Chair of the Committee mentioned that the Bill's macroeconomic effects have not been properly assessed. However, at a base level, the proposals will lead to less money circulating in the economy, as the financial power of retiring civil servants, sometimes described as the grey pound, will be reduced.

As I said, that is all in the context of the cost of public service pensions being driven down from 1·9% of GDP to 1·4% of GDP by 2060. Additionally, as I also said, increased numbers of public servants working longer will entail a reduction of job opportunities for younger people. Current circumstances already well define the problems of youth unemployment. For the period from August to October 2013, that rate for 18- to 24 -year-olds was 23·8%. So, we risk developing a lost generation. Large numbers of young people are again being forced to leave these shores to find work, and we should not, through this Bill or any other, seek to perpetuate that problem. As the Chair of the Committee said, not enough work has been done on the longer-term effects of the Bill. Perhaps we are addressing a short-term problem and are remaining blind to the longer-term impacts.

It is important to remember that pensions are not some sort of added or extra benefit. They are simply pay that has been earned and deferred. The changes in the Bill will leave a bitter taste in the mouths of many public servants, especially given that the London Government are already reneging on their promise of a 25-year guarantee on pensions. We have been petitioned, I suppose like many other Members of this House, by members of various professions across the public service on the provisions of the Bill.

4.30 pm

Contrary to the view that is often expressed on radio programmes and by various commentators who perhaps have a monetarist attitude to public service, public sector pensions are not gold-plated in the way that they would portray them. Over half of public service pensions are less than £5,600 per annum. For civil servants, the average yearly pension is less again at around £5,400, with a quarter of that number being less than £2,000 annually. So, when considering the impact of these proposed pension changes, we should bear in mind that the average Northern Ireland Local Government Officers' Superannuation Committee (NILGOSC) pension for women is less than £3,000.

During the course of the Consideration Stages, a case was made on behalf of firefighters and police officers. The SDLP supported that case. Indeed, one of our amendments, which was not successful, was directed towards that very end. In this instance, the Sinn Féin amendment was carried, and we supported that amendment. However, as Mr Attwood pointed out in a previous debate, conceding the case on behalf of fire and police personnel proves the point. Many public servants — nurses, teachers, doctors and paramedics, to name a few — face demands during their employment that could be described as particularly physically, mentally or emotionally demanding. Looking ahead, it would not be amiss to predict that increasing the pension age for so many in the public service will probably result in increasing numbers of ill-health retirements and people forced out of work on capability grounds. There will be a cost to that, and that cost remains to be seen.

I was disappointed that our efforts to have the trade unions named in the Bill as pension board members were not successful. Trade union members make up 65% of the scheme. That force of numbers alone, not to mention the expertise on pensions, representation and related matters that unions have, should have ensured that they were represented in the Bill. An unwelcome animosity towards the unions was expressed by some Members. That is not helpful, considering the importance of the trade unions as social partners.

The Bill has been strengthened. Mr Allister introduced an amendment that is helpful to RUC widows, and the SDLP supported that. The Bill was strengthened also in respect of increased affirmative resolution, which is also to be welcomed. However, we are not convinced that the Bill as it stands is the best possible deal for Northern Ireland's public servants. We did our best on these Benches to shape the legislation and improve it. We met with some success. However, the Bill is still not as we would like it to be.

Mr Cree: I support the Public Service Pensions Bill in its Final Stage. We have spent considerable time debating the Bill and the many amendments that were proposed. Basically, as some Members said, the Bill is modelled on the Westminster Act, which is not really surprising, as we have parity in these matters. However, this has allowed discussion and amendments to be considered, and that has been a good thing.

Members will remember that our Executive decided not to use a legislative consent motion, which would have meant the Westminster legislation applying directly here. They also decided, on 8 March 2012, to support the scheme in line with Great Britain and not adopt a different approach for Northern Ireland.

The Independent Public Service Pensions Commission, under Lord Hutton, was set up to review the structure in the UK. It found that the UK had not responded flexibly to rising costs and increases in longevity in past years and that the situation would not be tenable in the long term. The commission considered a wide range of professions and noted that a special case could be made for police and firefighters, who need an exception in retirement age because of the fitness and strength required for the job. It is important to note that no other categories were identified for this exception. The report was published on 10 March 2011.

The parties opposite have made determined efforts to change parts of the Bill and add other groups as exceptions. They have made no secret of the fact that they wish to break parity on these issues, despite the likely cost to the Executive of some £300 million in the first year because of delays. Most of us will know that that money could come only from the block grant and that other services such as health and education and job creation would suffer. No evidence or information was given as to why public sector workers should be given quite different treatment to those in the private sector.

The debates, in the main, were conducted in good order. The Minister accepted many of the amendments and had them incorporated into the Bill. In my opinion, those who continue to espouse further changes, with some passion on occasions, and enjoyed the shadow boxing were not really serious. If they had been serious, why did they not

present a petition of concern? On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the Bill.

Mrs Cochrane: As I said before, changes to public service pensions as a result of the Bill are not desirable but unfortunately are required. Unsurprisingly, there has been a strong lobby from public sector workers against the changes. It is frustrating for all of us that reform is necessary. However, the pension provisions are simply not sustainable in their current form.

Much has been said in earlier debates about increases in life expectancy and how the cost of pensions has risen by one third in the past 10 years. We need to be realistic and continue to monitor the proportion of adult life spent in retirement. That means continuing to assess whether scheme pension ages should be in line with state pension age.

There have been a few proposed exceptions to the link to state pension age. They have been made in line with the Hutton recommendations. Even with these changes, a public service pension, although perhaps not gold-plated, remains a very effective way to save for retirement. The benefits remain far greater than those on offer from most other employers, with the public purse paying the majority of the cost of the public service pension through the employer contribution.

We should also remember that there is transitional protection in place to phase in the changes. This means that many existing members of public sector schemes will still be able to retire at 60. It will probably be the mid-2030s before others will be expected to work until 68 in line with the state pension age changes. It is in that context, and given the amendments agreed at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, that I support the Bill's passage today.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I will have to finish chewing this sweet.

I will not repeat the observations of Members who have spoken. The consideration process that we subjected the Bill to was very worthwhile, because changes were made. Those changes improved the Bill and inserted flexibility, which I hope the Minister and future Ministers will take full cognisance of. The underlying assumptions behind the Bill and the pension reforms introduced at Westminster should have been underpinned by a macroeconomic analysis, particularly of public sector pension schemes.

Whatever economic and political conditions or realities affect London and the greater London metropolitan area, they do not reflect the social, political or economic reality of the North. The public sector's significance in our overall economy does not lend itself to a model whereby you raise the threshold for retirement while encouraging young people, particularly those who avail themselves of further and higher education, to enter the labour market. We are significantly disadvantaging that young generation of people who are looking to join the local employment market. Into the future, that inherent difficulty will apply.

Dominic, Daithí and others mentioned specific amendments. I am grateful that they were accepted and that the Minister responded with amendments that were, perhaps, minor in scope but that reflected the debate and the changes that the local Assembly was making to the Bill as originally presented. That was a long way from the arguments of his predecessor as Finance Minister, who simply wanted to subject us to the consent motion process without any kind of discussion.

My party is happy to support the career average reform. We think that that is inherently fairer and more equitable to the overall workforce. Other aspects of the reforms created difficulties for us and for other parties with the exception, perhaps, of the Ulster Unionist Party. Even the Minister's party engaged in the discussion and contributed to finding responses within the Assembly's financial capacity.

To that extent, I find it a bit disturbing — not just in this debate but in others — that some Members look at the projected costs or the financial penalties involved in going for nuclear options. Nevertheless, we have taken a much more measured and mature approach. We were not talking about throwing the whole lot, lock, stock and barrel, out the door and, therefore, having to pay the entire bill. Those were the figures that were being brought forward, in a sense, to bludgeon and dissuade those who wanted to examine the matter and to take their time to see whether that was the best that we could do.

The Bill made progress, as did the Assembly. I remain of the same view, which is that it is not sufficient, but at least we made an impact. On that basis, we support the Bill at its Final Stage.

Mr McCallister: Mrs Cochrane's contribution to the debate probably sums up the Bill. It is not completely desirable to make these changes, but the question is whether they will be necessary to safeguard the future. Were there many other options for the Minister or the Assembly with the hit that the block grant would have suffered? Could the Assembly or a Minister have taken a hit to the block grant of £300 million? Could we have achieved that? It would have been unrealistic not to expect the inevitable knock-on effect on other services and areas of government activity had we taken that hit.

Although it was undesirable, we might have wanted to do different things. We might have wanted to ease the burden on some areas, and we did mitigate some of them. However, the sheer size of the hit to the block grant is one of the realities that faces the Assembly and the Minister.

Generally, at Committee Stage, we gave a good hearing to the many groups that attended the Committee or wrote to us to make their views known, including the trade unions, and we listened in particular to the firefighters' concerns.

That is why I was pleased to sign the Sinn Féin amendment on firefighters. Unfortunately, family commitments prevented me from being here to speak on that. For obvious reasons, that was an important change to make, and I was pleased that the Minister accepted the amendment and that it is in the Bill. The Fire Brigades Union made a compelling case for why it should be included. The service faces difficulties in redeploying staff who have not been medically discharged but who do not meet the very high standards that we all expect from our Fire and Rescue Service. It was important to support that change.

4.45 pm

Mr McLaughlin's point about the career average was important. At times, it is important to reflect on the fact that many Members, including me, worked in other jobs or careers before coming into politics. Some of you, like

me, will have been self-employed. Some of you will know that private sector pensions are a lot lower. If you are self-employed, your only source of contribution is what you can afford to put into it. That might be slightly more in some years than in others. So there is a huge difference between what people in the public sector get and what people in the private sector get, particularly those who are self-employed or work for small businesses, which may struggle at the best of times, never mind reinvesting and paying pensions.

I accept Mr Bradley's point that average pensions in the public sector are much smaller than we sometimes imagine. Not everyone receives the pension of, say, a retiring permanent secretary or someone else at that level. However, there is certainly a considerable difference between what a private sector employee and a public sector employee will get, and we need to note that. You can accept all the other arguments about pension being deferred pay, but the public sector often makes a significant contribution, and it is no different for many of us in the Chamber.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes a point that is often made about public sector workers in comparison with private sector workers. He mentioned permanent secretaries, who, undoubtedly, receive a very generous pension settlement, but theirs are dwarfed by the pension settlements of CEOs of banks, for example. This simple public-private dichotomy does not work across the board. Indeed, at the top end in the private sector, much higher pensions are paid out.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful for that. On the point that Mr Agnew introduced, we could probably run an entire debate on how many Members feel about banks, never mind the CEOs of certain banks, banking bonuses and all of that. I am sure that, if I speak too long, the Speaker will tell me that I am going off on a slight tangent. I accept the point, but you are looking at a much smaller number.

Going back to Mr Bradley's point on the public sector, I accept that many public sector pensions are not nearly as big or as generous as we sometimes imagine. The career average probably limits the pensions of some of those at the very top end, such as retiring permanent secretaries, whose pension is built over a 35-year or 40-year career average.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. I remind the Member and Mr Agnew, who just raised the point, that the same argument could also apply to senior executives in trade unions.

Mr McCallister: Mr Speaker, I will maybe let Mr McIlveen and Mr Agnew sort this dispute out. I think that Mr Agnew will probably speak shortly. However, the point is about the people who sometimes argue most vociferously against something. Their pay and other remuneration, whether it is their pension or general expenses, are probably significantly out of kilter with the membership average.

The only union that I am a member of is the Ulster Farmers' Union, so I am not overburdened in that regard. *[Interruption.]* Mr Allister tells me that the UFU does not count as a trade union. Nevertheless, it is my only experience of union activity.

On pensions, we faced a difficult choice between what we might want to do and what changes we had to make, along with being realistic about the money available. I suspect that the Minister faces a similar choice when it comes to looking at welfare reform. He may want to tackle in his response how he will deal with Ministers, given some of the structural difficulties of our Administration. He has already had the experience of having to take one Minister to court. I wonder whether he is going to have to take the rest —

Mr Hamilton: Successfully.

Mr McCallister: Successfully to court. That probably depends on your point of view.

Mr Hamilton: I won.

Mr McCallister: He won, but whether it was a win for rural development and agriculture, who knows?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member will know that I have given him quite a bit of latitude. He is straying totally outside this afternoon's debate. Will he come back to the pensions Bill?

Mr McCallister: I absolutely take the Speaker's guidance and will not give in to temptation. If the Minister throws such nuggets at me, I will deflect his interventions.

How will the Minister make sure that other Ministers and Departments deliver on their commitments to implement some of the changes in the legislation? Does he have the power to do that, or will he end up having to cut budgets if some Ministers do not buy in? Mr Cree made the point that some parties in here, although they are in government, have not exactly toed the government line on pensions. The Minister may want to comment and shed some light on how he might address those issues.

Mr Allister: We have had much talk today about unions; the essential driving force of much of the Bill is the Union — between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. It is the template that, of necessity, we are following for pensions. Many things, such as lengthening work periods and all of that, are hard pills to swallow, but they are an inevitable consequence of the austerity that has afflicted all of the Western World and more besides. I cannot help thinking though what a worse pickle we would be in, with pensions and everything else, if some people were able to achieve the other union that is suggested — the union of all Ireland. Then we really would know the difficulties of austerity and all that comes with it. Although there are things in the Bill that, I am sure, if many of us were left to it, we would rather not have seen in it, there is a collective realisation that, with our membership of the United Kingdom, there come responsibilities. Just as the benefits flow, so too flow responsibilities.

I do not want to detain the House, but I want to sincerely thank it for agreeing to introduce what is now clause 30. It has brought considerable relief and pleasure to a small number of police widows, but, for them, it is very significant. It was right for the House — it did it very magnanimously — to bring that sense of equality of treatment to all police widows, whether recently widowed or widowed many years ago, and to restore to some who, hitherto, would have lost their pension rights if they had remarried and to some who did lose them upon remarriage the equality of treatment that more recent widows properly enjoy. I thank the House, and I think the Bill is better for bringing that equality of treatment to all police widows — I

stress, all police widows — whensoever they became a widow.

Mr Agnew: I rise to express disappointment of behalf of Green Party NI at the failure to create our own path in the Assembly and go our own way on pensions, as we had the potential to do. We have failed to make devolution work for public sector workers in Northern Ireland.

As we are aware, there were those who were willing to abdicate responsibility in the Bill through the process of a legislative consent motion. I think there has been some acknowledgement, through their agreement to some of the amendments that have been proposed, that that was the wrong path to choose. Whilst overall I am disappointed by the Bill, I welcome the fact that we have been able to break parity in Northern Ireland, which is what we have done, and make some modifications to what would otherwise have been handed down from Westminster. I am sure that the firefighters in particular will be grateful that we did indeed choose to legislate ourselves for pensions and to make special provision, taking account of the particular needs of firefighters.

The Bill essentially came from London and was introduced for London. It does not sit well in the Northern Ireland context. As I said at a previous stage, for the rationale of the Bill much has been made of the increase in life expectancy and, therefore, the increased pressure on the pensions pot, but we must contrast the life expectancy of 73 in Belfast with the life expectancy in Kensington of 85. When the Conservative Government talk about future plans to increase the state pension age, they base their proposals for pension provision on living in the bubble of London, rather than governing, as, I am sure, the unionist politicians believe that they should, on behalf of the whole of the UK, although, of course, they do not have a mandate in the whole of the UK.

Parties have, to some degree, been playing two different hands — one hand in Westminster and one in the Assembly — and arguing that they have challenged and opposed the pensions Bill in Westminster while seeking to implement it with insufficient amendment, in my opinion, in the Assembly. It is regrettable that the principles that those parties applied in Westminster were not carried over to their roles in the Assembly.

Much has been made of the cost to the block grant, and, of course, that is a significant factor in the issues that we are discussing, but, as has been pointed out by other Members, a macroeconomic case has not been made for the Bill. Increased productivity in the economy has not been taken account of during the pensions debate or in Westminster's decision-making, specific to Northern Ireland, on not seeking to increase the pension age along with the state pension age. No assessment has been made of the increased spend in the wider Northern Ireland economy through increased pensions coming into Northern Ireland. The impact and cost of youth employment have not been factored in to the figures that we are presented with. The cost of increased sick pay and of loss of productivity in public services has not been factored in. So, simply stating the cost to the block grant is giving only one side of the table of costs and benefits of breaking with parity. I have said before that it is an accountant's Bill, but that is not good accountancy.

5.00 pm

I welcome the acknowledgement that has been made of the particular role of firefighters and police, but I regret that that has not been extended to other areas. I also regret that my amendment to include paramedics and prison officers in such provisions was rejected, although I thank those who supported it. Hopefully the review that was secured through amendment at Further Consideration Stage will mean that other professions, such as teachers and nurses, can be given further consideration and the evidence that comes out of the Working Longer review can be factored in.

I regret the ideological attack on the trade unions that persisted. It continued today. I also regret that the amendment to give trade unions a place on pension boards was not accepted. It is right that those of us who defended trade unions did so. It is right that we defended workers' ability to organise, unionise and lobby in a professional and correct manner. We have heard the public versus private argument today. To workers in the private sector who do not have the right working conditions or pension provision and who I equally sympathise with, I say this: "Unionise and ensure that the trade unions do what they can to lobby employers for better pay and conditions". If they do so, they will certainly receive my support.

We need to move on from the conversation about how we bring down the terms and conditions of what are still some of the lowest-paid workers in our society, including some of those in public services, to the level of the private sector and instead discuss how we bring up pay and conditions for those at the lowest end in the private sector. There is clearly room to do that. I mentioned the highly paid CEOs in the private sector. A bit of fairness in the organisations that they work for could help to mitigate the problems that private sector workers face. We do not need to continually attack public sector workers.

I said in a previous debate on the Bill that we needed realistic and affordable pension provision that served the common good. I do not believe that we have that, and that is why I cannot support the Bill.

Mr Hamilton: I thank Members who have contributed to the Final Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill. Indeed, I thank Members who contributed at all previous stages of the Bill. I thank the Chair, in his absence, and the Committee for their scrutiny of this important legislation. I thank the Chair for his overview of the Committee's work. I echo what Mr Girvan and Mr McLaughlin said about the good engagement that happened as a result of the Committee's work.

If I may, I will respond to as many of the points that were raised as possible — or at least to the ones that I want to respond to. Before I do that, I thank Mr Girvan, Mr Cree, Mrs Cochrane, Mr McCallister, Mr Allister and even Mr McLaughlin — an unusual source, I suppose — for their support for what, I think, everybody has acknowledged as necessary if not necessarily desirable reforms to public service pensions. I want to pick up on some of Mr McKay's points later.

I will begin by touching on one of the fundamentals of the Bill that was addressed by Mr Bradley in his remarks: the linkage between the scheme pension age and the state pension age and his opposition to it. As I said repeatedly at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage,

it is a fundamental element of the reforms that are before us. In my view, those reforms are the right thing to do, with the notable exceptions for police officers and firefighters. It is the right thing in my view, not least because of the parity that it brings between the public and private sectors.

I want to pick up some of Mr McCallister's points. I welcome him back to the Chamber after his paternity leave. He arranged the birth of his third child — another son — to coincide with Consideration Stage, which is very handy. He has a habit of having these births coincide with major events. I am sure that he was more than happy to miss the Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Mr McCallister: It might have helped the baby to sleep.

Mr Hamilton: That is right. It might be helpful to bring the child here on any occasion.

Mr McCallister made the point about people, particularly those who are self-employed, who have to work, in many cases, beyond state retirement age. I mentioned a couple of times during the debate that, in his previous profession of farming, many farmers work up to state retirement age, whatever it is — 65, 66, 67 or even 68 and beyond in the future — and will not retire even at that age.

The reforms that are included, particularly the linkages that bring about parity between the public and private sectors, are a good thing. We are living longer. Sometimes, there is an attempt to equate old age with inability to work. As we know, many people live beyond the state retirement age and are more than capable of working to a good, high standard beyond that age. Costs are going up. That point was touched on by many. Indeed, I will return to it.

To go back to Mr Bradley's point and the amendment in respect of a regular review, the power that has been given to my Department to amend by order is the right thing to do. It takes us forward on an evidence base and not a subjective basis. Mr Bradley said something along the lines of the Bill being not as he would like it to be. That is the case for many people. It is the case for many of us in the Chamber. However, I want to point out and stress the amendments that have been passed, including the amendment to clause 10 in respect of a review, to which the Member had his name attached, and the various protections, some of which were pointed out by Mrs Cochrane in her remarks in respect of absolute protection for people within 10 years of retirement, the stepped impact for those who are a further four years out and of course the fact that all accrued benefits to date are protected.

I turn to Mr Cree's comments. He talked about the untenable nature of pensions. Again, the point was touched on by many contributors. It is, I suppose, the driving force behind the reforms that are before us. Many of the comments that I heard at the past stages of the Bill have been very much focused on the here and now. I can understand the impact that the reforms will have in the here and now on people who are beyond the 10 years. The protections are there for people who are within 10 and 14 years of retirement. I argue that our job as legislators is to be long-sighted and to look as best we can for the next generation and even beyond, if we can, to ensure that public sector pensions are not only affordable but sustainable in the long term because they are affordable, not only for those who are currently in the service but those who will come into the service in future years.

I will turn to Mr Allister's comments. I want to congratulate him on two things. I congratulate him on the lecture that he provided on the value of the Union. Even though Mr Agnew came immediately after him, his lecture was not even listened to by all of the House. Indeed, it should be listened to. I may return to that point. I congratulate him, too, on the amendment on police widows that was in his name. As he mentioned, it will affect positively a small number of people. Even though there was an attempt to raise it as a straw man, the cost of it, as he and I know, will be minimal. I am glad to support the amendment and see it in the Bill. I am glad to support the righting of a wrong.

Mr Agnew's comments were numerous and are freshest in my mind because they were last. He said that what had been passed by way of amendments were a breach of parity. I suggest that they are not a breach of parity; they are the manifestation of the flexibilities we have as part of devolution. I would not have supported any breaches of parity. In fact, I did not support any breaches of parity, and it is important that we did not do so. To go back to many of Mr Allister's points in the mini-lecture that he provided to the House, Northern Ireland simply could not afford to breach parity, because we could not maintain alone the public service pension scheme as it was, as it is now or even as it will be when amended by the Bill.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Agnew: I do not accept the Minister's point that we cannot afford it. We can make a choice about whether we wish to spend money in that way. Surely the figures he quoted as the cost are less than the figures quoted as the cost of reducing corporation tax. Therefore, it is a question of choices.

Mr Hamilton: I accede to the point that we could afford it, but it would come at a cost. This is the interesting adult conversation that we get into when suggestions such as the Member's are put forward. If the House or society in Northern Ireland were so minded to maintain forever and a day the current public sector pension scheme, the current welfare system or whatever it might be that we wanted to breach parity on, that would come at a cost. There is a question that goes back to the Member. Although I am sure that, if I were so minded, as Finance Minister and with the support of my Executive colleagues — I am not sure whether I would get the support of all Executive colleagues — I could find the money from somewhere in the Budget to pay for it, but it would have to come from elsewhere. The Member has a difficult choice. Although he may walk up to this point, he would back away very quickly when he realised the cumulative cost over time and the serious impact that it would have on the health service, which is already under strain. It would also have a serious impact on our education system, housing and so many other public services.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Wells: I am not a member of the Finance Committee, although I am rapidly heading towards getting a pension some day. I have listened with great interest to the Members opposite, and not in one contribution has anyone suggested where they would get the money to implement the decisions that they are trying to force on

the Department of Finance. For instance, in my situation in health, if, for the sake of argument, this costs £200 million — it will cost a lot more than that — that means that £80 million would have to be taken off the health service budget. We simply could not afford to do that. Are there schools in north Down for instance, Mr Agnew, that you feel should close in order to maintain the present situation? Are there schools in north Antrim —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have debate through the Chair.

Mr Wells: Are there schools in north Antrim, Mr Speaker, that Mr McKay would wish to see closed in order to pay for this. I say to Mr McLaughlin from Londonderry, who represents South Antrim, "Are there schools or social services in Toomebridge, Moneyglass or Randalstown that you would like to see closed in order to pay for this, because that is exactly what you are asking the Minister to do?".

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for our second lecture on fiscal responsibility.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am not going to take up the issue of Londonderry. We are dealing with the Final Stage of the Bill, and no one here at this stage is reopening the discussion. It is unfortunate that Mr Jim Wells was not in to hear what the Members contributed to the debate.

Mr Speaker: That is a fair point of order. Members know that they should be in the Chamber to hear at least two if not three contributions to any debate.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I may have my faults, but being absent from the Chamber is not one of them. I did indeed sit through long stages of the Consideration Stage and the earlier debate on the Second Stage.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are at the Final Stage. The Member may have sat through other stages of the Bill, but we are now at the Final Stage, so let us be very careful. I know that Members are busy elsewhere, and I understand that. However, even for interventions, it is important that, if Members are not here for any part of the debate, they should not even be allowed an intervention.

Mr Hamilton: To be fair to the Member, I did not hear anything particularly new today during Final Stage, compared with Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage, so perhaps he could be forgiven on that point. I will take the hint from the Chair.

This is an issue of fiscal maturity and responsibility that will come to all of us in the House. If we think that we have had a difficult number of years — we have had a difficult number of years — times will get tougher even as the economy improves, particularly in respect of public expenditure.

I am glad that we took the sensible decision and got additional flexibilities, which is the right thing to do and is part of devolution.

5.15 pm

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for giving way. The Minister referred to breaching parity and paying the difference forever and a day to maintain the current pensions scheme. Mention was made of other budgets that could be cut to finance that, but there is a second aspect to breaching parity. Once you throw parity out the window on a wide range of issues — social security, for example — the Treasury could say, "The average wage in Northern Ireland is less than that in the rest of the United Kingdom, so we are going to provide you with a smaller amount for social security payments. As you are keen to go on your own, you are perfectly free to cut other services to make up the difference". There is a double whammy with parity, which would have a major impact and would put further strains on pensions.

If, as a result, we were forced into a situation in which we had a lower level of social security benefits than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, would that not rebound on the very people whom some of the opponents of the Bill claim to represent?

Mr Hamilton: I am keen to move the debate on, but the Member is right. I have always been supportive, whether for pensions or welfare reform, of seeking and securing as many flexibilities in our legislation as we possibly can, when that is appropriate and affordable. That is one of the beauties of a devolved system. I hope that we will soon see the benefit of that with welfare reform and also the benefits of the flexibilities that my colleague the Minister for Social Development has negotiated.

The Member is right that a breach in parity in one place could lead to a breach elsewhere and an argument from the Treasury, particularly on issues such as public sector pay. The Treasury has already attempted to reduce public sector pay, which was successfully resisted by us and by other devolved Administrations. We open a Pandora's box on parity at our peril.

Mr Agnew said that he regretted that various groups had not been singled out for special treatment. He mentioned some groups of workers for whom he had not tabled amendments. As I said to him at Further Consideration Stage, although no one would seek to devalue the work that those groups of workers are carrying out on behalf of all of us, to go for the emotional and single out a worthy group of public sector workers and say that they should have special treatment, without any evidence to back that up, is the wrong approach.

I am sure that, on reflection, the Member would accept that, instead of picking out our favourite groups or groups that lobby us particularly strongly, an amendment for a review of clause 10 is the better way to go. Although a review was always part of the process and was inherent in Hutton's recommendations, to put in legislation that there will be a review, which does not breach parity but emphasises the need to do it, is the better way to go and will lead to an evidence-based approach to those issues.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. He criticises Mr Agnew for singling out groups without any particular evidence. Has the Minister or his Department undertaken any studies on professionals such as nurses, teachers and doctors and the effect that a longer working life would have on them and their ability to provide first-class services?

Mr Hamilton: In some ways, that is not the responsibility of my Department. We do not have the necessary expertise to address the Member's concerns, which may be true. I humbly suggest to my colleague the Minister of Health, who has come into the Chamber, that as the Minister responsible for that scheme, it is a matter for him to take forward such issues when he introduces secondary legislation in respect of the Bill.

Finally on Mr Agnew's point, Mr Speaker, you talked about Members not being present for the debate. As you know, although I was a little late, I have been present for all of the debate. I have yet to hear any ideological attack on the unions. I certainly have not heard one thus far, and I will not be provoked into one either. Arguing for special treatment to the exclusion of others, as Mr Agnew did today and when he voted for the SDLP amendment at Consideration Stage, was definitely dogmatic and, in my view, ideological, but I do not wish to get into a further debate about unions and the privileged position that some sought for them.

I am pleased that we have reached this point in the Bill's legislative passage, but it is important that we press on to deliver change and implement the reforms. Mr McKay and, indeed, many others talked about flexibility, which, in my view, was always and still is there in the secondary legislation required to amend the rules of each devolved public service pension scheme to give effect to the reform measures carried in the Public Service Pensions Bill. That work will be taken forward by each of my ministerial colleagues in Departments with responsibility for individual pension schemes. As Members and, indeed, Ministers will be aware, there is scope at that stage to introduce variations to meet the needs of particular workforces. Those must be met within the costs of the scheme.

Mr McCallister raised the issue of cost and asked what I will do. Once the Bill gets Royal Assent, it very much moves from me to the five Ministers responsible for the schemes. I am, of course, responsible for the principal Civil Service scheme. I assure the House that whatever I do, and if I include additional flexibilities, that will all be done and costed within the overall cost envelope. As I have made consistently clear throughout the Bill's passage, I will not pay, through the Department of Finance and Personnel, for Ministers who put in flexibilities that breach the cost envelope.

Ministers, though, are likely to give considerable consideration to the approach taken to date by the comparable scheme in Great Britain when designing their Northern Ireland scheme and its regulations. However, we must be mindful that, if we break from and exceed the cost envelope of the equivalent scheme in Great Britain, Treasury will seek to recoup the difference. As I said, I am content for Ministers not — to use Mr McKay's phrase — to nod in deference, as long as they do not nod in my direction looking for money.

We also need to maintain the impetus behind the reforms to meet the April 2015 deadline set by Her Majesty's Treasury. It is imperative that they are implemented on time; otherwise the Northern Ireland block will face a potential bill of about £300 million a year, starting in April 2015.

As I outlined in my opening remarks, the Bill is important and necessary legislation, the main purpose of which is to provide the primary enabling framework for required reforms. It is important that we get the primary framework enabling legislation passed successfully and that we retain, in particular, the link with normal scheme pension age and state pension age.

The essence of the reform to public service pensions is to make them sustainable by addressing the ever-increasing pensions liability. The commission reported that the public service pensions structure in the United Kingdom had not responded flexibly to rising pensions costs and increases in longevity in the past few decades. Change must happen now to address those matters.

Mr Speaker, if I may, I would like to speak on a procedural matter. I have already mentioned my concern about the limited time available to consider what are often numerous and complex amendments prior to Consideration Stage. It appears to me that we need more time at those critical stages in the legislative process. If it is helpful, I will speak to the Speaker's Office about considering a review of current deadlines to ensure that this critical part of the legislative process works effectively for Members and Ministers alike, with the collective aim of producing good law. I will certainly be in contact with you and your office about that matter in the future.

Finally, I thank all the Members here today and all who assisted in getting the Public Service Pensions Bill to this point in the legislative process. I look forward to the continued support of, in particular, the Ministers who have a responsibility for Northern Ireland public service pension schemes to ensure that we meet the April 2015 deadline for the implementation of these important reforms. On that note, I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 77; Noes 13.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Eastwood, Mrs D Kelly, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr McKinney.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That the Public Service Pensions Bill [NIA Bill 23/11-15] do now pass.*

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease as we move into the next item of business.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

South West Acute Hospital: Service Provision

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to propose. All other Members who wish to speak will have seven minutes.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I sincerely thank the Minister of Health for being here this evening. I appreciate that he has been chosen on successive Tuesday evenings for Adjournment debates on a range of topics. I am hopeful that this one will take more of a proactive, preventative approach to a situation, as opposed to reacting to a crisis that he is facing in the health and social care system.

We are not here about something negative; we are here to talk about a significant opportunity that exists for the health service locally by working collaboratively with our colleagues in the counties across the border: Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Sligo and south Donegal.

Before I get into any of the detail, I pay tribute to and commend all the staff in the new hospital in Enniskillen, who have had to acclimatise to very different circumstances than they faced when they worked in the Erne. The introduction of single-occupancy rooms has been a significant challenge for staff well used to working in eight-bed wards. It has resulted in staff having to work much harder to meet the needs of their patients.

The staff have worked well, and they meet the needs of the patients to a very high standard. However, there is room for improvement at a senior management level in increasing the range of services offered in Enniskillen and the wider issue of how the hospital is resourced. The staff of the hospital play a vital role in the successes of our health service. It is important that we remember that, without them and their help, the fact that there is a new hospital would be immaterial.

The new hospital in Enniskillen was opened in June 2012 to replace the Erne Hospital, which had served the people of Fermanagh since 1964. We are told that the hospital is one of the most modern in Europe, and the facility is something that we are all very proud of. However, far too often, we see services being centralised to Dublin, Derry or Belfast, with no consideration given to those who live in rural areas such as Fermanagh. Many patients are forced to travel to large urban hospitals to meet a consultant for an outpatient appointment when it would be much easier on patients, particularly those in pain or discomfort, if the consultant would simply hold clinics in the Enniskillen hospital.

When the Health Minister Edwin Poots visited the new hospital in May 2013 along with a Dublin-based colleague James Reilly TD, he is reported by the BBC as having said that he was impressed with the:

"cross border co-operation on many health projects ... The initiatives we have seen and heard about this morning are excellent examples of good practice and show the importance of collaboration ... Our strong partnership approach is key to delivering effective, innovative and streamlined services. Sharing information and resources on both sides of the border to maintain a better standard of care can only be of benefit to the people in both parts of this island."

I think that we can all agree with those sentiments. That cooperation and partnership approach is the sensible one to take where it delivers mutual benefit for patients and service users as well as for the wider health service. Collaboration allows patients to be rushed to their nearest hospital in the event of a serious incident. It should also be extended to allow outpatients to attend appointments at their nearest hospital and to access services on both sides of the border without the need for so many barriers being in place. To facilitate that progress, there needs to be much greater collaboration between the health services across this island in planning; service delivery; the sharing of information and patient records; pooling resources, such as personnel and machines; resource allocation, including payment; and the reciprocal arrangements that need to be put in place to make such an innovative model succeed.

The benefit of greater collaboration is that there would be better delivery of services at a reduced cost to the taxpayer. It would inevitably work out better for patients, particularly those in rural and border areas, who can access services closer to where they live in a sustainable manner with a sufficient population mass. Such a model would replace centralisation and the need to transfer an ever-increasing number of services into larger urban-based hospitals in Belfast and Dublin. Centralising services in large cities can have a negative impact on rural dwellers, as problems with congestion, parking and access arrangements are a major but unnecessary barrier. It also leads to problems in hospitals in urban areas.

The range of specialisms on offer in the hospital also needs to be looked at. One of the primary reasons for locating the new hospital in Enniskillen was to maximise the potential for cross-border collaboration and to attract patients from counties such as Leitrim, Sligo, Monaghan and Cavan. Unfortunately, due to poor planning and a reluctance to cooperate, patients from those counties still have to travel to Dublin or Galway to access some services. If the combined population of Fermanagh and its surrounding counties were to be assigned to the Enniskillen hospital, routine services, such as ear, nose and throat surgery and orthopaedic surgery, could be delivered locally instead of patients having to travel to Derry or Dublin to access what are very routine and planned procedures.

As I have stated, the benefits of greater collaboration between both health services in Enniskillen would have a positive impact for patients and service users, but it would also greatly increase the attractiveness of the hospital as a place for doctors to base themselves. Hospitals outside major cities face great difficulties in attracting doctors, particularly consultants. That point was demonstrated fully when the gynae ward in the old Erne Hospital had to close for a period due to a shortage of consultants. The accident and emergency and paediatric wards also faced challenges in attracting staff at times to the Erne.

If the wider populace of the neighbouring counties of Cavan, Sligo, Leitrim, Monaghan and the south of Donegal

were to become regular users of the hospital and the range of services was to be increased, then the attractiveness of the hospital to staff would greatly increase as well. This needs to be taken into consideration, as does the possibility of a medical school being based at the hospital.

5.45 pm

In response to a question that I recently tabled to the Minister, he advised that the Department does not believe that there is a need for a second medical school in the North, but if consideration were to be given to the passage of patients from border counties and the possibility of medical students from those same counties using the hospital as a teaching and learning hospital, then I think that that is a consideration that needs to be looked at again.

Medical students from the north-west of Ireland have to go to places such as Belfast or Dublin in order to qualify and I believe that there is no need for that. Enough young people are leaving rural areas to access universities as it is, and when we have a world-class hospital in our local area that can appeal to people from nearby counties, I think that that is something that we should look at. Also, opening a medical school in Enniskillen could go some way to resolve the continuing problem of the lack of doctors.

The current lack of doctors and the practice where junior doctors are compelled to work extra hours is impinging on services across Ireland. The common denominator seems to be that, where the services are being closed or seriously curtailed, it is the shortage of junior doctors or consultants that is to blame. None of the ideas that I am talking about are new ideas. They have all been debated before.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Flanagan: I will, quickly, Alasdair; yes.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the Member's comments, but does he agree that the simplest way to begin a solution in this case is to provide some salary enhancement in a place such as Enniskillen for junior or senior doctors or consultants or at whatever level and indeed for other staff as well where there is a shortage of staff?

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I do not necessarily agree. My gut instinct is that doctors and consultants are there because of a calling, a vocation, and I am not necessarily sure that extra money would be the carrot that they need. What they want to see are more patients for them to deal with in order to ensure that they are properly qualified and can retain their qualifications. That is the first issue that needs to be addressed.

The new hospital provides the opportunity to develop cross-border services from a base in Fermanagh that is convenient to or physically borders five of the six southern border counties. Services can be provided sustainably by providing specialist services that are not currently available, including, in the case of the new hospital, the provision of services that are not available or that are under stress in the adjacent border counties.

The Transforming Your Care review by the Department of Health recommends developing joint planning arrangements with the South, including services in the new hospital in Enniskillen, and the report states that the South:

> *"has expressly indicated it wishes to maximise the opportunity for its population in the new hospital".*

In relation to the current issues in acute healthcare delivery across Ireland, a 2007 report from the Centre for Cross Border Studies, 'Removing the Barriers: An Initial Report on the Potential for Cross-Border Co-operation in Hospital Services in Ireland', concluded that there is a clear case for joint hospital planning in the border region. In March 2008, the Centre for Cross Border Studies published a further paper, 'Surveying the Sickbeds: Initial steps Towards Modelling All-Island Hospital Accessibility', in which it examined the possibility of spatially exploring the accessibility of present and future hospital provision with particular attention paid to the cross-border region.

The North/South Feasibility Study presents a programme for real progress in the development of health services on an all-island basis, with benefits for all who share this island. That study should have been published when it was completed in February 2009, but it was deliberately withheld by former Health Ministers Michael McGimpsey and Mary Harney for political reasons. Recommendations in the North-South Feasibility Study included the two Departments and relevant agencies exploring approaches to improve access to services, including high-quality primary and community care services, particularly for populations in remote rural or border areas.

A briefing note published by the Health Service Executive (HSE) suggests building a strong bilateral link between Sligo General Hospital, Cavan General Hospital, and the new hospital in Enniskillen. Also under consideration at the time the briefing note was published were potential links between Sligo General Hospital and west Fermanagh for urology and cardiac catheterisation services, while the possible provision of rheumatology services to the west Fermanagh area from the Manorhamilton and Sligo hospital axis has also been looked at. A number of these issues are under active consideration.

A report by the Centre for Cross Border Studies published in October 2011 entitled 'Unlocking the Potential of Cross-Border Hospital Planning on the Island of Ireland' looked at the opportunities presented by greater collaborative planning. That report found that the new acute hospital in Enniskillen presents a significant opportunity for fresh thinking in respect of service provision on a cross-border basis. Particular opportunities may arise in areas such as day-case surgical procedures and orthopedics, serving patients not just in Fermanagh and Tyrone, but in the surrounding cross-border areas.

The report found that further research is merited into the potential for the new South West Acute Hospital to serve a cross-border catchment area. The report also found that future development of cross-border acute healthcare services should aim to generate a two-way flow of patients across the border rather than a one-sided approach providing services largely in one jurisdiction to be accessed by patients from the other.

Such a model requires a more collaborative mindset on the part on the health authorities, which need to work together to develop strategies and programmes to benefit those in the border regions.

The report examined five sample or exemplar clinical service areas, explored their potential for cross-border collaboration and tested the modelling framework. It identified significant potential for the development of enhanced healthcare services on a cross-border basis in a

number of areas, including services in the border corridor that are typically in clinical areas where there may be gaps on either side of the border, where accessibility may be problematic or where there is a general potential for providing services out of hours.

It examined services that may be provided on an all-island basis — for example, highly specialised tertiary services that may not be economically viable in either jurisdiction but that could be operated in a single location to serve the whole population of the island. It also identified challenges in moving to a more closely aligned system, including the different systems for the professional accreditation of medical, nursing and allied health professional staff, and different regulatory regimes that could create significant challenges, with clinicians practising outside their home jurisdictions.

As far as the financial crisis and the effects on health service budgets are concerned, there are two advantages to considering cross-border services in these difficult times. The first is that there is a potential to share resources, especially in the delivery of services in dispersed border regions, which should be a route to reduced costs for the same or better services in both health systems. The second is that the Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) model, which attracts external EU funding for its activities, offers the health systems a weighted pilot and develops such services without having to commit all the investment at the outset. That is an attractive option and should be considered when finances are used as a reason not to consider the development of cross-border services in this area.

I now want to move on to specific opportunities for expanding the actual range of services that are on offer. Elective trauma and orthopaedic surgery are areas that have proved difficult to manage for the past several years in many countries, not least in Ireland and Britain. Although some initiatives across Ireland have managed to reduce waiting times, the signs are that problems will remain unresolved in the long term. With both health services facing further funding cuts, without specific action it is likely that the waiting times will continue to increase in the future.

An initiative to increase the day-case rate may increase the capacity of the system to address the needs of the population. Using both sides of the border to do that would increase flexibility and, as we have seen with other cross-border projects, may capture more capacity for all patients rather than losing out on potential opportunities to provide more procedures because of the existence of the border.

Ear, nose and throat (ENT) surgery is a diverse specialty, with patients ranging from newborn babies to the elderly. ENT surgery is provided in several border region hospitals, including Sligo and Altnagelvin hospitals. Outpatient consultation and day-case surgery are provided in the Tyrone County Hospital in Omagh, the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon, Letterkenny General Hospital and Monaghan Hospital by consultants who are based in other hospitals. The hospital in Enniskillen has outpatient clinics that are run by consultants from Altnagelvin, but all the surgery is carried out in Altnagelvin and not Enniskillen. That caused serious problems when the fire occurred in Altnagelvin, and there were associated delays of over a year in getting treatment. The fact that there was not a drive in the Western Trust to open a service in Enniskillen, even to facilitate that short time frame, was extremely disappointing. The trust was much happier to rely on the private sector to fill in the gaps and deal with the waiting list. In fact, a private operator is based in the new hospital and provides services to reduce the waiting lists at a huge cost.

Cystic fibrosis treatment and care is centralised for all of the North in two centres in Belfast: the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children handles paediatric cystic fibrosis care; and Belfast City Hospital deals with adult cystic fibrosis care. That reflects the accepted model of care that relies on specialised tertiary centres for the delivery of cystic fibrosis treatment. There are issues about accessing specialist cystic fibrosis services for those who live in the border regions.

For those with cystic fibrosis who live in Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal, accessing the specialist centres in Dublin or Cork poses considerable logistical difficulties because of the distances involved and the poor transport infrastructure. Those with cystic fibrosis in Tyrone and Fermanagh likewise face long journeys to access the specialist care that is optimum to maintaining their quality of life. There is no reason why such a specialist centre could not be based in the new hospital.

The absence of an adequate neonatal facility in the north-west is another problem faced by many people. The birth of a premature baby is difficult and traumatic enough without parents having to spend so much time in Belfast with their newly born child. Once again, I want consideration to be given to such services being delivered in Enniskillen for parents in Fermanagh and its surrounding counties.

In conclusion, the opportunities presented by greater collaboration will deliver a broader range of services at better value for the taxpayer, increase the attractiveness of the hospital for staff and improve patient outcomes.

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

Mr Flanagan: The Minister and his counterpart, James Reilly, have indicated their willingness to explore such approaches when they deliver mutual benefits. We will all support them in reaching that goal.

Mrs Foster: Like the proposer of the topic, whom I congratulate on securing the debate, I want to pay tribute to the staff at the South West Acute Hospital. Unfortunately, I had to visit on a number of occasions recently after my mother fell and was an inpatient for 11 days. That allowed me to see at first hand how much care and attention those staff were able to give.

Members mentioned the single rooms that we now have in our beautiful new hospital. I know that they may have presented a challenge to staff, but the privacy and dignity now accorded to patients in the new South West Acute Hospital really manifested themselves when I visited my mother and saw how all patients were treated.

I pay tribute particularly to the staff in A&E. They are often under pressure, but I found them very professional and courteous. I want to pass that on to the Minister, and, perhaps, he will pass that on to the chief executive of the trust, to the staff in medical ward 2 and, in particular, to the ancillary staff: the cleaners and porters who took the time to have a chat and spend that little bit of time with the patients around the ward. I thank them most sincerely.

The facilities in the new South West Acute Hospital are second to none. Recently, I was very proud to be able to bring members of my Smart region group to the new hospital so that they could appreciate the level of technology and the fact that we can use it as a catalyst for the public sector and, looking towards investment, for the private sector.

The Smart region group comprises the chief executive of the Western Health and Social Care Trust; the chief executive of the South West College; representatives from the councils in Omagh and Fermanagh; Invest Northern Ireland; private sector interests, including BT; and me. We are looking at how we can use the infrastructure in and around the hospital to draw attention to Fermanagh for all the right reasons. So I hope that this beautiful public sector building — not just the building, of course, but what goes on within it — will act as a catalyst. I thank the chief executive of the trust and her deputy Joe Lusby for the way in which they have engaged with the Smart region group in all that they do.

I want to put on record that we have some state-of-the-art technology. Enniskillen has the new electronic document management system and is the pathfinder site for that facility. That is a regional feasibility pilot. Edwin has been working with me in my ministerial capacity on Connected Health, which I am delighted to see playing such a growing role in the new South West Acute Hospital. As well as acting as a catalyst for public sector interest in the hospital, it acts as a catalyst for the private sector. I understand, from speaking to the chief executive just yesterday, that it is proving also to be a magnet. Dr McDonnell made the point that it might be necessary to increase salary levels to get people to come to the new hospital. In my conversation yesterday, I was told that we are pulling in interest from top-quality medical staff. I look forward to announcements on that in the near future. I understand that the new hospital is attracting a lot of interest simply because we now have the technology hub in the south-west, and I am obviously pleased about that.

I understand that the hospital provides over 300 outpatient clinics per week, covering all the main specialties. Although I accept that we would want the maximum amount of services delivered locally — I acknowledge that desire, which is one that I share — I think that we will gain more from the hospital, and, more importantly, more for our patients, if we sell the fact that we have this marvellous facility in the south-west.

I take on board the point that Mr Flanagan made about cross-border working. Of course, if it is to the benefit of patients in Northern Ireland, we will do that. We want to make sure that the South West Hospital is the success that we all want it to be. I am sure that the Minister will reflect that in his comments.

6.00 pm

I know from speaking to clinicians in the South West that they are determined to innovate and to demonstrate the new facility and what it can deliver. I want to support them in that innovation where possible, whether it be Dr Kelly and all his colleagues in the stroke unit, Dr Nethercott in the paediatric clinic and everything that he is doing down there, or our coronary care services. It is always dangerous to pick out individuals, but I want to pay tribute to Mahen Varma for all the work that he has done for coronary care in the south-west. It is right to recognise his unstinting devotion, formerly to the Erne Hospital and now to the South West Acute Hospital.

Finally, 3fivetwo Healthcare has been using the facilities at the Erne Hospital. It is right to acknowledge what has been going on. A huge number of my constituents have benefited from the fact that 3fivetwo can lease premises in the South West Hospital. I understand that patient responses to 3fivetwo using the hospital have been very positive. For example, in 2013, 414 patients were seen at outpatient clinics and 474 patients underwent surgical procedures. Those are 474 patients who otherwise would have had to go elsewhere for their surgery. I know that they very much appreciate the fact that they could access it near their own home.

The Minister is looking for new ways to develop the health service.

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

Mrs Foster: I know that he is going to use new technology to do that. I will certainly support him. I thank him for all his support to date for the South West Acute Hospital.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. June 2012 saw the opening of the new South West Acute Hospital, which we were told could accommodate up to 312 inpatient and day-case beds. I attended the official opening of the new hospital as one of only two nationalist public representatives on the day. I think that all the Members opposite were also there. The new hospital was to deliver a wide range of services and include an emergency department, stroke unit, maternity unit and children's ward, as well as services such as X-ray and GP out-of-hours.

Those of us in west Tyrone who advocated for the hospital to be based in Omagh were disappointed with the decision to place it in Enniskillen. We in Omagh and the surrounding district were, and are, proud of the services that were, and are still, being provided at Tyrone County Hospital. Nevertheless, once the decision was taken to downgrade Tyrone County Hospital in favour of the new development, many people locally supported the decision and went with it.

The hospital is a state-of-the-art building, and all are impressed with the facility itself. Many in west Tyrone have used the facility and have nothing but praise for the medical staff who treated them. However, some patients have been taken from Omagh to Enniskillen by ambulance and then, when discharged late at night, maybe in their bed clothes, asked to find their own way home. They have to get home in a taxi at their own expense. That is not appropriate. It is fine if patients can get someone to lift them, but many live alone and have no access to a car to get them home. What happens if the person has no money on them or at home? Can they afford it? Is that how a caring society treats patients?

One of the first things that we were promised when it was announced that the acute hospital was to be placed in Enniskillen was the upgrade of the A32 from Omagh to Enniskillen. Although improvements have been made on part of the road, the overall road needs to be upgraded to accommodate hospital traffic and, in particular, emergency ambulances. We had black ice on the roads two weeks

ago, and there were many accidents on the A32 that morning. That is not acceptable.

Many who choose to go to A&E in Enniskillen are transferred to either Altnagelvin or another hospital. Is that a case of double accounting and adding to the frustration of patients? As a result, many select to head straight to the other A&E services to save time. It takes 45 minutes to go from Omagh to Enniskillen. If patients are then referred to Altnagelvin from Enniskillen, the journey will take approximately one and a half hours. To be sustainable for the people of the area, the hospital needs to treat all the patients that it can on site, as well as have a full range of services and medical staff available to treat all emergencies.

I note that the hospital has sometimes spent much of its budget on locum staff. If we need to attract staff to a hospital such as this, we need to provide not only a range of services but career opportunities that will allow individuals to continue to develop their expertise. State-of-the-art facilities help, but it is the expertise that comes with services, patient numbers and the complexity of health-related matters that will attract permanent staff.

The people of west Tyrone and Fermanagh need to have the same access to hospital-based quality services that people in Belfast, Derry and Craigavon do. Let us make sure that the South West Acute Hospital is properly resourced to make sure that it is fully utilised in the interests of the people of the south-west area.

Mr Elliott: I thank Mr Flanagan for securing today's Adjournment debate on what is a crucial issue. I also welcome the Health Minister's input and his being here for the debate.

Clearly, this is a very important issue throughout the west of the Province. It is not just a Fermanagh or a Tyrone hospital; it is now a south-west hospital of Northern Ireland. I fully appreciate the issues around cross-border cooperation and, indeed, cooperation throughout the community. When people are in pain and are suffering, and when they have a severe medical condition, they do not care where they are treated provided they get good, honest treatment. That is why I believe that there is a very good service in the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen.

We are all very proud, and I take Mr Byrne's point that people in Omagh and the wider Tyrone area were disappointed that they did not have an acute services hospital built there. In fairness, the people of Omagh and Tyrone have embraced it and accepted that the treatment that patients receive there is second-to-none. That is not to say that there are not some difficulties there, because there are. There are difficulties in every hospital and in every walk of life, and we have to take cognisance of what has happened.

There have been some very tragic incidents at the South West Acute Hospital. I have met families who have gone through severe tragedy, and clearly they may not be overly impressed with the service that their loved ones received at that time. However, you have to look at it in general; in the round, it is a first-class hospital that provides a first-class service.

Like others have done, I commend the staff in the hospital for the way they reacted and adapted to moving from the Erne Hospital site to the new South West. Let us be quite clear about it: there is a lot of new equipment and technology, and that brings opportunities for those staff who transferred, but it also brings opportunities for those people who wish to come to the South West to work, build a career and make their home in the south-west of the Province. They have an opportunity to develop their knowledge and their career. It is not every hospital in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom or Ireland that has the technology that we currently have in the South West.

It is also important that we keep ahead of the game and continue to provide services to the wider public. It is important that elective surgery is developed. Initially, we were promised that quite a lot of elective surgery would take place in the South West; maybe the Minister can enlighten us to some degree about what is happening with that situation.

The 3fivetwo healthcare group has already been mentioned, and I am well aware of some people who have availed themselves of that service. They have been extremely appreciative of it and they believe that the service that they got was excellent, and they did not have to travel out of Fermanagh. I am well aware that some people will probably have to travel to Fermanagh to avail themselves of that service, but we are very thankful to have it on our doorstep in the south-west.

Clearly, it is important that the facilities there are developed. I said that before. I will also pay tribute to Joe Lusby, who is on site and on hand at every opportunity. He is very open and is very willing to meet to discuss issues. He is also willing to meet to discuss problems, as well as progress. He and the management there are looking to develop even further the facilities and the opportunities at the hospital and to ensure that, whenever there are faults and mistakes, as, clearly, there will be, they do not happen again. We need to put every possible measure in place to ensure that the mistakes are limited and, indeed, cut out altogether.

That returns me to the staffing issues. From talking to individual staff members who work at the South West Acute Hospital, I know that they feel under extreme pressure at times due to work and because they have had to move from an entirely different system from that at the Erne Hospital site.

Mrs Foster mentioned the individual beds and rooms, and that is certainly very good for patient care. It requires additional work from the staff, because you cannot walk into a cubicle and look at six patients in a matter of a few seconds. You have to physically go into every room or look through the windows, and the patients accept that.

However, there is an issue with the staffing levels. The staff there feel under extreme pressure, and I hope that the trust is able to provide enough staffing resources to ensure that the services are not brought down and that the excellent service that they provide is not reduced to any degree.

Lord Morrow: I look forward to saying some words in this Adjournment debate. I am delighted to see that Mr Flanagan is not just as belligerent today as he has been in the local press about the South West Acute Hospital in recent times. I half expected a tirade from him about all the things that are wrong in the South West Hospital, which he has been highlighting in the local media in recent times. I am pleased that, in fact, he has not taken that particular

line tonight, and I think that that is a good thing. Maybe now that he is on the Floor, he is more appreciative of the facilities that have been provided through the South West Hospital than he has been in recent times in his remarks in the local media. So, maybe he is on a learning curve, or maybe he has seen the error of his ways. I very much like that, respect it and thank him for it.

I believe that the South West Acute Hospital is a magnificent structure. It opened its doors on 21 June 2012 at a cost of somewhere around £270 million, if my memory is right. At the hospital, which is not specifically for Fermanagh but is based in Fermanagh, we have facilities that, in my opinion, are second to none. It replaces, of course, the old Erne Hospital, which, also in my opinion, was no longer fit for purpose. This hospital certainly is a state-of-the-art facility.

It has a pioneering vascular services programme, benefiting patients North and South, as well as a Cooperation and Working Together project for people with diabetes. There are also specific units for dedicated stroke care and for women's health, as well as mental health liaison and a GP out-of-hours service.

Mr Flanagan, who secured the debate, has accepted that these are excellent facilities for staff and patients. I concur with what Mr Elliott said about the staff, because this is a completely different, unique hospital design, in that every patient now has a dedicated ward. It is not as though six to 12 to 18 patients are being facilitated in one ward.

It slips my mind now, but I heard the number of miles that nurses travel each day as they walk around the new layout of the hospital. It is phenomenal. I just wish that I could bring to mind the number of miles that they travel. That is not in any way to denigrate or downgrade that facility, as some have been trying to do in the media in recent times; rather, it is just the way that things are and an indication of how they have moved on. Fermanagh has benefited immensely from that.

Mr Flanagan was highly critical of an expenditure of £1·3 million on locum staff over a six-month period, which, incidentally, covered the first six months of the new facility being opened. He did not make reference to that tonight. I suspect that it slipped his mind, and he will want to return to that at some other time when he is writing to the press again. I think that the facility —

6.15 pm

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. I really do not understand what he is talking about. We are here to discuss the range of services that is on offer at the new hospital in Enniskillen. We are not here to discuss what you think I may or may not have said. Whether I have criticised a spend of £1·3 million on locum consultants or not is nothing to do with the range of services that is on offer.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Lord Morrow: It is not a matter of what I think he may or may not have said; it is a matter of what I read that he said. *[Interruption.]* Well, you were —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Everything through the Chair, please.

Lord Morrow: Yes, of course. I am not the one who is shouting. The shouting is from a sedentary position.

It is easy to go to the media and be as negative as you can about a very modern, up-to-date facility. We had a state-of-the-art facility at the South Tyrone Hospital, and it is worth reminding him that one of his predecessors, who was the then Sinn Féin Minister, decided that she wanted to close that hospital or take away the acute services status — I know that he is not responsible for that, but his party certainly is. That put pressure on —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I encourage the Member to come back to the topic.

Lord Morrow: It is very relevant, Mr Deputy Speaker. The closure of that acute service put pressure on other hospitals. It put pressure on Craigavon Area Hospital; it put pressure on the acute service in Fermanagh; and it put pressure on Omagh. So, these things have a knock-on effect. When we criticise others for not doing this, that and the other, let us be ever mindful of the neglect that they perpetrated when they closed a hospital.

We have a case of having to respond to the needs of the community, and, at that time, there were literally thousands of people standing in Market Square. His party ignored each and every one of them and said, "Those people are not relevant. We will make our own decisions". So, we have a South West Acute Hospital. It is a particularly good service and a particularly fine hospital that is delivering a great service. Like others, I pay tribute to the staff in that hospital from the highest ranking position to the lowest, because they all play a significant part in delivering an excellent, full service to the community. There are teething problems, but I suspect that those will be sorted out in time.

Another thing that has been mentioned that has to happen is that we need to see an upgrading of our road system in Fermanagh and in south Tyrone. The A4, which travels from Belfast right through to Enniskillen and beyond, from Augher to Enniskillen is not a good road system, and that has to change. I hope that it does change, and I hope that the Minister for Regional Development will see the importance of that. I am sure that Mr Flanagan will agree with that too. That is one thing that needs to happen in the whole of the Fermanagh area and, indeed, in the whole of the Tyrone area.

I want to say to the Minister today — he should take it back — that what he is doing and what has been achieved in Fermanagh is greatly appreciated by the people of Fermanagh and indeed those across the border. Mr Flanagan put much emphasis on delivering a cross-border service. I do not have a real problem with that at all. As a matter of fact, I am glad that he has acknowledged that it is uniquely situated to deliver that. As a result of what is continually happening in the South West Acute Hospital, there are better days ahead. I commend the Minister for what he is doing there, and I commend the staff, whether they are in his Department or in the hospital.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, I thank my colleague Phil Flanagan for bringing the debate to the House. I agree with many sentiments expressed by Members so far, but I want to remind the Member who spoke last that it was a Sinn Féin Minister who delivered the magnificent facility that we have in Enniskillen. I agree with everybody that it is the most modern in Europe. It is always the most modern until the next one is built, but, at a cost of precisely £276 million, it was one of the biggest capital projects ever brought

to County Fermanagh. As somebody who had the opportunity to visit the hospital through the various stages of its construction and at the end, I saw how up to date it was. I worked on a huge hospital in Dublin in a past life, Beaumont Hospital in the 1980s, and I could see the huge difference there was in just two decades.

Like the Minister — she is gone — I had reason to visit a family member, my mother, who took a heart attack this month last year. She got excellent care in the hospital and was out in a number of days. I have also spoken to staff. When you live in the county you meet people such as porters and staff at all levels. Although there were teething problems that we all know about, there will always be teething problems with a huge project of that size. I know that it had to open weeks before its time, which led to some of the problems. In fact, nurses were talking about the old hospital being a better facility. It took them a while to get used to single rooms, but today they would not go back.

The hospital is situated, as my colleague said, in a region that has Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan, Monaghan and Tyrone. You could drive for 25 miles in any direction and you would be in one of those counties. Therefore, the potential of the new state-of-the-art hospital is in the context of that region. It is an area of approximately 200,000 people, with a typical journey time of about 90 minutes. I know that there needs to be an upgrade of some infrastructure in the area.

The report 'Unlocking the Potential of Cross-Border Hospital Planning on the Island of Ireland' stated that, given the economic circumstances in both jurisdictions, it is unlikely that a similar facility will be built in the foreseeable future. There are ageing hospitals in Monaghan, Cavan and Leitrim, with decreasing services, so it is a reality that the new acute hospital will become more important in a cross-border context. The cross-border arrangement promoting access to healthcare will follow.

The report from the Centre for Cross Border Studies recognises that there are potential benefits to be gained from increasing North/South cooperation in key areas. Some of those have been mentioned by other Members, including ENT surgery, paediatric cardiac surgery, orthopaedic surgery and acute mental services. I believe that hip replacements, which are fairly simple, routine operations today, could also be carried out in it, though some people would say that they should not. Something that I have also raised in the House is that autopsy facilities should be located and utilised on a cross-border basis. Currently, if a loved one dies suddenly in Fermanagh, they must be transferred to Belfast, 100 miles away, not only at great cost but causing extra stress for the grieving family. I am aware that there is plenty of space in the new building to carry out autopsies.

I know that the Minister has encouraged cooperation, particularly in the Newry area. The Compton review of health and social care has suggested a number of cross-border initiatives, including specialist paediatric services to be provided to patients from here in Southern hospitals and vice versa, including cancer patients. I also recognise the good work being carried out by CAWT through its INTERREG project, particularly the arrangements between North and South. That is all to be supported. However, greater cooperation in area-based planning is needed. I call on the Minister to work with his counterpart — I know that he has done so quite well — to tackle some of the barriers, whether organisational, waiting lists, patient information or insurance issues, some of which have already been resolved. Any cross-border arrangements are at risk of failing in the absence of central support. Cross-border arrangements for the new acute hospital would improve the quality of provision and improve access.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate on the range of services at the South West Acute Hospital. It is a fantastic facility. We were all impressed when, after much anticipation, the building was unveiled. Indeed, it has won design awards. I also pay tribute to the caring staff at the wonderful new world-class facility. Minister Foster referred specifically to Dr Mahen Varma, whom I recall fondly. His contribution, particularly to coronary care, is legendary, and the House should acknowledge that.

Nevertheless, there are issues about the range of services in the hospital. When it first opened, one of the primary features that was marketed was the creation of a network of services. By that, I mean that medical staff, including consultants, would move between hospitals in Belfast, Derry and Enniskillen. Many were enthused about that prospect, as they felt that it would lead to an elevated level of local healthcare characterised by experience and expertise. Local people rightly envisaged a model of healthcare provision that would cater for all their needs on one site. It was hoped that the South West Acute Hospital would contain an A&E department, elective surgery and maternity services, with everything, as I said, on one site. It was to be a state-of-the-art, modern facility for fully comprehensive healthcare.

Tom Elliott said that there had been some incidents and that that was typical of many hospitals. I note that Lord Morrow does not want to brook any criticism and is selective in his, but there is a fundamental issue around how the business model was characterised at the start, which was what ultimately led to the capital investment. It has not yet delivered on its promises. We believe that that is more than just teething problems. There were warning signs on day one, when there were not sufficient doctors and nurses. I realise that the services currently undertaken in the hospital are all of a very high quality, and that has to be recognised. That is due to the ability and dedication of the staff. However, there are gaps in the range of services. One notable gap is the pain clinic. Individuals in the Fermanagh locality who need to use a pain clinic have to travel a substantial distance. Local people are bewildered that such an expansive hospital with a wide range of capabilities cannot cater for that.

As was touched on, another worrying trend is the number of people who are transferred from Enniskillen to other hospitals, particularly Altnagelvin. Indeed, we heard today that many people who live between Enniskillen and Derry will often opt for Derry to ensure that they are treated at the first facility they attend. Imagine that you lived in Fermanagh and for years had leaned on the Omagh facility, which itself was disintegrating. Ultimately, you are told that you will get a newly built, high-quality hospital that is close to you. How would you feel, if you discovered that that shining new dawn did not do all that it promised? The hospital has some empty theatres, which, as I understand, and as was reflected on earlier, are being rented out to the private sector to deal with patient lists from elsewhere. From our perspective, that is another example of health service failure. Imagine that you built a school but could find only

half the teachers necessary. Imagine that you built a factory with too many production lines. Somebody, somewhere should be able to answer questions on these issues.

Ultimately, will we face a potential situation in which the hospital could have a nurse-led unit? I do not want to be facetious about that, but that has been the answer in other situations that emerged in Dungannon, mid-Ulster and elsewhere. It would be different if it were a small low-cost unit, but this a multimillion-pound service that the people of Fermanagh and the south-west saw as a beacon for their health.

I will sum up with a range of questions. Why does the hospital not have the full range of services? Why are so many locum consultants needed and at such a high cost? Over five months, £1·3 million is a very high cost. Why do people need to be transferred to Altnagelvin? Why are the North/South elements not maximised? As I said, those issues culminate in more than just teething problems. It is clear that there is considerable concern among the people of Fermanagh and elsewhere. Contrast the initial vision for the South West Acute Hospital with the questions now asked about the service that it provides — can we get some answers?

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Members who spoke in the debate. It is clear that the South West Acute Hospital is held in high regard by many. Mr McKinney is not about Fermanagh very often nowadays and therefore does not hold it in the same regard as, perhaps, the rest of the community does. However, I can assure him and all Members in the House. I know that they think that it is an easy pop to have a go at the health service all the time. The 70,000 people working in the health service are a bit like a family. Politicians might think that it is smart to have a go all the time. However, the health service family does not like it, particularly when it is unjustified. So it is not a smart political move at all.

6.30 pm

I know how much people in Fermanagh appreciate the service because I get their letters, and those that appreciate the service greatly outweigh the negative ones. They are in favour of and recognise the good service that is provided. Very often, I do not need middle men to tell me what goes on in facilities because the public tell me, and I know the score. Mr McKinney can press whatever line he likes here, and Mr Flanagan can press whatever line he likes in the press and media — I know the score. People appreciate that they have a brand new hospital facility and that it has been well staffed. We have spent an additional £700,000 on nursing staff. We have taken on an additional cardiologist, an additional consultant in gastroenterology, an additional stroke consultant, two MRI radiologists and an additional physician. That demonstrates that there is not just a new, shiny building but a commitment to staffing to ensure that people are delivered high-quality services.

I had the privilege of being at the opening of the hospital by Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, and it was an excellent day. The people of Fermanagh and the hospital staff were out in huge numbers to welcome its opening. It is a state-of-the-art facility of which the health service can be justifiably proud. Subsequent to the opening, I have gone down there and met staff who work in the hospital at all levels. I know how dedicated and committed they are to providing a high-quality service to the people of the south-west.

The influence of the South West Acute Hospital extends beyond its catchment area. As a Queen's University teaching hospital, it is deeply involved in medical education and supports a significant number of Queen's undergraduate placements. In addition, it is the only hospital in Northern Ireland that provides medical education for students from the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. The hospital has attracted significant interest from other parts of Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK, with clinicians and managers from other areas visiting to see how it operates so successfully.

In the first year of its existence from July 2012 to June 2013, when it was, according to some people, having a whole lot of teething problems, the doctors, nurses and other professional staff working at the South West Acute Hospital clocked up an impressive volume of activity. There were 126,000 outpatient attendances, 20,000 inpatient admissions, 60,000 attendances for diagnostic imaging and 1,237 births. The emergency department had more than 29,000 attendances, with nine out of ten people attending the department treated and discharged or admitted to a ward within four hours. I know that some Members might want to work that up into a crisis, but it strikes me as a success story as opposed to a crisis.

Incidentally, reference was made to the challenges in other places. I know that the Royal Victoria Hospital, for example, has been under a degree of pressure in recent days. I can reassure Members that significant work has been taking place on that front. The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority is assisting me in two ways at the RVH. First, it is carrying out inspections. Over the past few days, it has been in the Royal's emergency department and its acute medical ward assessing the quality of care and dignity afforded to patients. Secondly, the RQIA will facilitate the work of an external expert team to review the 9 January incident and advise how we can improve our emergency care more generally. I think that we can even learn things from the South West Acute Hospital on the management of such situations.

The South West Acute Hospital also provides general inpatient services, including medical, surgical, care of the elderly, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, maternity, neonatal, coronary care and critical care. Its elderly care and stroke wards support the work of a multidisciplinary team of specialists, meeting modern-day treatment standards and delivering hyper-acute care incorporating thrombolysis and acute rehabilitation. Consultants, visiting consultants and specialist nurses provide, on average, 300 outpatient clinics a week in all the main specialities.

There have been service developments and investments in Enniskillen in recent years in the old Erne Hospital and the new South West Acute Hospital. We have the additional consultants whom I mentioned, and those investments have increased the range of on-site inpatient and outpatient services significantly. The number of visiting consultants on site has increased. For example, urology outpatient clinics are now held in the hospital by the team based at Craigavon Area Hospital.

The South West Acute Hospital is, of course, a general hospital, and it is not possible to provide every medical speciality there. The need to concentrate specialist

expertise, particularly for the more acutely ill patients or for regional and tertiary services, inevitably means that some patients in the south-west will have to travel elsewhere for treatment. However, the majority of patients will be able to access most of their healthcare locally.

The South West Acute Hospital is also at the forefront of innovation in modern, cutting-edge technology. New technology is one of the keys to providing improved healthcare. Its most obvious use is in new technologies designed to diagnose and treat patients. Staff in the hospital have on-site access to specialist and support services, including state-of-the-art radiology, pharmacy and laboratories. For example, the hospital's radiology department has fully digital radiography rooms, a fluoroscopy room, a multi-slice CT scanner, an MRI scanner and three ultrasound rooms. The department is almost paperless, with requests and reports being processed electronically. In the hospital's intensive care unit, the clinical information system utilises the most recent technological advances in computer-patient interfacing to improve the quality and standard of care. That allows nurses more time to focus their skills on the patients, reduce mortality, improve outcomes and provide a better service to patients.

Technology can help improve patient safety, alleviate some of the pressures on our staff, reduce duplication, improve access to critical patient information and bring care closer to the patient's bedside. The Western Trust is also the pathfinder site for a regional feasibility pilot for electronic document management, which is the digitisation of patient medical records. The system went live in paediatrics at the South West Acute Hospital in March 2013 and is the first of its kind.

One of the recommendations in Transforming Your Care was the development of joint planning arrangements with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland. The South West Acute Hospital is well placed for collaborative cross-border working. In May 2013, James Reilly TD, the Republic's Minister for Health, and I paid a joint visit to the hospital. We met staff and patients who had benefited from participation in the Cooperation and Working Together diabetes programme and heard about developments in cross-border vascular services. The Cooperation and Working Together partnership delivers an extensive level of patient services at the South West Acute Hospital, including vascular, ophthalmology, urogynaecology and ear, nose and throat services. Services range from outpatient assessment clinics to surgical procedures and follow-up review appointments. CAWT continues to invest in reforming and modernising patient services. One example is vascular VNUS closure, which allows patients to have more efficient vascular procedures. That means that patients are treated and discharged within approximately 2 hours as outpatients, rather than inpatients who stay overnight. My Department and the HSC will continue to explore opportunities for cooperation with the Republic of Ireland where it is of mutual benefit to our health and social care systems.

Transforming Your Care also sets out the direction of travel for Northern Ireland's health and services. Transforming Your Care has indicated that the South West Acute Hospital will continue to provide general hospital services to the people of the south-west, including its rural population. The hospital will network with Altnagelvin Area Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital. The new hospital being constructed at Omagh will also play an important role in the network of hospitals in the west. The networking between hospitals reflects the fact that no hospital stands in isolation from its neighbours, as not every service can be provided locally.

I understand that my time is gone, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I conclude at that point. Perhaps we can catch up on some of the other issues at a later time.

Adjourned at 6.41 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 February 2014

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order. May I seek some information? Will the standards commissioner's report into Mr Jimmy Spratt's comments about "nutters" now be reopened, given the revelation that the 'News Letter' has a recording that indicates that Mr Spratt denied ever having made the comment, particularly since a cornerstone of Mr Bain's report is that there was no such denial? Will the matter be reopened or will that fatally flawed report now stand? What of Mr Bain, who made such a basic error?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is not a point of order, as I am sure the Member is aware. It is a matter for the Committee, and it will be addressed there.

Ministerial Statement

Emergency Department Review

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you. It is good to put the Minister of Finance in his proper place.

The statement concerns actions that I have commissioned that are aimed at ensuring the safety and quality of the service that our hospital emergency departments (ED) provide, hence reassuring the public that they can have full confidence in these services. The review's primary focus is the Belfast Trust, but the work will look at emergency departments in the regional context. I am sure that there will be issues and lessons that will be relevant across Northern Ireland.

In recent weeks, there has been a continuing debate, not least in the Assembly, about the pressures that emergency departments face. Questions have been asked, and rightly so, about whether those pressures are routine. Are they caused by a shortage of staff or funding? Are ambulance turnaround times too slow? Are winter pressures more acute than normal this year? Are those pressures and the underlying causes peculiar to Northern Ireland or are we witnessing a national phenomenon that is explained in part by the growing elderly population or by an inability to attract junior doctors to work in emergency medicine? All those are questions that we need to address if we are to sustain and to improve the high standards of emergency care in the Province.

In response to the 28 January Assembly motion, I referred to the wide range of measures that we have put in place to manage the vastly increased workload on Health and Social Care (HSC) so that we can meet and service the needs of our population, which is growing older. I also stated that we are mindful that the performance of our emergency departments falls behind that in some other parts of the United Kingdom. I am keen to learn from the widest range of peers and to benchmark against the best.

In this context, I referred to our involvement with GB expertise in the Northern Trust, for example, and said that I was giving consideration to how we could utilise similar expertise to test whether there are more things that we could do better in our emergency departments, particularly in how they integrate with the rest of the hospital.

I have spoken with members of staff in different specialities and at different levels in the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) in recent weeks. Other staff in the Belfast Trust have made their views heard through correspondence and engagement with the Regulation and Quality Improvement

Authority (RQIA) and the Public Health Agency's (PHA) 10,000 Voices project.

On 29 January, I wrote to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety indicating that I was actively considering a review with external expert input. Following the Adjournment debate on 4 February, I sent a letter to the Committee confirming that I had decided to seek assurance for the public and for myself as Minister that our EDs are providing care of the highest quality and safety, and to identify areas where there may be opportunities to make improvements. I advised that this would take the form of an independent review bringing in expertise from outside Northern Ireland.

Taking account of the advice that I have received from clinicians and professional staff working in our emergency departments, I commissioned the RQIA to do two things to help ensure that the Belfast Trust and the wider health and social care system can act as effectively as possible on the issues arising from recent events and to ensure that there is a full and open process of review.

Firstly, I instructed RQIA to carry out inspections at the RVH site. Over the weekend of 31 January, RQIA assessed the quality of care and dignity that was afforded to patients in the emergency department and the acute medical unit (AMU). Secondly, I decided that rather than having a Health and Social Care Board-led review of the major incident that was declared at the RVH last month, it would be better for there to be a review under RQIA's role and powers. The RQIA has agreed to carry out this wider review, which will be led by Dr David Stewart, the RQIA's director of reviews and medical director. The other members of the review team will bring expertise from all the essential disciplines that are required in the speciality of emergency care. I do not wish to mention names until final confirmation has been received, but I can advise the Assembly that members will include a national expert in emergency medicine, a senior nurse, an operational manager with a successful track record in unscheduled care and an expert on ambulance-related issues. I have today published the terms of reference for this work.

RQIA has provided immediate feedback on its inspection at the RVH to the Belfast Trust, the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and my Department on its preliminary findings. I have been advised that the inspection identified a range of issues, which cause me and my Department to have serious concern about whether the Belfast Trust is consistently performing to the high standards that I require in executing its responsibilities to patients and staff. I recognise, however, that some of these are wider issues that cannot necessarily be addressed by the trust on its own. The emerging findings help to put all the concerns that had been circulated into a clearer context. Nevertheless, this is a disappointing outcome to the inspection and reflects the unacceptable experiences that many of us have had related to us by some patients and staff. I am resolved that this will be fully and comprehensively addressed as a matter of priority. RQIA will provide me with a preliminary report on its findings later this week.

I want to share with the Assembly the aspects of the immediate feedback that have given me cause for concern. These early findings require our immediate attention. The inspectors spoke to more than 100 staff across a range of roles and functions. The inspection has confirmed concerns about staffing levels in key areas, allegations of bullying, staff under intolerable pressure and a system of care that does not function fully as it was set up to do. The concerns relate to the emergency department itself, to the acute medical unit, which is a 60-bed unit for the assessment and treatment of admitted patients, including many admitted through the ED, and to some aspects of the wider hospital and trust functions. There are genuine and heartfelt concerns from clinicians about the impact that this difficult situation is having on patients.

The emerging findings recognised that the model of care and the intended approach to managing the treatment and placement of patients in the hospital is good but that the system has, on occasions, struggled to cope with the large numbers of patients who are awaiting admission. It appears that one root of the problem is as much in the delay in discharging patients who no longer need care in the acute setting as in the flows into and through the hospital. When large numbers are waiting for discharge, it is not always possible for patients to be placed in the correct specialty ward, where their particular conditions can be treated in the best possible way. It is well known that when patients are outliers — that is, that they are in a ward not specialising in the care of their particular condition — it is more difficult to provide the specialist care of the required quality and to do so as safely.

The inspection found that, in some settings and/or at some times, there are not enough doctors and nurses to provide appropriate care to the number of patients in the system. In some cases, this means staff working in areas that ideally they would have more experience to undertake. The pressure on staff limits the time to undertake professional supervision and appraisal. Sickness absence among nursing staff in the AMU is high. I understand that the trust has already taken some steps to address these issues and expects to appoint additional medical and nursing staff quickly.

Any reference to potentially unsafe care needs to be addressed with caution as all HSC organisations and all staff have clear statutory and professional obligations to provide safe care. Consideration of such allegations must be measured and proportionate as these are preliminary findings and we need to assure people facing emergencies that their needs can and will be met safely. Disproportionate or hasty interventions could be very damaging. However, we have to face the fact that concerns about safety have been expressed in the comments that led me to commission the inspection, and some significant points seem to have been confirmed in the inspection. I have no doubt that the Belfast Trust is doing all it can to ensure safety and is already acting on the key findings.

Risks to safety in the emergency department itself arise in the times when its functions are impeded by having too many patients at one time. Physical access to patients can be difficult for staff. There is a lack of space in the resuscitation area. Cubicles in the focused assessment area are being used at times to care for patients while they await transfer to specialist hospital beds. There are often many patients waiting for admission who need nursing care, including administration of drugs. This is difficult to carry out in an open environment. Beyond the ED itself, staffing levels in the AMU need to be sufficient to care for the needs of patients who are, by definition, acutely ill, and the trust also needs to find ways that reduce the risks associated with the care of patients who are outlying in

other wards, given that they require the clinical team from another ward to attend to their needs.

The inspection also found concerns about the environment and patient experience. There is insufficient space in the ED for the number of patients waiting. Patients waiting on trolleys are very close to the next patient. The ED can be noisy, draughty and cold as it is not designed to operate as a ward environment. The AMU consists of 60 beds, and the size and layout of the ward are difficult and confusing for families and patients. There is insufficient equipment in the ED and the AMU. The present conditions make the delivery of personal care by the nursing team in the ED difficult. Clinical observations and procedures are carried out in an open environment. The provision of meals and drinks are hampered. All of this points to issues of respect and dignity that are unacceptable. The patient tracking system is identified as not working well, and some patients' discharges are not happening in as timely a manner as staff would wish.

References to a bullying culture cause me particular concern. We have access time targets for unscheduled care, and I make no apology that these have been applied for many years and form part of the performance management function of the HSCB in relation to all trusts. I think that it would be wrong to say that it is acceptable for patients needing emergency care to wait for more than 12 hours for admission or discharge, and that is clearly the view that the public express. However, my message has always been that quality and safety must come first. Also, the access time targets are intended to promote good care and reduce the risk of poor patient experience. It appears that concern about the 12-hour and four-hour targets for emergency care may have led to some unacceptable behaviour by some staff on some occasions.

It is important that we achieve positive change in that culture and approach. My message is, and has been, very clear: patient care comes first, and no one should ever do the wrong thing to meet a target. Front line staff should be able to focus on the quality and safety of care. It is the responsibility of senior managers to ensure that it is possible for front line staff to do that and to meet the targets. That includes the responsibility to ensure that sufficient staff are available and that systems are working effectively. Senior managers know that if a task is impossible for any reason, they have the right and the responsibility to say so, as they are accountable to the Department for the threefold responsibility of providing high-quality, safe services that deliver the ministerial targets within the available resources.

12.15 pm

Against that background, I am glad to say that the inspection confirmed that there is an overwhelming desire from staff to be part of the solution, and I want to assure Members that that will happen. In response, the Belfast Trust has acted quickly to address the RQIA's emerging findings. I will say more about that in the days ahead. However, I stress that I have not yet received the considered and full findings even of the immediate inspection. It is important that we await the report on the inspection and the fuller review before reaching considered conclusions.

Although I recognise the gravity of the situation, I wish to reassure the public and the Assembly that the Belfast Trust will continue to provide services in the RVH's emergency department to meet the needs of its population, as a result of the commitment of all its staff. It is acting to manage the risks to safety that have been highlighted. However, we need to ensure that that is embedded in how care is organised and delivered. The trust's management team has responded with an open and fully transparent approach to the RQIA's inspection and is working constructively with the board, the PHA and my Department in moving forward.

It is right to express high appreciation for all staff who provide emergency care in the Belfast Trust for their dedication and commitment to their patients, and, most obviously, to all the front line staff who have kept going with a Blitz-like spirit, and also to the senior managers who are wrestling with highly complex and challenging responsibilities. I urge Members to recognise the great complexity of the situation: if easy solutions were available, they would have already been adopted. I want to thank the staff for their candour in expressing their views to the RQIA. I understand that the staff have welcomed the inspection, and I hope that they now have confidence that their concerns will be fully addressed.

The RQIA's wider review will report to me by June. Although the focus of the review is on the RVH as the Province's major trauma centre, undoubtedly there will be learning that can be of benefit more generally across the system. The review will, therefore, identify and recommend opportunities for all parts of the healthcare system to contribute to improving emergency care in Northern Ireland. It will look at how the whole system could remove some of the burden on emergency departments and offer a much improved patient experience.

I hope that the Assembly will appreciate that it is important to make progress in a considered and measured way, listening to the views of front line professionals and patients, mindful of the importance of ensuring at all times that the public retain confidence in our hospitals and continue to use them appropriately, not because I say so, but because the staff make it so.

Occasionally, the system has to respond to extreme pressure, such as that in the RVH on 8 January when the trust activated its major incident plan, or the major incident declared by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service at the Odyssey Arena last Thursday. In both cases, the system implemented its escalation plans to ensure that patient safety was maintained and that the necessary resources were made available. I should like to take this opportunity to commend the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and the Belfast and South Eastern Trusts for their action on Thursday evening in responding to what was a very serious and potentially volatile situation.

I have made it clear from my first day as Minister that the underlying objective for the entire health system is to protect and improve the quality of services that we deliver. The health service must be safe, effective and totally focused on the patient, as they are at the heart of everything that we do. Today, I assure the Assembly of my commitment to continue to work to improve the care provided for all patients, not least those who use our emergency departments.

I look forward to receiving the RQIA's report in June. It will be an important report, and it will complement the

substantial work already being undertaken by HSC to improve emergency care in the short term and in the medium to longer term through Transforming Your Care.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement. The initial RQIA findings are quite damning. Your statement referred to speaking to over 100 staff and confirmed concerns about staffing in key areas, allegations of bullying, staff under intolerable pressure and a system of care that does not function fully as it was set up to do. That is nothing new to us in the House or, indeed, the wider community. A year ago next month, a report from the College of Emergency Medicine clearly outlined that procedures in the Belfast Trust were neither safe nor sustainable. There was an earlier A&E improvement group. Given that the Minister is widening the review to look at emergency departments in a regional context, does he now fully accept that there is a crisis in our emergency care?

Mr Poots: Waiting times are coming down for emergency care. We are getting better outcomes in our responses to major critical illnesses such as sepsis, stroke, heart attack and major trauma. None of those aspects is experiencing a crisis situation. You are looking at improvement right across the system and at better care than was ever delivered previously.

We have a situation in which staff are working under immense pressure. I identified that, which is why I brought the RQIA in to assist us in speaking to staff and identifying their issues. Consequently, I made today's statement in support of the staff who deliver the service. It is absolutely essential that those staff are working to their optimum and getting the responses that they need from the management system and other parts of the hospital to ensure that delivery of care in emergency departments reaches its optimum output. All that is focused on delivering better working conditions and support for the staff who are at the front line of our hospitals providing front line services.

Emergency departments are always highly pressured places, but staff are feeling under more pressure than usual. Where does that pressure come from? It comes from managers. Where does the pressure on managers come from? It comes from me. Where does the pressure on me come from? It comes from you. It all directly comes back to the House, which is demanding higher and higher standards. We are living within a particular budget and expect staff to deliver for us. We have a growing population, so more and more people require emergency care. That is the essential problem. Can we do it better? I think that we can, which is why I want assistance and expertise from other places that are doing it better. That is what this is about.

Mr Wells: The Minister referred to the situation at the Odyssey last Thursday night. Will he give the Assembly his initial views on what caused that major issue for A&Es and what he and his Executive colleagues can do to ensure that similar events are not repeated?

Mr Poots: What happened at the Odyssey had a fairly significant impact on our emergency departments. Emergency departments are always prewarned if anything is going to happen. My wife used to work in an emergency department and does not like flying because so many calls came in warning of potential air incidents. Emergency departments are promptly warned that they could have a major incident on their hands, and that was the case on Thursday night with the Odyssey. Some 100 young people required treatment and care. Some of that was carried out by the voluntary sector, much of it was carried out by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service on site, and 17 people attended emergency departments. From the first reports, it had been anticipated that many more people would need to go to emergency departments. The cause of the problem was alcohol and drugs. The people attending emergency departments were 15-, 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds. None of them should have been drinking alcohol, and the drugs were illegal. Let us be very clear that, as a consequence of taking materials that they should not have taken, young people ended up in our emergency departments.

Let us be also clear that eight out of 10 people who attend emergency departments at weekends are there as a result of taking alcohol. So society has a role to play in ensuring that we deliver care for people who really need it. Very often, actions that people take, and foolish actions that people take, contribute to the pressurised environment that we are talking about. Emergency doctors and nurses, and other staff in the facility, very often operate in an environment where they are under huge pressure as a consequence of people attending and behaving very badly as a result of having taken alcohol. All these things have to be taken into account. There are also things for other Departments and Committees to take on board to ensure a society that has greater respect for the work that is being carried out in our emergency departments.

Mr McKinney: I remind the Minister of a statement that he made on 13 January in the wake of the situation at the Royal:

> *"Last week's circumstances were exceptional, and it is important not to confuse an exceptional circumstance with overall performance". — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p276, col 2.]*

> *"I just wish that our politicians and, indeed, our media would be more mature in how they assess things." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p277, col 1.]*

In that context, and given the announcement today, I offer the Minister the opportunity to apologise to those who rightly raised the issue in the media and on the Floor. Given that position and the apparent position today, I think that I am right to be sceptical. The review may be an assessment of events internal to an emergency department, but we believe that there are external influences. Will the review look at the decisions, which we believe were wrong, that influenced the crisis in the first place?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Let us keep questions to the statement as concise as possible, please.

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

The apology should come from the Member and, indeed, those Members who continually castigate a system that delivers for the people of Northern Ireland and ensures the survival of more people who attend hospital with a heart attack, stroke, major trauma or sepsis when, in many other circumstances, they would not survive. I am disappointed that the Member has not apologised for that.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. Some weeks after the Belfast Trust's declaration of a major incident at the Royal Victoria Hospital and the diversion of ambulances from Craigavon hospital, the Minister denied that there was a crisis in A&E in Northern Ireland. Why is he only now advising us of a review of A&E, having denied that there was a crisis? Is it a result of tomorrow night's 'Spotlight' programme on A&E and the spotlight that will be shone by the Health Committee later this week?

Mr Poots: We will wait and see how maturely that programme handles things and how well it puts the case for the good things that are happening in hospitals, or whether it is just another session of attacking the healthcare system. I had decided, before learning anything of 'Spotlight', to ask the RQIA to look at what was going on in the Royal Victoria Hospital. That was not on the back of any Assembly Members or the media. That was on the back of talking to people on the ground and to staff. That is one of the benefits of having a local Minister who is prepared to go to a hospital immediately after there has been a difficulty to see what is happening on the ground, arrange to meet people thereafter and identify the issues and problems. Staff said that they were operating under immense pressure and did not feel that they were getting the support throughout the hospital that would allow them to ensure that ED output flowed more smoothly. It is about paying attention to the needs of the local community and the people who serve that local community and doing something about it.

12.30 pm

Mr McCarthy: Once again, it takes a crisis or major incident to effect an urgent investigation. Let us hope that the review will bring some change.

It appears that we are losing experts in the field to regions outside Northern Ireland where conditions are much more attractive. What consideration will be given to the introduction of incentives to encourage medical staff to specialise in emergency medicine and remain in Northern Ireland? Will the Minister concede that the continued reduction of 3% per annum in the budget makes Transforming Your Care impossible to fulfill, and, as such, ill people will continue to suffer?

Mr Poots: If Mr McCarthy wants to do something about the health budget, perhaps he can ensure that we get some money off the Department of Justice, DEL or some other Department that will enable us to spend more.

In spite of the fact that we had the 3% cut that the Member refers to, we have been able to employ 100 more doctors and increase the number of nurses who are employed in the Health and Social Care system. The Member may not understand that. He is on the Health Committee, so he should know and understand that we have spent resources more wisely, sought to reduce waste and employed more staff on the front line. Therefore, I do not accept that implementing Transforming Your Care is an impossibility. It is absolutely essential that we implement it; otherwise, the problems will keep coming at us.

I understand that we are in the middle of the process of implementing Transforming Your Care. One requirement of the additional £30 million that the Minister of Finance was able to allocate to us was to take on more staff to carry out domiciliary care, and the money has enabled us to do that. It is very important that we keep more people in their own home, support them to be in their own home and support our older population.

What some Members fail to recognise is that we are successfully keeping people living longer. Sixty per cent of our hospital beds are taken up by people who are over the age of 65. The more successful that we are, the more work that we will create for ourselves, and more pressures will be applied. If the Assembly wants to take a different view on budgets, it is for the Assembly to take that view. If it wants to identify that health needs greater resources, that is a matter for this Assembly. We are living within the resources that we have, and we are doing it well.

What we have in the hospital at present is a situation in which staff are operating under a lot of pressure. We believe that we can assist them to ensure that we resolve the issues and problems. That is what I am proposing to do today, and that is something that the House should welcome.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement, for his work in trying to make A&Es more efficient and for challenging managers to work more effectively. Does he agree that we should not be seeing adverse incidents in the health service? How does Northern Ireland's handling of such incidents compare with that of other places?

Mr Poots: Adverse incidents arise because of a number of circumstances. Sometimes, they can arise in the community. Very often, they will arise before they reach an emergency department. They can be the result of vulnerable adults, children in care, vulnerable children, and so on.

When standardised against hospital mortality rates for the five trusts compared with those of the 146 English acute trusts, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is at 99·1% on the index. That is pretty close to the national average. The same applies for serious adverse incidents. Northern Ireland is not falling behind other parts of the United Kingdom in the quality of healthcare and social care that it provides for people.

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the fact that he is having a review into the crisis.

He poured scorn on those of us who, he says, castigate the system. We do not castigate the system, rather, we simply want to call into question those who are on world-class salaries yet are unable to run a world-class health system in the North.

On the question of widening the review to look at hospitals such as Downe, can the Minister give assurances that the trust that people have lost in those who govern the health system will be rebuilt throughout the review? Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Poots: Perhaps the Member has just returned from Wexford — from another country — in the past few hours. If he had fallen ill there, he would have got a lesser standard of treatment than if he had fallen ill here. Perhaps Sinn Féin should recognise that, whilst Northern Ireland, in United Kingdom terms, could do better, it looks pretty good against the Republic of Ireland. That is what you would like to take us into, of course; I recognise that.

I understand that recruitment to emergency departments is challenging. It is not just challenging here; it is challenging in other parts of the United Kingdom and in the Republic of Ireland. Of course, that will be an issue for Downe

Hospital. I have identified quite a number of doctors who have chosen to go to other countries, such as Australia. Around one quarter of emergency doctors in Australia come from either the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland. I have asked why that is the case. Very often, people talk about better working conditions, managers who are more responsive to the needs of the doctors and so forth. Those are areas that we can do something about and make being an emergency practitioner here more attractive. They also indicated that, within the hospitals, they felt that they got better support from the communities — the people who attended emergency departments — and that it was less abusive.

Perhaps you and everybody should stand with our emergency staff and say that the abuse that they take at times is wholly unacceptable. As a community, we need to ensure that we support our staff in those instances, as opposed to demanding and demanding and demanding more of the staff on behalf of people who abuse the system.

Mr Givan: I commend the Minister; whilst others try to grab the headlines, he seeks to grab the difficult issues and tries to resolve them. With regard to assuring himself that he is hearing from front line members of staff who are working in the emergency departments, what efforts is he taking to meet them and speak with them, as opposed to hearing a message that may well be filtered — this is a concern of some of the staff — through senior management? Some of the staff who have contacted me have indicated that the failure of the South Eastern Trust to maintain the services at the Lagan Valley was having a detrimental impact on the Royal Victoria Hospital. What efforts are being taken to resolve that?

Mr Poots: The Member knows that I have sought to meet, and have met, members of staff who are working on the ground. As a consequence of having met the staff directly and identified the issues, we brought in the RQIA and carried out that piece of work. The report will be initiated by others who have expertise on the issue.

We have approached Dr Taj Hassan, for example, who is a vice-president of the College of Emergency Medicine, to participate in the review. The Chair of the Committee referred to the previous review; Dr Hassan was one of the key architects of that review. I am sure that he will want to assure us of the full implementation of that review if he is able to take up the post. Dr Hassan has agreed that he is prepared to do this, but he needs to get the authority of his employers, and that is being sought. There has to be final confirmation of that.

The RQIA has been talking directly to the staff, identifying those issues, on the back of us talking directly to the staff. I am telling the House that, having identified the issues, we want to go further and do something about it. We want to ensure that our staff work in the optimum conditions, because staff working in optimum conditions will provide the best level of service for the people who need it.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. We all commend the work of the staff. Minister, do you accept that the closure of the Downe Hospital at weekends and at night has put increased pressure on the Royal and the Ulster Hospital, considering that 40% of the Belfast Trust's patients are treated at the Ulster's accident and emergency? Will you widen this out to look at A&E provision outside the Belfast area and how that affects the Downe and so on?

Mr Poots: There is not evidence to suggest that the pressures that were identified in the Royal Victoria Hospital were a consequence of the Lagan Valley and Downe circumstance. The Member referred to a large number of people, particularly from east Belfast, who use the Ulster Hospital. I should also refer to a large number of people who live in the South Eastern Trust area, particularly in the Colin area, who use the Royal Victoria Hospital as their base. So, there is a degree of counterbalance to that.

The South Eastern Trust has had trouble attracting the requisite number of doctors that would ensure that the service could continue in the Downe Hospital. I have impressed upon the trust the importance of going out and being more vigorous in its recruitment and to seek to ensure that we get more staff there. That will ensure that we can have as strong a service as possible in the likes of the Downe and the Lagan Valley Hospital and that we can seek to ensure that we treat people outside the key sites.

I make it very clear that the Ulster Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital are the acute hospitals in that region. That is where people are best placed for acute care. I think that it is absolutely appropriate that a lot of the people, particularly older people, who go through emergency departments with issues that involve admissions, are admitted directly to the likes of Lagan Valley Hospital and the Downe Hospital. People with many of the minor injuries should not be travelling to the South Eastern Trust to the Ulster Hospital or, indeed, to the Royal. We need to ensure that steps are taken to avoid those circumstances, and I have impressed that need upon the trust.

Mr Cree: Minister, thank you for the statement. I am looking at some of the figures, and I see that the performance on four-hour waits at A&Es across Northern Ireland has continued to decline every year since you took over in 2011. That may just be a coincidence. However, the external review at Antrim produced a degree of improvement across a wide range of services. I wonder, on behalf of the constituents of North Down, and, indeed, further afield, when we can expect similar investment in staff levels, improved management and, of course, resources at the Ulster, which you just mentioned.

Mr Poots: Perhaps it is also a coincidence that the 12-hour waits have been coming down since I came into office. Nonetheless, we have given investment for each trust to have additional beds and support in the hospitals, particularly over the winter period. So, they have all received finance to assist them through the winter period when the pressures are somewhat higher. That is a course of work that has been carried out.

The Ulster Hospital has also taken on additional consultants over my time. Indeed, we have taken on additional doctors and nurses across the system. So, in spite of the constrained finances that exist across the UK, which have been applied here in Northern Ireland, we have managed to employ more doctors and nurses to deal with people on the front line of services. We are offering more domiciliary care, and we are engaging in offering more social care support to people. In all those measurements, we are doing more than was previously the case.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement. Having previously welcomed the turnaround team that he introduced to Antrim Area Hospital, I certainly welcome what he has decided on with the RQIA. No doubt, that will bring some benefit to aid the healthcare workers in the emergency departments.

The Minister referred to the number of people who come to the A&E departments with alcohol-related problems. As part of signposting people to minor injury units, has the Minister given any consideration to ensuring that the emergency departments are not overused by people who should not be there?

12.45 pm

Mr Poots: In our hospitals, we need to look at having an emergency department that is purely an emergency department; where the triage takes place and that admits people to an emergency department. Others would remain in an acute services department, minor injuries or something that has another description, because what is an emergency department?

I named the four issues that take most lives: sepsis, stroke, major trauma and cardiac incidents. We provide excellent care for those things, and it really grates on me that Members do not even bother to acknowledge that excellent care and the better standards in all those things. In fact, if you had a stroke in 2012-13, the chances of you dying were 16·8% lower than in 2008-09. We are doing better on those major things, and perhaps people would be decent enough to acknowledge the good care that is being provided. However, in doing that, do we separate at the door of the hospital those kind of treatments from the other treatments that involve admitting people with chronic illnesses, which is acute care? Indeed, should minor injuries be separated as well? We need to look at and address those issues, and I hope that, as the report comes to a conclusion later this year, we will have very clear recommendations on the way forward to ensure that we can provide the best possible care across the board.

It is important that public confidence is not diminished as a result of people carping and seeking to make a headline for themselves. It is important that public confidence is maintained in our health and social care system, and the fact is that people are being seen quicker and are getting better treatment than was the case a number of years ago. We should focus on that at this time as well.

Mr Allister: Can I ask the Minister this directly: have any trolley waits or delays led to or contributed to any fatalities? Given the catalogue of failure that has been recited today, does the buck ever stop with the Minister?

Mr Poots: When Ministers learn something, they do something about it, and I am telling the Assembly today that we are doing something about it. The Member knows very well the problems in the Northern Trust area, which is his area, and if he is in contact with his constituents, they will tell him that they are getting a much better service after the intervention of the Minister. I got criticised because I asked someone to step down because I did not think that they were carrying out their job as well as they should have been. Subsequent to that, there has been a dramatic improvement in the Antrim Area Hospital and in the Northern Trust. Mr Allister could have paid tribute to us for the service that we have provided for his constituents.

Mr Agnew: The Minister said in response to a previous supplementary question that there was no evidence that the closure of the Downe and Lagan Valley A&Es in the evenings and weekends contributed to the major incident at Lagan Valley Hospital. However, an answer in an AQW that he provided to me shows that approximately 20% of the patients admitted that night were from those areas. Will he give a commitment that, should the review signal that this is a problem and is contributing to the problem, he will seek to solve the problems in recruiting staff for those A&Es rather than simply keeping them closed?

Mr Poots: When he got the answer, the Member obviously did not check the figures for the previous year and the year before that. He may not be aware that the Royal Victoria Hospital is a regional facility. So, it takes people from across Northern Ireland. It is the major trauma facility and the lead hospital for a series of specialisms. So, of course it will serve people from outside Belfast. I do not think that we should discriminate against people outside Belfast for specialisms. And, of course, it also takes a large number of people who migrate to it from the Colin area, naturally, and indeed from the Lisburn area; but there are substantial numbers of others, in the Belfast Trust area, who migrate to the South Eastern area to use the Ulster Hospital facilities, as the Member should know.

Mr McNarry: It is clear that confidence in the service is enjoyed by many. However, revelations damaging that confidence are not, I contend, based on lies told by anyone. How competent is the system for dealing with revelations via complaints, and can we all be confident that the system itself is efficient and impartial?

Mr Poots: As the Member knows, healthcare is always in a very fluid situation. Millions attend our hospitals during the year and 70,000 staff work in them. We are spending £4·5 billion. That is a massive scale. Does anybody think that you can operate a system like that and not hit problems? I think that the Member asks how we respond to those problems, and that is what is important.

I hope that, at trust level, responses are good and effective. That is not always the case and, sometimes, we have to intervene. That is why I am intervening in this instance, to ensure that the trust gets the support it needs to ensure that it delivers the service that the public desires. That is our aim, our goal and is why we are giving support to the trust in this instance.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the review. I also welcome the marked improvements in the Antrim Area Hospital which is in my constituency of South Antrim. I ask the Minister for his assessment of how our emergency departments perform with genuine life-and-death emergencies.

Mr Poots: With respect to the performance of emergency departments in those genuine life-and-death situations, we have identified that improvements are being carried out. For example, one of the recent innovations is a 24/7 cath lab, which has been installed at the Royal Victoria Hospital and which will be in place later this year at Altnagelvin Area Hospital. That will reduce mortality among people who have heart attacks.

We have already indicated that we have reduced the number of people who die as a result of stroke. We are doing well with regard to sepsis and we are doing better with regard to major traumas. So, in those key areas of life-

and-death situations, which is what people really perceive and what EDs should really be about, we are doing better and the public can have confidence that if they fall ill with a major serious illness the appropriate expertise will be able to deal with them and provide the best possible care for them. On some occasions — a very small number — it may fall short, but in the vast majority of incidents, over 99% of cases, people will be well treated.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise for having missed the start of the Minister's statement. I thank him for it. Earlier, he referred to Wexford. Sinn Féin is not yet in Government in the Twenty-six Counties, but you can be sure that, when we are, health will be a priority.

The Minister accepts that a shortage of staff contributes to some of the problems in A&E. You said in your statement that the trust has taken steps to address the problem by recruiting staff. Why was that not done earlier? People have been talking about this long-term problem for at least 18 months.

Mr Poots: Additional staff have been recruited. One of the things that we want the report to identify is that the appropriate number of staff is employed and that the shifts are right to allow us to respond to people. All those things can be looked at to see whether improvements can be made. Representatives of the College of Emergency Medicine came over last March to look at the system and reported to us in August. A series of steps have been taken to implement their recommendations, and work is ongoing with regard to full implementation of the recommendations. I trust that the process that I have announced today will hasten that and ensure that those recommendations are fully and more quickly implemented.

Mrs D Kelly: The report makes stark reading. The SDLP has always been pleased to stand with staff to bring the issue to the Minister's attention. It is a somewhat belated response but is, nonetheless, welcome.

The statement refers to A&E units not being equipped to be wards because they are not the right environment. Is the Minister aware that, to the best of my knowledge, on Saturday night past, no beds were available in the Belfast Trust? The lack of bed availability is having a direct impact on A&E waiting times and trolley waits. Will the review acknowledge that and examine that difficulty, which is leading to the problems being experienced by A&E patients?

Mr Poots: Of course I recognise that. That is one reason why I propose to bring in expertise. If the Member had been listening earlier, she would know that one problem in our emergency departments is the whole hospital environment and the ability of other parts of a hospital to take people out of emergency departments at the appropriate times. People are not being discharged quickly enough, and emergency departments have more to do. We believe that there can be further improvement in that regard, which is a key element of what we are doing. We are bringing a team together to look at that to ensure that the whole hospital system works as effectively as it should do, which should lead to a major reduction in the pressures on our emergency departments.

Mr D McIlveen: I also apologise for being a little detained in getting to the Chamber this afternoon. Unlike some of the Minister's predecessors, he has clearly been speaking to front line staff in the health service. Will he elaborate on the impact of those who have, either through the media or in the House, used flyaway headline-grabbing descriptions such as "crises" to castigate those in the front line of the health service? What has been the impact on morale, particularly for staff who find themselves in such a situation?

Mr Poots: If we look at international news, we will probably see crises. There is probably a crisis in England, where people are having significant problems in accessing services such as healthcare because of flooding. We have had difficult situations to manage. They have been highly pressured situations, but Members wish to drum them up into something else so that they can grab a cheap headline. I am not interested in cheap headlines; I am interested in outcomes. Our hospital outcomes are better than they were a number of years ago. We continue to improve outcomes because we have brilliant front line staff who provide a great service for us. I am proud of them, and I am standing with them. I urge all Members to stand with us.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. I note his reference to the unfortunate incident at the Odyssey last Thursday night, when 100 young people created an emergency situation because of alcohol and drug misuse. Will the Minister, along with me, acknowledge the many thousands of young people across Northern Ireland who behaved responsibly and maturely and are tarnished by the unfortunate incident last week?

Mr Poots: The majority of young people in Northern Ireland are good young people. I was at an event on Saturday night with many young people who are going to Poland to help young people there who are in very needy circumstances. I was in conversation with someone from Mr Ramsey's part of the world who had witnessed some young people getting onto a bus. He said that the amount of alcohol being loaded onto that bus resembled a mini-off-licence. It was wholly irresponsible of the private coach hire company to allow that to happen. It is against the law, and it is the Department of the Environment's responsibility to enforce it. It is my intention to set up a meeting to include people from the PSNI, the DOE, which has a very significant job to do in enforcement, and the Odyssey to identify how we can reduce the risk of things like this happening again.

1.00 pm

If you go to the Odyssey or other parts of Belfast on a Saturday night, you will find smaller but significant numbers of young people in similar circumstances, and many will end up in our emergency departments. We cannot continue with this attitude to alcohol. Our young people consume far too much of it. Over the weekend, I got a letter from an emergency department consultant in which she said that she feared that, in 10 years' time, there would be an explosion of young women who had developed liver problems as a consequence of the total abuse of alcohol in their teenage years. The House needs to do something about that.

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 10 February 2014.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 10 February 2014.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. Today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14 and Vote on Account 2014-15

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next two motions relate to the Supply resolutions. As usual, there will be a single debate on the two motions. I shall call the Minister to move the first motion, and the debate on both motions will then begin. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on the second motion.

The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four hours and 30 minutes for the debate. The Minister will have up to 60 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and making a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £15,530,883,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,606,564,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(c) and 2(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14 that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,062,352,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £7,545,788,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility

Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2014-15 document that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We then move to the debate proper. I call Mr Daithí McKay, the Chairperson of the Finance Committee. Sorry, the Minister wishes to make a statement.

Mr Hamilton: The Supply resolutions debate is a critical step in the legislative process that governs our finances. The debate covers the final spending plans for 2013-14. In the first Supply motion, I seek the Assembly's legislative approval of the Executive's final spending plans for 2013-14 as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSE) that have been laid before the House. Through the second motion, I request interim legislative cover for resources and funding for the first few months of 2014-15 in the form of a Vote on Account.

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

I request the levels of Supply set out in the motions under section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which provides for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make recommendations to the Assembly leading to cash appropriations from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

The amounts that I ask the House to vote in Supply for 2013-14 are substantial: over £15 billion of cash, over £16 billion of resources and over £2 billion of accruing resources for spend and use by Departments and other public bodies in Northern Ireland. The first Supply motion sums up the spring Supplementary Estimates that are before us today. I take the opportunity to remind Members that the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect all in-year changes made since the Main Estimates were approved by the Assembly last June; that is, they reflect the departmental expenditure limit (DEL) changes agreed by the Executive at the June, October and January monitoring rounds as well as the annually managed expenditure (AME) funding agreed by the Treasury since the approval of the 2013-14 Main Estimates in June.

Before going into some of the detail of the spending plans for 2013-14, I want to make some important points. Over the next few weeks, we will progress a significant tranche of business through the House relating to the Supply resolutions and the Budget Bills. Those are important pieces of legislation, but it is critical and crucial that Members appreciate that today's debate is not an opportunity to redistribute funds for particular issues. Rather, it is about giving legislative authority to the decisions already taken by the Executive on public expenditure for 2013-14. In addition, it is about ensuring that departmental spending for 2014-15 can go ahead with legislative cover from the start of the next financial year. In effect, the legislative process today and over the next few weeks simply gives form to budgets agreed by the Executive in January monitoring and in previous Budget exercises for 2014-15.

Therefore, it is my hope, perhaps optimistically, that Members will not use the opportunity to seek a debate on what project should be funded and where but instead will focus on the specifics of what the budgets have achieved over the 2013-14 financial year. That, in essence, is what today's debate is all about, but I suspect that the call to focus on the specifics of the spring Supplementary Estimates may fall on deaf ears.

With that in mind, let me turn to a topic that has a bearing on the Estimates, and that is welfare reform. I again express my concern that the public expenditure consequences of welfare reform non-delivery have not been taken as seriously as they should. I confirmed in January monitoring that £15 million will be lost to the Northern Ireland departmental expenditure limit in the 2013-14 financial year. That is not some theoretical accounting adjustment but money that could have been allocated to local schools, hospitals, roads or other public services. The 2013-14 Estimates before you could, and should, contain an additional £15 million for services. However, that could not happen, because, without progress on welfare reform, Her Majesty's Treasury will now take that funding off us. Losing £15 million in that manner is simply inexcusable. Looking to the scale of the Northern Ireland DEL adjustments that lie ahead because of non-delivery of welfare reform, it is ever more unacceptable that progress is stalled.

Turning to the 2014-15 financial year, which the motion on Vote on Account covers, the forecast penalty for not progressing welfare reform is now £105 million. That simply cannot be met through the reduced requirements that usually materialise in the three monitoring rounds. It will therefore require cuts to all Departments, equivalent to 1% across all resource DEL baselines. To give some perspective as to what the £105 million cut will mean for public services, Members should note that the quantum represents the annual costs of providing around 2,500 nurses or 2,100 teachers.

If we do not implement welfare reform, I could be standing here in a few years' time telling the House that we have lost over £300 million in a single financial year as a result. Indeed, the forecast cost for failure to progress welfare reform is now over £1 billion over the next five years. In failing to proceed and allowing increasing millions of pounds of public spending to be foregone and not spent where it should be — on providing key and critical services to people across Northern Ireland — those who resist the inevitability of welfare reform are being utterly negligent in their duties and are exhibiting an abject absence of leadership.

In addition to the direct financial penalties, there are other adverse impacts on public service delivery and the wider economy that cannot be ignored. There are 1,410 people employed by the Department for Social Development in providing child maintenance and social security services to people in England on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. Those jobs are located in two service centres, one in Belfast and one at Lisahally, Londonderry.

The Department for Social Development is able to retain those jobs because it is able to staff the service centres with experienced staff who understand the existing benefits and the supporting IT systems. The Department for Work and Pensions is clear that, should Northern Ireland not maintain parity in the social security system and, consequently, no longer have staff experienced in using the supporting IT systems, it will have no option but

to relocate the work to service centres elsewhere. The loss of those jobs to Northern Ireland would be a huge blow and would have a seriously detrimental impact on the local economy.

I agree that we must do as much as we can to protect those in our society who rely on the benefits system. My colleague the Minister for Social Development has negotiated a package of measures that will ameliorate the worst impacts of welfare reform. We are not best serving those people by removing millions of pounds from our overall departmental expenditure limit budget. That simply makes our public services poorer for all, including those who need them most. Those resisting welfare reform because they think they are protecting the vulnerable are only serving to harm those same people and potentially create more vulnerable people by depriving funding for essential public services such as health, education and housing.

The Social Development Minister has put in place a package of concessions that provides a unique opportunity to implement welfare reform here while helping those most affected by that change. It is a Northern Ireland solution for Northern Ireland people. It is an opportunity that we must grasp, and it is one that I, as Finance Minister, believe we simply cannot afford to miss.

Having had my say on that issue, I turn to the detail of today's business. This financial year has been one in which we have finally started to see some meaningful recovery in our economy. The most recent Northern Ireland composite economic index showed growth in the Northern Ireland economy of 1·2% in the 12 months from September 2012. Unemployment has fallen for 11 consecutive months. The latest Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index, published this morning, shows our recovery gaining momentum, with firms experiencing their fastest rate of growth in 10 years. Growth here is faster than in the UK as a whole.

Rising workloads and fuller order books are also translating into an increase in employment. Our construction sector, which suffered severely during the downturn, is also returning to growth, with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors reporting in October that the sector had exited recession.

We cannot and must not be complacent. The positive indicators in our economy mean nothing to the person who has lost their job. Every job loss in our economy is one job loss too many. There is much, much more to be done, and it is within that context that the Executive have gone about their business of reallocating budgets this financial year. That job has not been easy.

The positive economic growth has not translated into an improving public expenditure purse. The public expenditure position remains constrained as the UK Government seek to deal with the legacy of debt. That public expenditure austerity at a UK level has worked its way into our budget from Her Majesty's Treasury. The Executive have had to make difficult decisions about the allocation of that funding to best equip our economy and protect our citizens.

In 2013-14, we began the financial year with an overcommitment. An extra £58·9 million of resource funding had been allocated to Departments, with the expectation that, during the course of the year, the Executive would be able to recoup that through reduced requirements being surrendered in the monitoring rounds. I can confirm that that approach has not only allowed additional funding to be appropriately planned for but has been effectively managed through the three monitoring rounds. In addition to reducing that planned overcommitment, the Executive were able to allocate further funding throughout the year to high-priority and emerging issues.

I will take a moment to look at the overall public spending picture for 2013-14. The Departments surrendered £90·7 million non-ring-fenced resource funding for redistribution in the three monitoring rounds. That compares with equivalent reduced requirements of £66·7 million, £65·7 million and £54·9 million for the preceding three years. Taking into account the Executive's Delivering Social Change funding, a capital to resource transfer and funding to manage the overcommitment and ring-fenced resources, it meant that the Executive were able to allocate some £132 million of resource to emerging issues in 2013-14.

On the capital side, Departments gave back some £181·6 million for redistribution during in-year monitoring. That included some £108 million as a result of the ongoing delay to the A5 road scheme. Again, taking into account the surplus position at the start of the year, technical adjustments and additional allocations from Her Majesty's Treasury, the Executive were able to meet capital pressures of some £249·6 million in 2013-14.

The Executive have delivered throughout 2013-14. We hosted the G8 in June and the 2013 UK City of Culture in Londonderry, which showcased to the world what Northern Ireland has to offer in hospitality and potential to invest. We held an exceptionally successful World Police and Fire Games over the summer, again highlighting to the world a Northern Ireland that is a world-class tourist attraction. I am personally particularly pleased that Ulster Rugby will host a quarter final of the Heineken Cup at the 18,000 capacity Ravenhill ground in April. That will be funded in part by the Executive. There have been plenty of positives as a result of Executive intervention.

1.15 pm

Let me turn to the detail of some of the resource and capital allocations that the Executive made this year. Some of the major allocations include £57 million to the Department of Health for a range of pressures, including elective care and the Transforming Your Care programme; £49·6 million to DRD for a range of areas, including road repairs and street lighting improvements; £11 million to the Department of Justice to support the policing operation for the G8 summit; £8·5 million to DETI for Invest NI initiatives and funding to support our Tourist Board in the promotion of major events; and £8·3 million to DARD for a hardship scheme and a TB compensation programme.

On the capital side, the Executive allocated just over £80 million to DRD for improvements to our region's infrastructure, including improvements to our road network and replacement buses for our transport network; £44 million to the Department of Health for a range of infrastructure and medical equipment investments; £27·2 million to the Department for Social Development for co-ownership and first-time buyer initiatives to help to get people on to the property ladder and to create movement in our housing sector; £26 million to DETI for an access-to-

finance fund run by Invest NI and the buy-out of the Invest NI HQ PFI lease; and £25 million of financial transactions capital to be issued to the University of Ulster as a loan to assist its move to the city centre.

That is just a snapshot of some of the departmental expenditure limit allocations in the monitoring rounds. However, Members must not forget that provision was also made in the annually managed expenditure exercises and in the 2013-14 spring Supplementary Estimates for almost £3 billion of income-related social security benefits to the most vulnerable. That funding goes a long way to protect those who are most in need and provides mainly for expenditure on disability benefits, income support, pension credit, jobseeker's benefits and housing benefits.

Before leaving the detail of the spring Supplementary Estimates, I can inform the House that some additional headroom has been built in over and above the January monitoring position. Headroom has been included for the Department of Health and the Department of Justice to ensure that, should other Departments have underspends before the end of the financial year, there is sufficient legislative cover to allow unspent resources to be redirected to those Departments. That will help the Executive to maximise expenditure and should ensure that no resources are lost to Northern Ireland under the Budget exchange scheme.

In addition, some headroom has been built in for the Department for Employment and Learning to cover a technical change in the way that the Treasury accounts for student loans. That does not represent an increase in spending power for the Department; rather, it is a prudent step to provide sufficient legislative cover for student loan provision. It is critical to emphasise to the House that such headroom has been included on the condition that if — I emphasise if — the resources become available, they must be used only for the agreed purpose, effectively ring-fencing the areas that I outlined.

I am sure that Members will also endorse the actions that have been taken. The actions will ensure that we maximise the funding that is available to Northern Ireland and utilise it for areas that will provide a real benefit to the people of Northern Ireland. I hope that I speak for all in the House when I say that the last thing that I want to see is scarce funding being surrendered to Treasury at the year end.

Turning from the 2013-14 financial year and looking ahead to 2014-15, the second motion before the Assembly seeks approval for the issue of a cash and resource Vote on Account to ensure the continuation of services into the next financial year. The amounts of cash and resources that are proposed are an advance of around 45% of the final 2013-14 provision and have no direct correlation to the Budget allocations for 2014-15. That advance is necessary to enable services to continue into 2014-15 until the Main Estimates are prepared and presented to the Assembly for approval.

I commend to Members the motions on the 2013-14 spring Supplementary Estimates, the 2014-15 Vote on Account and the Supply resolution. At the end of today's debate, I will endeavour to deal with as many of the issues that Members raise over the next few hours as I can.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Senior DFP officials briefed the Committee for Finance and Personnel on 5 February on the SSE and the Budget Bill. The Committee approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, which the Minister will introduce later today. That decision was on the basis that there has been appropriate consultation with the Committee, as provided for by Standing Order 42(2). I have written to the Speaker to provide confirmation of that.

As has been pointed out, the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect the changes that have been made to the opening Budget position for 2013-14 as a result of the monitoring rounds in June, October and January respectively. Additionally, the Department has explained to the Committee that headroom has been built in to the SSE to give the Executive ability to spend any last-minute underspends on priority areas to ensure that no resources are lost to Treasury under the Budget exchange scheme. I will return to that issue in a moment.

During our evidence session with departmental officials, the Committee received helpful clarification on a number of significant allocations, easements and technical adjustments that have occurred through each of the three monitoring rounds. The officials helpfully ran through the detail of these when explaining the reconciliation of the Estimates with the original budgets of Departments.

This reconciliation exercise highlighted the scale of the movement of moneys between Departments during the year. In fact, from a quick calculation, the total resource allocations amounted to over £180 million, while the total capital allocations amounted to almost £250 million. This was against total easements of almost £133 million in resource and £182 million in capital. In some instances, the figures involved were substantial, including for Health and Regional Development in particular.

The scale of the cumulative changes resulting from the nominal reallocations through monitoring rounds, combined with the in-year technical changes, will, in some cases, have resulted in significant differences between the opening and closing resource and capital allocations of Departments. In that regard, it will be important that all Statutory Committees have satisfied themselves as to the reasons for, and timing of, any significant levels of easements or return of moneys during the in-year monitoring process, and that the necessary assurances have been received on any concerns raised with Departments in minimising year-end underspend. I expect that other Members will address these issues in their contributions to today's debate.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has undertaken an active role in scrutinising the quarterly monitoring rounds, at a strategic and departmental level, throughout the 2013-14 financial year and has received timely briefings on the Department's position prior to each monitoring round.

As regards its own expenditure, DFP had no significant allocations, but it reported easements totalling £5·9 million in resource and £1·5 million in capital, which is significant given DFP's relatively small budget. This might indicate further scope for achieving savings in the Department of Finance and Personnel budget; a point that was acknowledged by senior departmental officials during separate oral evidence on 15 January. No doubt, this will be an area that the Committee will wish to explore as part of its input to the 2015-16 Budget process.

As regards the quality of the briefing provided by DFP on its Estimates, I wish to commend the officials on their paper providing a reconciliation with the Budget. Indeed, the Committee has circulated this paper to the other Statutory Committees as a potential model for the other Departments to follow in future.

Returning to the strategic and cross-cutting issues, during the session on 5 February, members queried how DFP ensures that the Executive's main priorities are still to the fore and that value for money is being achieved in the context of the significant movement of moneys in-year. On this point, officials have sought to assure the Committee that Departments are required to make clear how their bids fit in with the Executive's priorities.

As regards the headroom issue that I mentioned earlier, the Committee has previously recognised that limited use of this facility offers flexibility to minimise year-end underspend and so avoid the handing back of money to Treasury, which nobody wants to do. However, during last week's evidence session, members probed the DFP officials on the rationale and justification for the significant amounts provided for Health at £35 million, Justice at £14 million, and Employment and Learning at £8·7million. Some unease was expressed that an increased reliance on headroom might hinder an accurate assessment of the standards of financial management and forecasting of Departments. In sharing the DFP briefing paper with the other Statutory Committees, the Committee for Finance and Personnel, therefore, highlighted the significant headroom provision and whether Committees have been fully briefed by their respective Departments.

Finally, arising from last week's evidence from DFP, the Committee has sought advice from the Department on the feasibility of a composite final out-turn report being prepared and laid in the Assembly annually in future in order to address an apparent gap in the budget and financial reporting process. Although the Finance Minister provides the Assembly with a cross-departmental picture of the provisional out-turn figures in June or July each year, no similar report is provided on the finalised position and the separate end-year accounts for individual Departments provide only a disjointed picture. This is important also in light of the point made in the Minister's January monitoring round statement about the Budget exchange position being finalised only once the final out-turn for the year is known. For completeness and transparency, perhaps, a composite final out-turn report could also include confirmation to the Assembly of the finalised Budget exchange position.

I turn now to the motion relating to the Vote on Account for 2014-15. This is a practical measure that provides interim resources at approximately 45% of the 2013-14 provision. This enables departments, as the Minister has said, to ensure that public services continue during the early part of the financial year until the Main Estimates for 2014-15 and the associated Budget Bill are debated by the Assembly before the summer.

To conclude, therefore, on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support the motions.

I now wish to speak briefly in an individual capacity. The Minister has already mentioned some of the allocations in the previous year. Some £3 million went to the G8, the City of Culture, the World Police and Fire Games, all of which were important for our international reputation and for tourism.

For the year ahead, and tying into the Vote on Account for 2014-15, I want to see that same flexibility applied, if need be, into significant events such as the Giro d'Italia, which will make its way from Belfast through north Antrim and all the way down to Dublin. It is important to recognise that some DSD moneys have gone to some of the towns along that route but the amount is rather minuscule and we have to bear in mind the scale of this event — which not many people seem to have caught on to yet — which will take place in just a matter of weeks up and down the eastern seaboard of Ireland. It is important that, if moneys are needed in Departments such as DETI and DCAL for the Giro d'Italia and for building a legacy after the event, the same flexibility that has been applied in this financial year is applied in the next one.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, Alex Maskey, may touch on the next issue later. The past year has been quite difficult for a number of glazing firms. I should declare an interest as a number of these firms are located in north Antrim. A great deal of money was to be spent on the double-glazing project, but that was important not just for those companies but for a lot of families who should have been provided with double glazing and would have had the ability to heat their homes and save money going into the winter. That has not been the case. In my view, there has been meddling in that scheme and it has put firms and jobs at risk in my constituency. We need to ensure that DSD's budget handling capabilities are such that construction work in all our Departments is upheld and also in terms of employment and suitable insulation for families.

Similarly, there have clearly been easements in relation to the Maze/Long Kesh project, which also would have brought construction, tourism and jobs. That was shelved because of party politics and the politics of the past. That, in my opinion, is shameful. *[Interruption.]* Mitchel McLaughlin mentioned the headroom issue in last week's Committee meeting. He described it as preparing for bad financial management. That is clearly true.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr McKay: To conclude, I support the motions on behalf of the Committee and my party.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Givan, I remind Members not to make remarks from a sedentary position. I am sure that no Member cherishes more the right to be able to speak without interruption.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am pleased to speak today as Chair of the Committee for Justice. As Members will know, we scrutinise the Department in respect of its delivery plans, its savings plans and all the financial matters that are related to it.

Given that over 60% of the Department's budget relates to the Police Service spend, the Chief Constable attended a Committee meeting in September last year to discuss the police budget and the pressures and challenges that he faces. I will focus on that area first. Although the cost of the huge police operation for the G8 summit was high, there has been no resultant pressure on the police budget because the Executive provided £14·5 million in

resource and capital funding, with the rest coming from Her Majesty's Treasury's reserve. The operation itself was also managed very efficiently and effectively, resulting in virtually no trouble or arrests.

1.30 pm

During the year, however, the police indicated financial pressures in a range of areas, including the Historical Enquiries Team (HET), overtime costs and mutual aid costs. The Department has asked the police to absorb the costs, including that of the HET pressures, this year and next year of approximately £12·6 million. Although that has been achieved this year, it is a challenge to absorb the additional pressures while continuing to meet the required savings targets, given that over 80% of overall police costs are salary-related.

The PSNI also faces a very challenging situation with the delivery of its savings targets this year and next year. To address the problem, as well as its original planned savings from back office and areas such as estates, supplies and transport, it has initiated an efficiency programme called Service First, which aims to achieve efficiency from all parts of the organisation, especially operational activity, to gain the most from existing resources and deliver up to £45 million of efficiency savings over the next two years. No doubt, the Committee and, in particular, the Policing Board will wish to keep a very close eye on the outworkings of this project to ensure that there is no detrimental impact on front line services.

It is clear that the PSNI faces some major budget and resilience challenges currently and going forward. The medium-term resource plan highlights the fact that sustaining the level of resources that the police believe they need — a minimum of almost 7,000 warranted officers who can be used in a variety of ways, as indicated in their review of resilience and capability — will create a significant budget gap. According to the Chief Constable, 500 to 600 officers will leave through natural procedures over the next couple of years, and the PSNI can at this stage recruit only an initial tranche of about 100 officers because of budget funding uncertainty. This issue needs to be addressed over the coming months to ensure that the potential resilience issue is satisfactorily resolved.

Before moving on to other areas of the budget, let me touch briefly on the Desertcreat training college capital project. The Committee has questioned officials, including the Deputy Chief Constable, who heads up the project, on a number of occasions. As we are all aware of the issues and difficulties that have arisen, it is vital that none of the capital funding that has been made available for this project is lost due to the delays. Hopefully, substantial progress can be made in the coming months.

I turn now to the Prison Service. I very much welcome the efforts made by the Finance Minister in establishing this headroom provision, of which £14 million has been earmarked that could go to fund the voluntary service exit scheme. The funding is required to complete a voluntary scheme that would enable the final eight governor grades and 20 senior officers in the service to leave. I particularly welcome the decision by the Executive to make this a priority issue.

It is important that all staff who opted to leave under the scheme can be facilitated to do so. Approximately 500 officers have left under the scheme. Let me declare an interest: a family member was one such individual. The scheme was designed to allow older members of the service who had served during some of the most difficult periods of our Troubles to leave with dignity. I know that they have been very upset at the long protracted period that it has now taken to bring the scheme to a conclusion. If funds become available and other Departments are unable to spend them, I think that it is prudent of the Executive to have made this provision rather than send the money back to Westminster. It is a welcome move to be able to facilitate these individuals to leave the service.

Let me also take this opportunity to welcome the announcement that the Prison Service has identified the resources needed to fund the payment of a supplementary environmental risk allowance to post-2002 operational prison grade staff this year, which was recommended by the Prison Service pay review body. Staff should receive the payment this month. Again, this issue has been ongoing for some time.

Members will know that, on the back of the tragic murder of prison officer David Black, the personal security of prison officers and prison grade staff came into sharp focus and, rightly, this issue was brought to the fore. It has taken some time to get the Minister of Justice to this point. The matter was referred back to the pay review body, which made the recommendation, and I want to thank the Prison Service management, who have been able to identify the funding and make it available within their current resources. It is right that we support officers living under a threat. As they protect us, it is right that we support them.

Let me turn briefly to legal aid, which continues to generate the biggest pressure on the Department, despite the implementation of a number of changes to funding arrangements and the level of fees paid for criminal legal aid work. As early as June, the Legal Services Commission was forecasting a pressure of £27 million. The Department allocated an additional £15 million to ease the pressure. However, by October, the forecast pressure had increased to £41·7 million, or a net £26·7 million, taking into account the extra £15 million funding already provided.

In the January monitoring round, the forecast pressure now sits at around £25·8 million. The fact that the cost of legal aid is still so far above the available budget is unacceptable and unsustainable. Other areas of the Department cannot continually be expected to fund the additional cost, nor can the Department of Justice expect to receive additional money through the monitoring rounds that could be used to fund more important services and projects in other Departments.

The key cause of the pressures continues to be civil legal aid, with higher volumes and higher average case costs. There has also been an initiative by the judiciary to clear a backlog of Crown Court cases, which has led to an increase in criminal legal aid costs this year. The initiative is welcome from the point of view of speeding up cases through the justice system, but the Committee is concerned not only about the legal aid bill, which still far exceeds the available budget, but about the apparent inability of the Legal Services Commission to forecast with any accuracy the likely cost of legal aid.

An example of that is the initiative in the Crown Court, which would affect legal aid costs to be paid this year,

yet no account appears to have been taken of it until the pressure emerged. Even then, the forecast was not accurate. A robust model capable of accurately forecasting legal aid costs must be developed as a matter of urgency. Otherwise, the ability of the Department to deliver the legal aid reform programme will be undermined.

The Committee will continue to scrutinise further reforms that the Minister intends to bring forward, particularly in civil legal aid, to ensure that value for money within the available budget is achieved. Bringing legal aid spending within budget is important, but also of importance to the Committee is protecting access to justice. Therefore, we are looking at possible ways of assessing the impact of changes, especially on civil legal aid for family cases. The Deputy Chairman and I will meet the chief inspector of Criminal Justice Inspection tomorrow to discuss the matter further.

Finally, on the Department's budget allocations and savings delivery plans, the Committee pays particular attention to the likely impact on the delivery of front line services. Previously, there had been indications of possible impacts on front line services in the Probation Board, the Office of the Police Ombudsman and the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust. The Committee will continue to scrutinise closely the outworkings of the delivery of the savings targets in those areas and across the Department as a whole during the 2014-15 financial year.

I welcome the Minister's motion. Personally speaking, I concur with the Member for North Antrim Mr McKay, who said that he wanted flexibility to continue next year to address emerging pressures that could materialise. I say to Members opposite that, in the continued absence of leadership on their part to deal with welfare reform, they will not have the type of flexibility that they want. So step up to the mark, provide leadership and recognise reality, and then we will be able to allow our Finance Minister, who has been doing a superb job since his appointment, to continue to meet emerging pressures going into the next financial year.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leat as an deis cainte seo a thabhairt domh sa díospóireacht ar Mheastúcháin Fhorlíontacha an earraigh agus ar an Vóta Creidmheasa. Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on the Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account.

As already outlined, the spring Supplementary Estimates are, in effect, a way of summarising and tidying up the financial situation for the current financial year, and the Vote on Account is a resolution to allow initial spending into the next financial year. The SDLP will not be opposing the motions.

I begin by reminding the House that the Department reviewed the financial process, and a number of options were proposed to create a single, coherent financial framework. It was to be efficient, effective and transparent, and it was to enhance and ensure scrutiny and accountability to the Assembly. There was to be a Budget calendar for future processes, and that was to be outlined in advance to allow for adequate consultation. The Budget process was to include a strategic phase, perhaps in the spring, to precede the production of a draft Budget. That was all to allow the Assembly the opportunity to debate revenue measures and spending priorities.

Another important recommendation was that future Budget processes should include a formal stage for the reconsideration of the Budget in the light of emerging spending pressures or policy reorientation. Its aim was to inform in-year reallocations and to consider developments that might affect those reallocations. Future budgetary documents were to include a more detailed breakdown of the expenditure plans and the linkages between expenditure and performance outcomes.

The framework for a budgetary process was to be set out clearly in legislation, with additional details, where necessary, contained in the Assembly's Standing Orders. We have been told in the past that the implementation of the reforms is being halted by the Minister of Education. I do not think that that situation is acceptable. I ask the Minister this: can any of the reforms be implemented, or is it the case that the Minister of Education can hold the whole process to ransom? I am interested to hear the Minister's response to that at the end of the debate.

My colleagues will set out in today's debate and that tomorrow some of the areas in which they see a necessity for budgetary change. I will refer to some of the areas of concern as I see them, and I hope that I do not step on any of my colleagues' toes in doing so.

The ongoing failure to bring the Education and Skills Authority Bill back to the Assembly is leading to a crisis in the delivery of the £180 million capital programme for schools. The education boards and the sectoral organisations tell us that, owing to a moratorium on recruitment, they simply do not have the personnel to process the projects that await funding. The problem has the potential to impact severely on the delivery of the whole programme. I ask the Minister to give the House his views on that issue. Does he agree that there is a problem around the delivery of the programme and that it may have a negative impact on the financial situation, not to mention on the building and construction industry, which depends on the projects coming to fruition?

There are also a number of projects that seem to be locked in OFMDFM. I mention the Maze/Long Kesh development, the childcare strategy, the poverty and exclusion strategy, and the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. The moneys tied up in those projects are of concern. Once again, I ask the Minister for his views on the financial implications of the continued delays. Those delays have an impact in the community; that is the most worrying aspect of it.

1.45 pm

Looking back, we will remember that variance and special terms were agreed for the Department of Health at the beginning of the Budget period back in 2011. However, given the monitoring performance outcomes, it seems that we have moved away from that position. In the run-in to the 2011 Budget period, the Department was allowed to keep its reduced requirements, and the quid pro quo for that was that it would not bid in the monitoring rounds except where it could demonstrate exceptional need. That arrangement seems to have been relaxed, and that has been done rather informally.

We have now reached the stage where the Department of Health is bidding along with everyone else, presumably

as well as keeping its reduced requirements. I would like to hear the Minister's comments on that situation. Does he think that our health service is properly funded, or is it the case that it will constantly be in need of bailouts until the end of the budgetary period and, indeed, beyond that? I ask the Minister to outline the amount of extra money that is going to Health and for what reasons it is needed, because annex A in the book of Estimates does not explain the situation in full.

The Minister mentioned the headroom afforded to the Departments of Justice, Health, and Employment and Learning. He explained the rationale behind that: he is seeking to avoid underspend. Certainly, all of us would welcome that situation. However, as the Chair of the Committee remarked — I find myself agreeing with him — we need to be careful that such generous headroom does not contribute to the encouragement of poor financial management across Departments.

The SDLP is working responsibly for change through the democratic processes of the House. We showed that in our approach to the Public Service Pensions Bill. We have achieved changes there that are of benefit to our people, although obviously you will remember that we believe that more could have and should have been done. I hope that, today and tomorrow, we will get a chance to discuss welfare reform in more detail in response to some of the points that the Minister has made today.

In conclusion, it is obviously —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr D Bradley: — the case that we have few economic levers here. Public spending is one of the few that we do have, and we must use it to stimulate —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — the economy. I ask the Minister to tell us —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — what is in the Budget that will foster and grow our economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to speak on the two Supply resolutions, which I understand will be debated together.

Following on from Mr Bradley's point, last year I referred to the review of the financial process as well. That was, as you know, promoted by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and agreed by the Minister at that time and the Department. We had a debate in the House, and the House also agreed it. This matter has been under discussion for several years, and it is a great disappointment to me that it is not being progressed by the Executive.

Everyone agrees that the existing process is inadequate and does not provide direct read-across. It is well past its sell-by date and needs to be clearer and more user-friendly. I ask the Minister, and I know that he will try to tell us, why such an issue, which cannot be contentious, has not been agreed by the Executive.

There are two motions before us. The Supply motion seeks the Assembly's approval of the Executive's final spending plans for the year 2013-14, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates that have been laid before the House. The second motion requires interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2014-15 in the form of a Vote on Account. The spring Supplementary Estimates are technical and tidy up the loose ends that have been dealt with in the three monitoring rounds.

I will now highlight concerns that I have with the current situation. First, in DARD, there is an easement of £1·2 million, which equates to £0·5 million for the forestry fund. I wonder why it was not possible to carry the work out as planned — that much needed and sought-after increase in forestry provision. Perhaps the Minister can advise me or perhaps he will need to check it out. Some £2·7 million was also declared as an easement in the Department of Education. Is that a capital realisation? If so, what happens to it? In the Department for Employment and Learning, an easement of £9·2 million is surrendered, which, I understand, relates to colleges' end-of-year flexibility. Is that money at risk or can it be ring-fenced for future use?

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment appears to have invested in one of its own headquarters during the year. It seems that, no time ago, we were talking about the very opposite: selling them off and leasing them back. However, it purchased the Invest Northern Ireland building for £17 million. I wonder whether the Minister can advise what the resultant savings in rent or lease payments will be. It also appears that £5 million came back through a reduced requirement from the economy and jobs initiative. Will that sum be reallocated or will it be available to the Department next year?

Turning to the Minister's own Department, perhaps he could comment on the easement of £1·6 million for staff costs. The Department for Social Development has shown a reduced requirement of £66·3 million, which appears to come from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Further clarification would be appreciated. Incidentally, some figures on the spring Supplementary Estimates for that Department have, strangely, not appeared in the volume dated February 2014. I do not know whether I got a specially printed edition, but there are some virtually blank pages.

The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister received both resource and capital allocations through in-year monitoring. The resource amounted to £10·625 million. I understand that £3·8 million was for the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry and £2 million was for Delivering Social Change. On what is the balance of some £5 million intended to be expended?

Finally, there appears to be £300,000 of annually managed expenditure for the current year in respect of the settlement for the Northern Ireland Civil Service pay claim. As that has not been resolved in full, will the balance be ring-fenced or protected in any way for the next financial year?

I am sure that the Minister will be able to answer my questions satisfactorily in due course. On that basis, I am prepared to support, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, the Supply resolution and the Vote on Account that are before the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The next item of business on the Order Paper is Question Time. I therefore propose by leave of the Assembly to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.54 pm.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Investment Fund

1. **Ms Boyle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. *(AQO 5482/11-15)*

2. **Mr Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the social investment fund. *(AQO 5483/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 2 together. I am pleased that we have announced, today, the first 23 successful projects that will be funded from the social investment fund (SIF). These projects amount to more than £33 million and are from across all nine zones. The list of 23 projects is available from the OFMDFM website, and officials will be communicating directly with the organisations involved. The remaining projects that are within the funding allocations are in the economic appraisal process, and, over the next few weeks and months, we anticipate making the remaining announcements, fully committing the £80 million fund.

Considerable work has been completed in developing the policy and structures, establishing the steering groups and supporting them in the development of their 10 projects for each zone and in getting those projects through the economic appraisal process to this final stage. Most of the individual projects have many elements within them, some with up to 15 different capital elements.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before calling Michaela Boyle for a supplementary question, I inform Members that question 5 has been withdrawn.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for the good news story that the 23 projects are to be announced. I am sure that the letters of offer will be going out to those other groups within the coming weeks. Given the delay in getting funding to those groups, will the Minister's office extend the timelines for spend to ensure that we get the maximum outcome from the projects?

Mr P Robinson: Yes, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am happy to do that. The deputy First Minister and I have consistently indicated that we are ring-fencing the £80 million. Each of the groups is aware of its allocation. I think that it is worthwhile pointing out at this stage that some of the zones will have fewer schemes in this tranche than others, which means that they will have more than others when it comes to the next and later allocations. So, rather than holding until we have the last schemes out from the appraisals being carried out by the economists, we now have a sufficient batch through the economists to make this announcement and, hopefully, in the next number of weeks, we will be able to make further announcements.

Mr Anderson: I thank the First Minister for his responses thus far. I, too, welcome the good news story that has been announced today. First Minister, of the projects announced, can you outline what projects will be funded in my area in the southern zone?

Mr P Robinson: All politics is local. I had looked at the southern zone for the withdrawn question. Six projects will be funded across the zone that incorporates the Upper Bann constituency. Amongst those are two revenue projects, which will operate on a zone-wide basis with the objective of increasing employment. They include £2·7 million for an employment work-it project. In addition, there will be four capital projects, three of which are cluster projects encompassing a number of smaller capital works. They will result in 11 capital schemes specifically within the Upper Bann constituency, including projects to sustain local infrastructure with £1·25 million.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister. I have been checking the home page of the departmental website and clicking on the social investment fund. I see no record of the announcement, as yet. So, I apologise if this scheme is across the line, but I am not aware whether it is. The First Minister will be aware that there was a proposal for a sports facility to be put in place in the Glen Estate in Newtownards in conjunction with work ongoing on developing Londonderry Primary School, which would have been a very cost-effective use of SIF funds. Can he estimate the number of similar missed opportunities if, indeed, this proposal is not going ahead?

Mr P Robinson: I assume that the first part of his question was, "Congratulations, we are delighted to see the announcement today and we hope that the scheme will build capacity in the local area and allow local people to determine what is best for their area". His criticism of the people in Strangford will no doubt be heard by them.

Mr Nesbitt: It is not a criticism.

Mr P Robinson: It is entirely a criticism of the people in Strangford. The Member is criticising his constituents. We did not choose the schemes. They are locally chosen schemes. They were chosen by the people in the zone after consultation around his constituency. If he is unhappy with that, rather than perhaps the constituents being unhappy with him, which might be the norm, he can now be unhappy with them. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Attwood: I will nail my colours to the mast and say that projects that are good and not so good will be funded, and we will see where all that goes over the next period. Given that the First Minister said that, over the next weeks and months, the funds will be fully committed, is he saying that all those funds will be committed and spent by the end of the 2015-16 financial year or will we have a situation where spend will go into the next mandate, which will see the £80 million spend in SIF go over a timeline of five or six years? Is that the outcome? Is that satisfactory?

Mr P Robinson: It is a bit sanctimonious of the Member to stand and say that, although we set up local organisations representative of the political parties here, including his own, we do not like what they believe is best for their area. That is effectively what the Member is saying. We may all have judgments about what might have been the best

or worst schemes in any area. That is why, rather than big government consistently taking the position that it will decide for people, this project allowed local communities to decide for themselves what was most needed in their area. His criticism is not a criticism of the scheme or the Executive but is a criticism of people in his local area.

As far as the timescales are concerned, the funding is allocated and ring-fenced. Some schemes, particularly the capital schemes, will take longer to roll out than others. The money is there for when the bills come forward, and the letters of offer will stipulate the conditions that apply.

We really cannot have it both ways. There has been criticism in the past about the delay, but you cannot criticise the delay on the one hand and then, on the other hand, fault us for putting robust procedures in place, which required more time. However, whether it is in this Programme for Government period, the comprehensive spending review period or it flows over into the next, the money is ring-fenced. As soon as the projects are completed, they will be funded.

Mr McCarthy: I welcome the announcement, even though we have not seen it, and I ask the First Minister not to keep me in suspense and to relay to the Assembly for my constituency of Strangford exactly the same details as he did for Upper Bann.

Mr P Robinson: I am delighted that I will not need to do so because I have just been informed that the SIF press release is now out. I hope that everybody does not vacate the Chamber at the one time to go and read it. It will be available. This is only the first tranche and the allocations are a minimum of £8 million for each zone. That money is ring-fenced for the zones, and, as soon as the remaining projects have been assessed by the economists, we will make those announcements and a letter of offer will go out.

EU Funding

3. **Mr Swann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the drawdown of EU competitive funding in relation to the Programme for Government target. *(AQO 5484/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: Departments continue to make good progress towards meeting the 20% target. In 2011-12, year one, we drew down £23 million, and in 2012-13, year two, we drew down £18·3 million. I can confirm, therefore, that at the halfway point in the full Budget period 2011-15, £41·3 million has been drawn down, which represents 64% of the target, so we are on track to realise the total drawdown of £64·4 million by the end of March 2015. Figures for 2013-14 will be available after the end of this financial year. We will continue to monitor progress through the all-party ministerial Budget review group, which I co-chair with the deputy First Minister, and the junior Ministers will also continue to encourage Departments to deliver against this target through the Barroso task force working group.

Mr Swann: I thank the First Minister for his answer. According to some research, the framework programme for research and technological development — framework programme 7 (FP7) — indicates that Northern Ireland has drawn down only €35·33 per head whereas, in the Republic, the same figure is €590·26 per head. What steps are being put in place to rectify that discrepancy?

Mr P Robinson: If I can decode the Member, I assume that he was saying congratulations. It is good that we are not only on target but ahead of it in meeting the PFG figure of a 20% increase. You do it in precisely the way in which the Executive have set it out. You encourage officials to stretch themselves and work with the arm's-length bodies and third parties to enhance the amount of drawdown. In addition to that, through our North/South ministerial meetings, we spoke with the Irish Government on ways in which we can collaborate with them to increase both our drawdowns. Do not forget that we have just come out of a period during which we were an objective 1 area. We did not have the same level of competing under objective 1 criteria. So we are on a learning curve and are already finding ourselves ahead of the targets that we set, and we will continue to stretch officials to meet even higher targets.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go nuige. I thank the First Minister for his answers until now. Specifically with regard to research and development, it is widely acknowledged and known that the drawdown under FP7 was quite pathetic by comparison with other EU regions. The Irish Government have set themselves a drawdown target of €1·25 billion for Horizon 2020. Has the First Minister any ambition, or has his Department set a target, for a drawdown of Horizon 2020 funding for research and innovation?

Mr P Robinson: Yes. The Irish Government's target takes them through to 2020. We are awaiting a paper from DETI setting our targets. I hope that they will be ambitious. If they are not, the Executive will want to look at them. We recognise that, in many cases, when talking about research and development, we usually mean collaboration between universities and business. We have two universities that are now working very hard. They have learned how to use the system and are submitting applications that will bear fruit in the future. Obviously, the Executive have an interest in that and will do everything they can to assist in collaborating with those who submit applications, but they are effectively led by those outside of government.

We want to increase significantly our drawdown from Europe. At the beginning, I thought that we were setting ourselves a very challenging target at 20%, and I am delighted that we are well on track to reach it. However, that does not mean that we stop as soon as we reach the 20% mark. We will continue to push officials, and those who are collaborating with third parties and arm's-length bodies, to increase the percentage. We are coming up to the halfway stage — the mid-term review — and we will look at the targets at that stage to see whether they should be increased.

2.15 pm

Jobs: Derry 2012-13

4. **Mr Eastwood** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the companies responsible for promoting 1,180 jobs in the Derry City Council area in 2012-13. *(AQO 5485/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I ask my colleague, Assembly Member and junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Job creation is one of the key priorities contained in the One Plan for the city's regeneration. I emphasise the very challenging economic climate during that period. The 1,180 jobs promoted in 2012-13 are from a range of sectors, including construction, information technology, engineering and hospitality. As the Member would expect, there are commercial sensitivities regarding the information for some of the organisations and smaller businesses in the city. I can provide the details of some of the organisations and sectors behind the job figures. They include 26 construction jobs during 2012-13 on the Ebrington site through H&J Martin. In addition, the Executive backed the UK City of Culture project, which resulted in 213 jobs. Invest Northern Ireland promoted 453 jobs, including 200 in the US-owned technology firm Allstate, 20 in Allpipe Engineering and 11 in MetaCompliance Limited. Firstsource announced the creation of 100 new posts. Sixty new IT jobs were announced by Kainos. The opening of the Premier Inn created 60 jobs, and the new Iceland store created 28 jobs.

Some of the jobs were promoted and created through small business start-ups and expansions. I think that we would all want to commend the small businesses that created jobs in the city during what was a very difficult economic period. Although the economy remains fragile, we are seeing some signs of improvement. There have been a number of very significant events, such as the announcement of 190 jobs in Fujitsu last December following the First Minister and deputy First Minister's visit to Japan.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the junior Minister for his answer. It is useful to have that information. Will he tell me why his Department refused to give me the information in response to my previous questions for written answer?

Mr Bell: I happen to have a copy of the answers that were given to your questions for written answer. If you want, I will read them out. They show that the sector stated that 1,180 jobs were promoted in 2012-13. That information was given to Mr Eastwood on 17 December 2013. Either he is not getting the letters or his researcher is not telling him. That was given to you in December 2013.

Mr G Robinson: Will the junior Minister give a commitment that the promotion of the north-west will continue to be a priority during investment visits by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, particularly in light of the very welcome result arising from the Japanese visit to the north-west?

Mr Bell: Yes. We are very much committed. I have undertaken a number of visits to the area, as have the First Minister and deputy First Minister. In the margins of some of those meetings, I met the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce, city council officials and economic development officials. I am very encouraged by the can-do attitude of many. The list of jobs includes 20 in Allpipe Engineering, 200 in Allstate Northern Ireland Limited, 10 in Fleming Agri-Products Limited, 11 in MetaCompliance Limited, Season Harvest Limited, Crystal Clear e-learning organisation, right down to childcare jobs in Muddy Puddles. It is very clear that, right across the range of sectors, there is an entrepreneurial spirit in the region. We will do all that we can to encourage that.

I notice that today's 'Financial Times' records that the monthly rate of Northern Ireland business activity is at one of its all-time highs. We want business activity to increase, and we want to see some of what appear to be green shoots of a recovery delivering for areas right across Northern Ireland: north, south, east and west.

Shale Gas

6. **Mr Wilson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have had any discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on bringing forward a cross-departmental policy on the exploitation of shale gas. *(AQO 5487/11-15)*

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

Mr Bell: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has had no discussions with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on bringing forward a cross-departmental policy on the exploitation of shale gas. DETI officials continue to liaise with Department of the Environment officials as part of the work of the shale gas regulators' forum. In addition, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment officials, in conjunction with the Department of the Environment's Planning Service and Northern Ireland Environment Agency officials, provided the Northern Ireland input to the 'Onshore oil and gas exploration in the UK: regulation and best practice' road map that was published by the Department of Energy and Climate Change on 17 December 2013.

Mr Wilson: Given the energy problems that we face in Northern Ireland, I am disappointed that the issue has not been addressed cross-departmentally. However, given that at least two Executive Ministers have vociferously opposed the exploitation of shale gas in Northern Ireland — something that the 42% of consumers who experience fuel poverty and the businesses that are struggling with fuel bills will find bewildering — can the junior Minister assure us that there will be serious discussions of energy policy, investment policy, planning policy, environmental policy and mineral exploitation policy to ensure that we do not lose out on the opportunity that has transformed the American economy and that has the potential to transform the Northern Ireland economy?

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Bell: When two Departments work together, that is cross-departmental.

It is important that we always follow the evidence and best practice. We all have a responsibility to be good stewards of the environment and the earth. As the Member rightly points out, we also have a responsibility to look at international best practice and at the successes in energy security, in jobs created and in businesses driving their energy costs down so that they can appear more competitive on the international market.

Ultimately, this will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, and I think that they will be judicious in looking at it. It will be important to take account of all the

implications if we proceed, and, equally, those if we do not proceed, with exploiting what is a natural resource. The Member made a number of important points towards the end of his question that should undoubtedly form part of the considerations. We should be aware of the best practice in the United States of America and look towards best practice in the rest of our United Kingdom. We have to weigh up the evidence in a judicious and measured way that allows us to be good stewards of the earth that we have inherited and want to pass on to our children and grandchildren. However, we also have to make sure that we do not miss out on the huge opportunities that are available to deliver jobs and investment to the people whom we serve.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the questions from the Member who spoke previously, will the junior Minister give us his assessment of whether climate change exists?

Mr Bell: I have a science degree, but it is in psychology, and some would debate whether that is a science or a social science.

In all seriousness, we have to look at what there is. We have to look at the best scientific evidence available and at shale gas exploration in other parts of the world. We all live in an international marketplace, and the cost of jobs and energy will affect the employment that we can provide for our young people and citizens.

There are obviously concerns around climate change, and we all have a responsibility to ensure that we pass on the environment in a responsible manner. We also have to take a balanced approach to looking at international best practice, international science, the difficulties that exist and, equally, the opportunities. If opportunities exist to significantly drive down energy costs and thereby allow our people to have more jobs and investment in their area and more money coming into the economy, we would be foolish to ignore that on an emotional basis. We have to look at it in a measured way — scientifically — and see what we can do for the next generation. We have examples. We can look to the rest of the United Kingdom and the United States, and where there is best practice and success, we would be very foolish not to copy the United States in driving down energy costs. The European Union is looking at energy security as one of its primary aims. We would do well not to ignore those concerns.

Mr Elliott: I thank the junior Minister so far. Have there been any agreements or even discussions about specific benefits, such as rate reductions, for communities where fracking would take place?

Mr Bell: As it stands, preparation for that possible unconventional oil and gas development in Northern Ireland and its regulation requires input from several Departments and other bodies. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has the initial role in the licensing and regulation of petroleum exploration. The Department of the Environment is the principal regulator for shale gas development through its environmental and planning responsibilities. The Department of Finance and Personnel, if it is a direct question in relation to rates, is the best Department to answer your specific question.

The shale gas regulators' forum was established in 2012. It was a joint initiative by the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister and the then Environment Minister, Alex Attwood MLA. It continues to keep under review the legislative and regulatory requirements needed to support possible development. Where possible, it will coordinate the functions and facilitate the cooperation. There has been no direct discussion as yet between the Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the development of shale gas in Northern Ireland. However, DETI officials are continuing to liaise with Department of the Environment officials as part of the work that lies within the shale gas regulators' forum. DETI officials, in conjunction with DOE Planning Service and Northern Ireland Environment Agency officials, are going to provide the Northern Ireland input to the 'Onshore oil and gas exploration in the UK: regulation and best practice' road map.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the junior Minister's statement that we should be looking at the evidence because all the evidence is that exploiting shale gas in Northern Ireland will not bring down gas prices. Where I do agree with Mr Wilson is that this is a cross-departmental issue. Does the junior Minister then agree that it is a bit anomalous that we have this situation whereby the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister can issue a licence without any consultation?

Mr Bell: I cannot agree with the Member. Anybody looking at this situation dispassionately and objectively could not concur in a reasonable way that all the evidence is against, because it quite clearly is not. I am not sure that that sort of zero-sum game that he proposes is in the best interests of the environment, energy security, fuel poverty or job creation.

The tenor of the Member's question indicates exactly why we need independent and objective evidence. Any progress that has been made scientifically has always been met with fears. I do not dismiss the fears, but they have to be forensically analysed. There is best practice in other parts of the world. We have to look at what occurs there. We are facing a situation in Europe of energy security.

All of us in this House want to pass on best practice in the environment and use best practice in making our decisions.

2.30 pm

What is necessary is a measured, judicious response that dispassionately analyses the evidence for science and asks first, how we can we pass on, as good stewards of the earth, a better environment and use best practice from what we inherited. And secondly, how can we ensure that we follow international best practice, including that which allows us to create jobs, make energy prices cheaper, bring investment into our areas and make our businesses competitive on the international stage?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Natural Gas: East Antrim

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what help they can give areas that are not receiving natural gas, including in East Antrim from Larne to the glens. *(AQT 681/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: I await his supplementary to hear his proposal. His question indicates the need to use natural resources where they are available. I therefore expect that he will be teaming up with the Member for East Antrim Mr Wilson in calling for the use of shale gas over the next number of weeks and months.

Of course, where facilities are available, they need to be used. In the Larne area, there is particular potential for the storage of gas and electricity — two fantastic opportunities are available — and I hope that that will be supported around the House. I look forward to hearing the Member's proposals for what should happen in his area.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for that. If we do nothing for areas that will not get natural gas, we will create areas that are black spots for industry. Nobody will come into them if we cannot compete with areas that can offer alternative energy. Doing nothing will also create more fuel poverty. That is why I am asking what can be done by the Assembly to look at that. Larne has the gas storage etc, but only last week one firm pulled out of gas storage under Larne Lough. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr P Robinson: I agree with the premise upon which the Member asked his question. There are risks, not just to business and commerce but to residential use if we have too high a reliance on very few sources of energy. There is a good cause, and I hope that the ETI Minister and Committee will consider whether they can assist in the further expansion of that project.

However, we cannot on the one hand say that it is essential that we exploit opportunities and on the other, with our eyes closed, say no and that we are not going even to look at the opportunities for shale gas.

Catherine Seeley: Intimidation

2. **Ms Ruane** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their view on the recent sectarian intimidation of the young schoolteacher from the Boys' Model School, Catherine Seeley. *(AQT 682/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: I have already spoken on this issue, and my view has not changed. I deplore intimidation in the workplace, no matter where it takes place or against whom it is directed. People should get jobs on merit and should be allowed to carry out their employment in a peaceful and dignified way.

Of course, there are issues about education; there are also issues about fairness of employment in education. However, none of those touches on the issue or justifies the intimidation of anybody in the workplace.

Ms Ruane: Gabhaim buíochas leis an gCéad-Aire as an bhfreagra sin. I thank the First Minister for that answer. When I was in the Department, that was one of the schools for which we approved a newbuild. I welcome the work that is going on in the school and particularly pay tribute to the young boys who stood up and were counted in tackling sectarianism.

As a supplementary question, I will say that there have been other attacks, including one at Ahoghill GAA club and in Bangor, so would the Minister like to give his view on those?

Mr P Robinson: I think that it is right that we publicly take the opportunity to express our condemnation of any attack on persons and property. We have had a long history of people trying to threaten and to intimidate. Indeed, a schoolteacher in Newry was killed over past years. There is a long history, which has to be deplored, of people trying to intimidate and impose their way on others. Let there be a very clear message from this Executive that intimidation, whether by verbal means, threat of violence or by actual violence, is to be deplored — past, present and future.

Ballykelly: Expressions of Interest

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether there has been any indication of the potential of the Ballykelly site, given that the closing date for expressions of interest has passed. *(AQT 683/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I took the trouble to go down to that site, and I have to say that we were both substantially impressed by the opportunities that we saw in the facility. We therefore gave a direction that the site was not to be sold, because it was to be for a use that would not have developed it to the potential that the area would have wanted. I think that, as a result, we have been vindicated by the level of expressions of interest.

Over 40 expressions of interest have been created. They include those from people who want to employ only one or two people on the site to those who want to employ thousands. In terms of finance, they range from those who want to rent the site to those who want to buy the site, some at very significant amounts of money, to some who want joint ventures and some who want trusts and community organisations to have a role. So, those 40-plus expressions will have to be considered very carefully to see whether more than one of those uses could be on the site at the same time, because some of them are requesting use of only part of the site. I think that a massive opportunity for the north-west area could be drawn out of the site, and it could become a regional hub with very significant employment opportunities.

Mr Campbell: I welcome the First Minister's very positive announcement of the number of expressions of interest. Can he outline what criteria will be used to maximise the site's very positive potential?

On the subject of positivity, I also welcome the positive approach that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have taken to the site. It is much more positive than walking around the corridors of Stormont counting the number of people who do and do not speak to you, which makes you look and sound like a real loser.

Mr P Robinson: I will respond to the first part of that question, if the Member is content. I assume that he is recognising that decisions will have to be taken on the balance between whether we look at that site as one to create jobs, irrespective of what the income generation might be to government, or whether we want to maximise the amount of money that we get for the sale of the site. I think that the balance that we have had in other sites is in recognising their local importance, recognising the potential that they can have and seeing how they can change a local area's economy. I am pretty sure that, when it comes to looking at the criteria, a major factor will be how we can develop that site to be an economic hub for the area as a whole.

Child Poverty Act: Targets

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether we will achieve the targets in the Child Poverty Act. *(AQT 684/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: I think that all that any Executive can do is continue to push as hard as they can. Obviously, the targets became much more difficult because of the economic recession. Targets for child poverty are related directly to the ability of their parents and that very much comes down to whether people can get jobs. It is obviously a much more challenging factor as result of the increase in unemployment since the days when we had 4% unemployment in Northern Ireland. However, as my colleague indicated earlier, the trends in the economy are with us. It is very clear that unemployment is coming down. The claimant count is coming down. That all indicates that more people are getting into work. Prosperity will, therefore, increase.

I have some problems with child poverty statistics in that we base them on median incomes and, therefore, will never get rid of child poverty. Poverty will always be with us if we base it on that. In fact, if you use that criterion, poverty in Northern Ireland is the same as poverty in India. Anybody who has seen the slums in India that the deputy First Minister and I saw on a recent visit will know that we are dealing with two entirely different situations. We are not dealing with world-recognised criteria for poverty. We are operating on the basis of relative poverty in Northern Ireland.

Mr F McCann: I thank the First Minister for his answer. In light of the findings in the OFMDFM-commissioned Institute for Fiscal Studies report, does he accept that the Delivering Social Change agenda needs to be mainstreamed in all Departments if we are really going to tackle child poverty?

Mr P Robinson: I am very proud of the Delivering Social Change agenda and the steps that we have taken in it. It requires the participation of all Departments to achieve its outcomes. In the Delivering Social Change agenda, we had a number of initiatives. When we bring out new proposals, they very often require new infrastructure to be put in place within the government system. That can take some time. I have high hopes that, as we move forward, the Delivering Social Change programme will flow out and we can build upon it.

The Member and I are in total agreement that, when young people grow up in this society, they should all have an equal opportunity to be able to progress and move forward. It must be in the interests of the Assembly to do everything that it can to use that human resource to the best possible advantage and to make sure that every child has the same opportunity.

North/South Interconnector

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given Enda Kenny's recent announcement about a formal application for a North/South interconnector, to confirm whether their office has received representation from groups opposed to it and to update the House on their thinking about the proposal. *(AQT 685/11-15)*

Mr P Robinson: I remember discussing the issue with the Taoiseach along with the deputy First Minister. My understanding was that most of the problem was in the South rather than in Northern Ireland and that most of it related to whether there was overhead or underground cabling. I will write to the Member to clarify whether the Department has received any objections. All that I can say to him is that I am not aware of them.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the conflicting views on the issue, does the Minister believe that there should be a proper assessment of whether or not the project is needed to address the energy issues on the island?

Mr P Robinson: I do not think that there is any question about the need for the project. That was the one thing that we were all very clear about. How it is implemented is an issue of cost. I understand that the cost of underground cabling would be so high that it would make the project unfeasible. From that point of view, it is very clear what needs to happen. I recognise the rights of people to object because not everybody wants to have the kind of overhead cables that would be necessary going through their land or close to their property. However, as I understand it, it is absolutely essential that the project goes ahead.

Childcare Strategy

6. **Mr D Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the childcare strategy. *(AQT 686/11-15)*

2.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I have already made our statement announcing the childcare strategy. Perhaps the Member should go along with the Member for Strangford and visit the OFMDFM website. It is a project that delivers thousands of places in Northern Ireland, which, I hope, will be welcomed throughout the community. I am not sure whether the Member had any specific question or whether he doubted that we had the project under way, but it is now up and running.

Employment and Learning

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. We will start with the listed questions to the Minister for Employment and Learning. Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Economic Inactivity

1. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how the level of economic inactivity locally compares with other regions of the UK. *(AQO 5497/11-15)*

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I was going to group questions 1 and 5 together and ask for an additional minute for the answer.

The current rate of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, measured as a percentage of the 16-64 working-age population, for the third quarter of 2013 is 27·1%. This equates to more than 315,000 people who are neither in work nor actively seeking employment. It compares with 21·5% in England, 20·9% in Scotland, 23% in Wales and a UK average of 21·7%. Within the overall rate for Northern

Ireland, 27% are students, 28·4% are categorised as long-term sick and disabled, 25·7% are categorised as having family commitments, 12·4% are early retirees and the remaining 6·5% are categorised as "other", for reasons such as a short-term illness or injury.

For several decades, Northern Ireland has consistently had the highest rate of economic inactivity in the UK. Economic inactivity has not historically been influenced by economic cycles and it is right that we now focus on tackling this long-term problem in a progressive and sustainable way. It is for that reason that the Northern Ireland Executive have made the unprecedented commitment to develop a strategy to tackle the difficult issue of economic inactivity. My Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment have jointly developed a strategic framework document in conjunction with several other key Departments and have recently launched a 12-week public consultation exercise on the proposals, which will inform the development of the final strategy. This process will be complemented by a series of forthcoming public consultation events across Northern Ireland.

The final strategy will be the only dedicated government strategy in the UK that is targeted specifically at addressing the major socio-economic issue of economic inactivity. I should emphasise that this is a Northern Ireland Executive initiative; it is not about welfare reform, nor is it being driven from Westminster or elsewhere. It is a local initiative that is focused on finding real solutions to help people who are inactive because of health issues or caring responsibilities to go back to work when they are ready. Students or early retirees are not a focus for the strategy.

Mr Wilson: This is not a new issue. It is one that has persisted over 30 years through boom periods and periods of depression, so it is clearly nothing to do with a lack of jobs. Even during boom times, the issue was not addressed.

Given that it has been a long-term issue and it is clear that there is a whole group of people who either cannot work or will not work, is it time not for more consultation but for some action? Will the Minister tell us what specific proposals he has at the moment for contemplation that will address this problem and get these resources back into productive work in the economy?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question and his interest in the matter. He is right to say that this has been a major long-term issue for our economy. It is a structural issue that we have to come to terms with. As a former Minister, the Member will appreciate the reality that we have to go through a public consultation on these issues. However, it is to the Executive's credit — and this was an Executive-wide initiative that was part of the Programme for Government — that they have realised that they have to address this issue. I stress that we are the only part of the UK that is currently developing such a strategy.

This will be a 10-year commitment across a number of Departments. We will need to look for additional resources in due course to make this a reality, but we hope to take the initiative forward through what we call a series of competitive pilots. We want to see proposals coming forward from the community and organisations so that they can put in place a number of different initiatives, whether on a Northern Ireland-wide or a local basis, test what is effective or less effective, and seek to scale those initiatives up across the board. That is an innovative way to address the issue, and there is a desire for a lot more innovation in Northern Ireland under devolution.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. How does he intend to develop measures and tackle areas of high unemployment such as in my constituency of West Belfast.

Dr Farry: The Member is right to say that inactivity levels will vary across Northern Ireland, and there will be parts of our region where there are considerable concentrations. Economic inactivity is a different category to unemployment, although there will be a correlation between patterns of higher unemployment levels and levels of inactivity. Again, I stress that it is about the community coming forward with innovative projects. We will, no doubt, see a greater volume of those from areas where levels of inactivity are most acute. On the back of the consultation, some organisations in the community are already beginning to give thought to different types of initiatives that could be taken forward.

Mr P Ramsey: It is most welcome that the Minister is coming forward with his strategy. Following on from Fra McCann's question, there is clearly historical economic inactivity in Northern Ireland, but there is much more cultural historical economic inactivity in certain areas, the north-west being one in particular. How will the Minister encourage and motivate to try to ensure that business or community groups come forward with realistic programmes to make a difference?

Dr Farry: The Member's question is on a similar theme to the previous question. There are some local angles in the north-west, and I can tell the Member that a specific public consultation event will be held in Derry on 13 March. That will complement events that are being held in Dungannon on 19 March and in Belfast on 26 March. I encourage Members and, indeed, any of their constituents and organisations in their areas also to attend those events. We will want to talk to those organisations to try to encourage proposals. We also have a skills and employability adviser in the north-west, and part of her role can be extended to encourage organisations to come up with ideas. We have the infrastructure in place to try to encourage proposals, particularly from the most vulnerable areas such as the north-west.

Mrs Overend: Recent labour figures show that the over-45s are more likely to be economically inactive here than in the rest of the UK. Does the Minister intend to take specific steps to address that trend?

Dr Farry: In spring 2013, we published a baseline study that set out the overall context behind our economic inactivity figures. There is a whole host of variations compared with the situation elsewhere in these islands that relates to our particular circumstances. I stress that, to make a difference, we need to relate the type of projects that we take forward as part of the strategy to the particular characteristics of the economically inactive population. Hopefully, that fits in with the thrust of the Member's question.

Mivan: Employee Assistance

2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance his Department is providing for the employees of Mivan, Antrim. *(AQO 5498/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I understand the deep impact of the loss of Mivan on its employees. My Department has been proactive in determining what steps we can take to assist employees facing redundancy to provide them with advice and guidance regarding upskilling and alternative employment. To this end, my officials have worked closely with Mivan since the initial redundancy statement was announced.

My Department's redundancy advice service has already started to deliver a tailored package of support to Mivan staff. It is working in partnership with a range of organisations, including the Social Security Agency, Antrim Enterprise Agency, Citizens Advice and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, to deliver the redundancy clinics, which took place at the Mivan offices on 22 and 29 January. Through this service, advice has been provided on alternative job opportunities and mentoring, access to training courses, entrepreneurship and careers, as well as advice on benefits and taxation. The service was delivered free of charge to all employees facing redundancy. My officials have received expressions of interest from a number of companies about exploring the possibility of redeploying affected staff. There has been liaison with Invest Northern Ireland and Mivan to ensure that those opportunities are brought to the attention of the redundant workers.

Finally, my staff in the jobs and benefits offices will continue to engage closely with those workers affected by redundancy. This is an approach that we have already successfully deployed to address other significant redundancies. Notwithstanding the job losses in relation to Mivan, our economy is growing and unemployment is falling. The prospects for our economy are strong.

Mr Girvan: I appreciate the help and assistance that has been given, albeit that quite a bit of it is looking at redundancy and access to unemployment benefits. I wonder what contact has been made on an interdepartmental basis between DETI and his Department to try to move forward with new initiatives to deal with these types of problems when they arise.

Dr Farry: The Member is right to highlight the importance of Departments working in collaboration around this issue. I believe that that has been the case in relation to Mivan and similar tragic situations that have arisen in the past number of years.

Obviously, Invest Northern Ireland is an important partner in this regard in terms of looking to other opportunities that may arise. We have the potential in relation to MGM, though that situation still has to be clarified with regard to any opportunities that may arise for existing staff to be able to apply for jobs that may well be created. We can also look to the resource of our local training colleges. If the demand is there, we can put in place some specific courses to help with retraining opportunities.

Often, when we come to these situations, we find staff who are very highly skilled. The difficulty has been that, in the past, they might not have gone through the process of having their skills formally accredited. Often, what is required is actually putting in place those procedures to get people the qualifications to allow them to sell themselves to other companies and employers. That is something that we are more than happy to look at.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, thank the Minister for the help with the Mivan employees. When he is talking to other Departments, has he looked at helping DSD's jobs and benefits and other organisations to have more resources to actually be able to help the people? That is one of the difficulties that has arisen.

Dr Farry: I cannot comment directly about the resourcing available through the Social Security Agency, but I am aware that my employment service's current resource base is overstretched. We are essentially resourced to deal with a jobseeker's allowance (JSA) live load of around 35,000. The claimant count is falling, but it is still just below the 60,000 mark. So there is considerable pressure on the front line, and I pay tribute to the work of our staff in helping people by giving them advice and signposting them to other opportunities. However, as and when these situations arise — and, hopefully, they will be a lot fewer over the coming months and years — we will be quite clear in our commitment to follow through and to put in place the type of redundancy service that we have put in place in relation to Mivan.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister have any concern about how the Mivan situation was handled to result in the fact that none of the workers have any transfer of undertakings and protection of employment (TUPE) rights, because the redundancies were allowed to fall into place, and then, immediately, a new company came in to take over the premises and the buildings but gave no TUPE rights to the existing workers? Is that not an abuse of the arrangements that should be in place?

Dr Farry: We have had a public consultation on TUPE arrangements over the past number of months, and it is my intention to bring forward a paper to the Executive in relation to the future of TUPE in Northern Ireland. That is very much in line with a similar exercise — and, indeed, we were part of the consultation that was conducted — by the Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) for Great Britain.

I understand the Member's concerns, but, if there are concerns around how TUPE is being applied in any particular situation, those who are affected have rights and the ability to challenge decisions that have been made.

I cannot take a view on that particular situation, except to clarify once again that people do have recourse in the event that they feel that TUPE has not been properly applied.

3.00 pm

DEL: Transfer of Functions

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to facilitate the early transfer of his Department's functions to match training provision and apprenticeships to job opportunities to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. *(AQO 5499/11-15)*

Dr Farry: Matching training to jobs is addressed through a number of measures. In January, I made a statement to the Assembly to announce the findings of the review of apprenticeships. The review's interim report sets out the

blueprint for Northern Ireland's future apprenticeship programme. It is a model that puts employers at its very heart and matches better supply with demand. In parallel with that review, a review of youth training is being undertaken to ensure that provision meets the future needs of business by developing a highly skilled workforce.

This year, the careers review will consider how young people are encouraged to align their education, training and apprenticeships with current and future job opportunities. I am keen to expand higher and further education places in Northern Ireland and, to date, have been able to negotiate funding for an additional 1,350 places. All the additional places are in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subject areas, as I believe that they are key for the future of our economy. My Department has worked closely with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in the production and implementation of the Success through STEM strategy. I also chair a series of working groups on ICT, advanced manufacturing and food and drink manufacturing. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is also represented on those bodies.

The Executive are committed to an overarching review of Departments, and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have indicated that they are content to await the outcome of that review before taking any decisions on the future of the Department for Employment and Learning. That may well see a consolidation of economic functions across a number of current Departments within a new Department of the economy.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his answer, but, if we can cut to the chase, will he accept that a Department responsible for training that has resulted in 5,000 unemployed teachers simply cannot continue to manage teacher training?

Dr Farry: I am afraid that the Member is ill informed. My Department does not set the teacher training numbers. We simply resource the teacher training colleges. The number of teachers allocated to teacher training is solely a matter for the Minister of Education.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his answers. In my role as an MLA, I, like many others, regularly engage with businesspeople, and the message that I hear from them, particularly those in medium-sized businesses, is that they have a large number of positions that they want to fill. I then speak to highly skilled, highly qualified people who cannot find a job. How does the Minister propose to bring the two problems together to find a solution?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for putting his finger on what is a constant source of frustration in our economy and, indeed, many other economies around the world. There is a certain mismatch between supply and demand, and that happens also in areas in which we are investing in training and upskilling. We need to be much more efficient if we are to ensure that our economy grows to its maximum and our young people find themselves lucrative careers and sustainable jobs. We can be much more efficient in what we are doing to address that particular problem through a number of measures that I outlined in the principal answer. In particular, I highlight the review of apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are perhaps the purest way of matching training to employers' needs. As the Member knows, we are out to consultation on the findings of the review of apprenticeships.

We are also working on the review of youth training, which will support interventions at that level. In particular, we need to look at what we do in the universities and encourage people to study subject areas that are more likely to lead to secure jobs in the economy. That is why we place such a focus on STEM subjects. I am pleased that we are making progress in all those areas, but we need to keep the work going.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he give us an update on the review of apprenticeships and the role that he sees them playing in upskilling the Northern Ireland workforce and leading to high-value, sustainable employment?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. As the Member will know, last month, we announced the outcome of the review of apprenticeships, which is out for public consultation. I am pleased with the response that we have received to date from a number of stakeholders. This provides a very exciting new platform for training in Northern Ireland and should radically transform our skills infrastructure. We are taking forward a number of other initiatives on apprenticeships while the public consultation is under way. They include work on the funding model to ensure that we are gathering the resources available to us to have the greatest impact on delivering results.

We need to work with small businesses in particular. As Members know, a disproportionate share of our economy is linked to small businesses, and it is important that we try to address the barriers to recruiting apprentices that they may face in the future. We are developing a number of different models to see how we can provide a mechanism to allow small businesses to engage with our model. It is a problem that is uniform across the world. However, hopefully, with good innovation under devolution, we can find the means to crack it. Bear in mind that it is a new start for Northern Ireland. We are changing the apprenticeships model from a level 2 and level 3 intervention to level 3 up to level 8 and expanding it to a range of new occupations. I strongly recommend it as a major plank of our future skills offerings.

FE Means Business

4. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the role that regional colleges will have in the delivery of his Department's Further Education Means Business strategy. *(AQO 5500/11-15)*

Dr Farry: Our further education sector is a major asset to the Northern Ireland economy and wider society. The Department's role is to set the strategic direction for the sector in Northern Ireland, fund colleges to deliver my strategic priorities for the sector and monitor the extent to which colleges meet the targets they are set. Following a major process of evidence gathering and consultation, the current Further Education Means Business strategy was agreed in 2004. The strategy confirmed the role of further education as being to strengthen economic and workforce development, to enhance social cohesion and to advance individuals' skills and learning. The objectives of FE Means Business included raising the skills and qualification levels to meet the needs of employers and the wider economy; ensuring that colleges provided an economically focused

curriculum; providing support to employers; developing flexible approaches to learning; and ensuring quality in keeping with best international practice. The main achievements of the strategy include the rationalisation from 16 to six colleges, increased enrolments, increased levels of learner achievement, which are now at 87%, and strong support to employers.

We are committed to a new strategy for further education. That is at the early stages of development. However, building on successes in recent years, the vision is that colleges will have a detailed understanding of the changing needs of employers and learners, that they will develop and deliver services and curriculum in an innovative and inspirational manner, and that they will have a strong ethos of self-improvement. I can confirm that the Department will work closely with the further education sector and other key stakeholders in the development and implementation of the new strategy.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he tell the House how he sees the strategy being different in delivery from all the other strategies already in the system?

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. It is important that the House understands the full remit of my Department and the areas that we cover. The most important strategy that we have is the skills strategy, which was agreed by the Executive in 2011 and sets the overall skills requirements that we need to meet in Northern Ireland over the course of the decade. That will be supported by a number of different strategies. We have, for example, the higher education strategy, which looks at higher education issues; we are working on a review of apprenticeships; and we have a widening participation strategy to ensure that we bring more people into higher and further education. Within that spectrum of strategies, FE Means Business, which is our further education strategy, is now 10 years old, and it is time that we refresh and renew that and look to put in place a strategy that will take us forward over the next 10 years. I know that the Member is very aware of the potential of further education, and I stress that it is a sector that is likely to grow over the next 10 years. As we look to develop our new model of apprenticeships and increase the number of people taking foundation degrees, the role of further education will be critical in ensuring that we match the needs of employers with the areas in which we are investing in training and education.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister state whether the regional colleges have enough resources and the ability to provide STEM courses within the remit of the strategy that he outlined?

Dr Farry: It is probably fair to say that the simple answer is no. At present, all six colleges are stretched in what they are doing, and what we can do to assist them is very much foremost in my mind. In the current round of efficiency savings during this CSR period, the colleges were less affected than other aspects of my Department's work and, indeed, than other aspects of the public sector. Nonetheless, they are in a challenging situation. As we look to the future of the economy, and bearing in mind what I just said to Mr Buchanan, we will need to be mindful of making sure that we put in place adequate resources for the FE sector to ensure that we all live up to our potential and seize opportunities for the future.

Mr Beggs: What engagement has the Minister had with small and medium-sized enterprises on FE Means Business, particularly directly or through intermediary bodies such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)? How will he assure businesses that training will be provided locally and therefore minimise the associated pressures on staff time and travel?

Dr Farry: First of all, FE Means Business was developed back in 2004, so I cannot comment specifically on the nature of engagement with the small and medium-sized enterprises sector, although there is no doubt that it was considerable. What I can answer for is what happens today. We work very closely with the representative bodies of small and medium-sized enterprises, including FSB and the Northern Ireland Retail Trade Association, to take forward and evolve strategies and action plans. They have been represented, for example, in our review of apprenticeships and in the review of youth training. Indeed, as we take forward our review of the FE strategy, they will be closely involved.

Beyond the formal process of devising policy, there is ongoing engagement with FSB, particularly on further education. Indeed, it is more than happy to sponsor different types of awards. I know that a number of Members have been to some of those events and have seen at first hand how closely small and medium-sized enterprises engage with colleges. We are, in fact, trying to encourage the FE sector to be the first point of call for advice for businesses, particularly on some research and development activity.

Employment: People with Learning Disabilities

6. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the employment opportunities available to people with learning disabilities who are leaving school at 16 years old. *(AQO 5502/11-15)*

Dr Farry: My Department provides a range of programmes and services that help young people with learning disabilities to move towards their employment goals. The provision covers support in adult education, careers advice and guidance, training and skills development and employment support.

Through its provision of careers advice and guidance, the Careers Service is the first point of contact for young people. In particular, during transition planning meetings, advisers support the young person and their parents or guardians by offering independent advice on their options, such as training or supported employment opportunities.

My Department's disability employment service delivers tailored support to people with learning disabilities through a range of specialist services and programmes to help them to achieve their employment goals. That provision can include local disability organisations, some of which specialise in support for people with learning disabilities.

The Department is developing a new disability employment strategy in conjunction with the local disability sector. An emerging theme is a renewed focus on young people with disabilities and the implementation of a more employment-focused transition service. The Department's adult education and skills provision gives people with learning disabilities additional support to help them to overcome

specific difficulties. That can include more flexible entry criteria, specialist equipment, specialist support providers or additional financial help.

Under the European social fund programme and the Pathways to Success strategy, a number of projects are being delivered to help people to achieve sustainable employment. The projects support a range of individuals who experience disadvantage, including those with learning disabilities.

Finally, my Department works with the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, which is a regional cross-sector strategic group of key agencies from health, social services, education, policing, housing and the voluntary and community sectors. The partnership has a transitions subgroup, which is addressing the issue of transitions across front line providers.

3.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Apologies, Mr Hilditch; we are out of time. We must now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Queen's University/Stranmillis: Proposed Merger

1. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for the current status of Queen's University and Stranmillis, following his statement to the House on 13 May 2013 in which he effectively brought the proposed merger to an end. *(AQT 691/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for his question. He will appreciate that we are going through a two-stage review of the future training infrastructure in Northern Ireland. We are in phase 2, and the panel that has been appointed is working with the different providers. We have received a number of submissions from a range of different individuals and organisations. The issue of the specific merger between Queen's and Stranmillis is something that I inherited when I assumed office in May 2011. It quickly became clear that there was not the necessary support in the Assembly to take forward that merger and it was essentially subsumed into the two-stage review of teacher training. The official position of the Department is that we would still like to see the merger proceed. Stranmillis's response to the two-stage review has superseded its support for the merger, though, of course, it remains one of many scenarios that may emerge on the back of the report that I am expecting in the spring of this year.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his answer but I am still not quite sure whether he is in support or not. He said that there was not sufficient support in the Assembly for him to proceed down that road. Bearing that in mind, I suspect — maybe he does not — that the position is as it was then, which is that there is still not the support for that. Do you intend to resurrect the merger or what line do you intend to take, bearing in mind that you said that you felt that there was not the support for it?

Dr Farry: In November 2011, I made it clear that the Department and I believed that the merger had significant merit and should proceed, but there was not the support to take it forward. I respect that, and Members are entitled to have their opinion. However, we are now looking at a much bigger issue than simply the future of Queen's and Stranmillis as it pertains to teacher education, and we need to have a holistic view of the entire teacher training infrastructure. That is what the current review is seeking to do. It is possible to imagine a whole range of different options that may emerge from the current expert panel that is taking forward the issue. I cannot predict whether it will recommend the Queen's/Stranmillis issue on a stand-alone basis or as part of a wider series of options or, indeed, as a subsection of a much bigger option. That remains an open question. We will see where we go on the back of that report. However, I will be taking forward discussions with the different providers during the later half of this year, and that will be a discussion without prejudice to whatever particular scenarios we wish to discuss.

Students: ROI Costs

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning the current cost to his Department of providing free education for students from the Republic of Ireland in our further education colleges. *(AQT 692/11-15)*

Dr Farry: If the Member can be patient for two seconds, I will hop forward to question 15, which we did not quite get to as part of the formal session, and give him the precise figure.

For the 2012-13 academic year, the figure was £7,120,887. Hopefully, that is accurate enough for the Member.

Mr Allister: Can the Minister give any indication to the House of whether there have been or will be any efforts to recoup any of that money from the Republic of Ireland, bearing in mind that there is also a figure of £4 million or £5 million for the cost of educating Republic of Ireland students in our universities?

Dr Farry: The Member is quite right to draw attention to the issue. It is important that we encourage a natural flow of students in both directions on the island of Ireland. At present, the flow is predominantly in one direction, which is from South to North, and it is an issue in further and higher education. As a former Member of the European Parliament, the Member knows well that we do not have any legal basis on which to seek to recoup these funds from the Government of the Republic of Ireland —

Mr Allister: That is why we would be better off out.

Dr Farry: I am not sure whether the Member gets a third go. Let me continue with the answer I was giving.

We have to bear in mind that there are some underlying causes as to why we have these discrepancies. A 2011 report on higher education from the Irish Business and Employers Confederation and the Confederation of British Industry sets out the issue well and points to a number of barriers that are being addressed, particularly in relation to the recognition of A-level grades in Northern Ireland. We have now seen some very small but welcome progress, with the announcement, last week, by Trinity and Dublin City University. We want to see that across the board. We need to do more in careers advice and ensuring that people are aware of the opportunities to study in the Republic of Ireland.

When we look at further education, we see that there is a particular problem in the north-west of the island. This reflects a lack of equivalent level 2 and level 3 provision in County Donegal. Around three quarters of the flow

is in that corridor. We are having discussions with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on how we can encourage them to better invest in their vocational training opportunities in that geographical area, which, in the long term, will address the issue. It is also an issue that has been raised as part of the North/South Ministerial Council.

May I stress for the benefit of Mr Allister that we benefit massively from Northern Ireland's membership of the European Union. The sums we receive by way of the European social fund, the European regional development fund and Horizon 2020 dwarf any distortion that we happen to see, as bad as it may be, in the medium term in relation to student flows.

North West Regional College: Industrial Relations

3. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he realises or finds it acceptable that the North West Regional College improvement team has not met, given that it is almost 12 months since the Harry McConnell report on industrial relations. *(AQT 693/11-15)*

Dr Farry: In some ways, I am pleased that Mr Ramsey has raised the issue of the North West Regional College, as it is becoming a source of frustration to me that we have not seen the action plan being fully implemented. I feel obliged to draw attention to where I believe the main source of the problem lies at this stage: the actions of the regional branch of the University and College Union (UCU), which, despite numerous attempts and offers, has not formally engaged with staff in taking forward the action plan.

I stress that the North West Regional College should be looking to have a bright new future. There have been serious industrial relations problems in the past, and they have been documented well in the McConnell report. It is important that we move past those as quickly as we can because, as the Member knows, the economy in the north-west needs particular revitalisation, and the college has to be a key partner in that regard. It is my concern that, the longer this goes on, it will become a distraction from what should be the real job for the college, which is to support young people and employers in the north-west.

Mr P Ramsey: It is a subject that I was hoping not to raise again, but I accept some of the points that the Minister makes in going forward. The Minister's information from the board of governors is one-way traffic. The board unilaterally changed the college's action plan without any discussion with any other membership body or trade union movement within the college. Does the Minister find that acceptable? Is it not the case that he should be intervening once again in the college's industrial relations?

Dr Farry: It is important to stress that it is the job of the governing body to run the college. I have confidence in the governing body, and, as the Member knows, we are going through a transition in relation to the chairperson. I am meeting the acting chairperson this Friday to discuss the college and, in particular, the issues that the Member will be aware of. I reiterate this: fundamental to moving the college forward is the local UCU branch engaging with the staff on the delivery and implementation of the action plan.

Teacher Training: Catholic Certificate in Religious Education

4. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given his role in teacher training, to outline his stance on the requirement that teachers can be appointed to Catholic maintained nursery or primary schools only if they hold a Catholic certificate in RE, bearing in mind the unfortunate situation with the teacher Catherine Seeley and the Boys' Model School, which highlights the reality that, if we are moving to a more normal society, there will be new "norms", including members of one traditional community becoming embedded in another. *(AQT 694/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I am grateful to the Member for her question. It barely relates to my direct responsibilities as Minister because the matters that she outlined are primarily responsibilities of the Minister of Education. I want a situation in which any teacher who is professionally trained is capable of teaching in any type of school, irrespective of his or her background, whether that be political, religious, gender, sexual orientation, disability or any other type. That should be the norm in a healthy modern society.

As part of the current review of teacher training, I want to look at some of the entry requirements to the colleges and, in particular, to try to address the anomaly that St Mary's is not using the UCAS system for admitting its students whereas Stranmillis and the others are. That almost gives some students a second bite at the cherry in trying to access a precious teacher training place. We also need to look at the anomalies in fair access to the certificate in religious education. There is a wider issue of whether that should be a requirement for employment, which should be considered by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister alongside the Minister of Education as an equality issue. However, under my responsibilities, I want a level playing field in access to the certificate.

Mrs Overend: In April 2013, the Assembly passed an Ulster Unionist motion calling for an end to an exception to fair employment law that allowed discrimination on the grounds of religious belief when appointing teachers. The Minister mentioned some of the ideals that he wants to see. What progress does he hope to achieve before the end of his term?

Dr Farry: I reiterate my personal support for that motion, and hopefully that will come to fruition through other channels in the near future. As part of stage 2 of the review of the teacher training infrastructure, I want those equality issues to be addressed. We have acknowledged them in the past, and they are ongoing issues of concern. Indeed, there is a sense of grievance, and I believe that they need to be overcome in some manner. I will put them on the agenda for our future discussions with the different providers.

Welding: ISO 9606-1

5. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he is aware of the lack of provision to train or to upskill welders to European standards, such as the ISO 9606-1 approval system for coded welders, to meet the growing opportunities for welding jobs offshore and in Northern Ireland. *(AQT 695/11-15)*

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I appreciate the concern that has been voiced about some perceived opportunities that have been missed in the past number of months. We are moving to a situation in which our training programmes are much more demand-led than has been the case in the past, and, in particular, our reviews of apprenticeships and youth training are designed to ensure a much purer form of demand-led provision. We may see requirements for more investment in particular welding skills. Within welding, there will be different standards that people can be trained to and different situations, particularly offshore welding, where different types of training are required. I give the Member a commitment that our infrastructure will respond to the needs of industry, and we are happy to have further discussions with him or, indeed, anyone who wants a meeting to raise his or her concerns so that we can work through a way to address that.

I would signpost anyone to our skills solutions service as the first point of call for having a discussion at employer level.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14 and Vote on Account 2014-15

Debate resumed on motion:

> *That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £15,530,883,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,606,564,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(c) and 2(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14 that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

> *That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,062,352,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £7,545,788,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2014-15 document that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Environment Committee's views on the motion.

In comparison with other Departments, DOE's budget is one of the smallest, but the services that it provides are no less important to the people who live in this region. The Committee gave its support to DOE's proposed budget at the start of the year and will welcome the net increase in resources to be allocated to it.

Of particular interest to the Committee is the significant increase in funding available to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). During the past year, the agency has faced increased pressure on its resources from a number of directions. The Committee heard recently from the Department of its role in providing support and guidance to the management trusts, which administer areas of outstanding natural beauty, as well as addressing poor water quality in our rivers and lakes.

NIEA also has a vital role to play in fighting environmental crime. The Committee agreed that it was appropriate for staffing levels to be increased in the environmental crime unit to deal with illegal waste, particularly when it is on the scale of the recent incident at Mobuoy, where more than 0.5 million tons of illegal waste has been dumped. The Mills report estimates that £250 million may be required to clean up the sites and states:

> *"Waste crime is not just damaging the environment; it is damaging the economy in Northern Ireland."*

I therefore hope that extra money will be made available in future bids, if DOE needs financial assistance in that respect.

The Committee also supports the additional allocation of resources to local government. Members are very much aware of the widespread changes to be introduced over the next year as shadow councils begin the review of public administration (RPA) process for local councils and realise how vital the provision of adequate resourcing will be to the success of the new roles and structures. However, it is concerning that the provision for planning, both policy divisions and services, is to be significantly reduced by more than £2·5 million at a time when preparation is under way for the transfer of those functions to local government.

The Committee also places great emphasis on the provision of road safety services and will be concerned to note that this area, too, has had a cut in its resources. The Department recently provided a comprehensive update on its work on road safety, but the Committee is very conscious that adequate funding is vital to the ongoing support of this work.

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

The Committee has largely been supportive of DOE's bids during the past year and, in considering the Vote on Account, stresses the importance of making sure that the necessary funds continue to be made available to DOE so that it can continue to deliver its programmes and conduct its functions effectively. On behalf of the Environment Committee, I support the motion.

I will now make some comments as an Alliance MLA. The maintenance of designated sites is funded from a combination of the DOE's budget for the management of sensitive sites and DARD's agrienvironment scheme moneys from the rural development programme pillar 2 budget. The next rural development programme will not be funded to the same level because of the zero percent transfer from pillar 1 to pillar 2.

DARD is preparing an agrienvironment scheme that will have two strands: a wider area scheme for all farmers; and a targeted one for those whose land contains designated sites. Without adequate co-funding, they will not be effective. In any case, there is a risk that the wider scheme will detract from the targeted one and that the NIEA will have to make up the shortfall.

DOE operates a centralised education and outreach programme that has to cover everything from road safety to conservation. Funding aimed at explaining the importance of our natural environment, including the cause and effect of climate change, is very limited. It merits an increase.

As the Alliance Party spokesperson on culture, arts and leisure, I want to raise the issue of the resource allocation to National Museums NI (NMNI), which received a budget of £12·9 million, including £10·6 million for staffing costs, in the 2013-14 financial year. National Museums NI recognises that its curatorial base has reached low levels, and it has identified a number of key posts that it should prioritise for recruitment. Given that the number of curators fell from 28 in 2008 to 16 in April 2013 — that number is even lower today, as there is no plan to replace the curator at the Ulster American Folk Park — there is real concern about how DCAL and NMNI will meet their statutory obligations to improve the standard of collections care and management in Northern Ireland's museums.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I will cover the work that the Committee has done on scrutinising the DARD capital and resource budgets. I will mention some of the budgetary and financial issues and constraints that have been debated in Committee and in the Chamber over the past few weeks.

The Agriculture Committee takes regular briefings on budgetary and financial matters as part of its ongoing remit to scrutinise its Department. We last did so just before the Christmas recess, when we heard about DARD's plans for the January monitoring round. In the financial year 2012-13, DARD achieved an out-turn of 99·8% on resource and 98·9% on capital. DARD hopes to achieve the same level of performance in this financial year, and we as a Committee will scrutinise and call the Department to account if it does not.

We heard that, during the year, it had to give up moneys to ensure that it met those targets. It gave up money that it cannot spend this year on the proposed new IT system for animals and food products, to be called the Northern Ireland food animal information system (NIFAIS). It is the replacement for the current animal and public health information system (APHIS). The Committee is concerned about that because APHIS and its replacement are essential to the agrifood industry, enabling traceability and, thus, trade in Northern Ireland and internationally.

One of the main financial issues exercising the Committee and that I wish to cover is that of the budget for the new rural development programme 2014-2020. All here are aware that the Agriculture Minister's decision to transfer 7% of funding from CAP pillar 1 to pillar 2 was successfully challenged in the courts. That decision means that €137·5 million is retained in the pillar 1 budget over the 2014–2020 period, and that goes directly to the farming community.

The Minister indicated that she will now go to the Executive on the issue. The Committee took oral evidence recently from a range of organisations. In discussions, it indicated that it is content and indeed supports the call for Minister O'Neill to go to the Executive. However, the Committee will need to see the detail of any proposals before it can endorse them.

People are linking the issue of funding for the rural development programme to the Agri-Food Strategy Board's document 'Going for Growth'. It was published in May 2013 and has a stated request of £400 million from central government. As the Chamber will be aware, agrifood and that strategy are key targets in the Programme for Government which fall jointly to DARD and DETI. It should not be linked exclusively to the rural development programme (RDP), but there will be some important overlap that I will elaborate on.

The agrifood industry is very important to Northern Ireland. It has substantial potential to create jobs and wealth. It employs 27,000 in the food and drink processing sector and another 47,000 in farming. There is real potential to grow the industry even further with an estimated extra 15,000 jobs and a growth in sales to £7 billion. Those jobs and that wealth can be spread across Northern Ireland, and, with the right financial incentives, that growth could soon happen. The industry has told us that the opportunities are there now, ready to be acted on. We have been told that an immediate three-year commitment of £400 million could yield immediate results in jobs and wealth creation. It could also lever in investment of over £1·3 billion from the industry.

Many of the proposals in 'Going for Growth' sit very well with the proposals in the RDP. There is near-perfect alignment with the farm business investment scheme, but we need to know what is happening and how the funding required for the rural development programme and 'Going for Growth' will be realised.

We know that some movement has been made with the recent announcement by the ETI Minister of the agrifood loan scheme. I wish to congratulate the ETI Minister and the Finance and Personnel Minister on that initiative. Many local farmers have shown an interest in the scheme, and we hope to see a rapid development in capital investment for poultry houses in the near future. Alongside that are the recent announcements on a coordinated approach to, and ease around, planning issues. That proves that, when we put our minds to it, a joined-up approach can and does work well for our industry. On behalf of the ARD Committee, I would welcome any indication from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that those issues have been discussed at the Executive and are beginning to impact on the financial planning and budget of the Executive.

Another financial issue concerning the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee is the budget and eventual cost of the proposed trap, vaccinate and release (TVR) exercise to combat bovine TB. DARD has been preparing for some time — too long, I believe — to undertake pilots of TVR of badgers. We are aware that the scheme could be costly, and have been asking for some time for indicative costs and timetables. There is no doubt that bovine TB is costly to the Northern Ireland economy and purse, but it is also costly to individual farms, farmers and the industry in general.

Every monitoring round, departmental officials come to the Committee and indicate that they will be seeking additional millions of pounds from the Executive to help pay the costs associated with this disease. We had a little bit of good news in the last monitoring round with the receipt of £3 million of additional EU vet funds. After consulting with DFP, the Department has been allowed to use that to offset the additional costs of TB compensation. That underlines why we need to ensure that any scheme to tackle bovine TB is cost-effective, represents an efficient use of resources and is capable of being delivered in a timely manner. We expect that the cost of TVR will be in the 2014-15 budget, and we look forward to hearing from DARD on that aspect.

The Committee has also been briefed on the capital funding DARD will need to deliver flood alleviation measures over the next four financial years. In 2014-15, it will require £2·8 million. In the period to 2017-18, that will rise to around £18 million. Flooding is on the mind of everyone at the moment. We have all seen the destruction that the winter storms have brought to our shores. Over the past few years, every MLA has been all too familiar with flooding and the devastation and misery it brings to families, so we are pleased that DARD and the Rivers Agency are taking it seriously and that the finance will be available to carry on this important work in 2014-15.

The Committee has also taken a keen interest in tree disease, and we are pleased to note that it has been a while since any new cases of ash dieback were discovered here. It is, therefore, more disappointing when we hear that there have been further and substantial outbreaks of larch tree disease. We are also pleased to note that DARD and the Forest Service took the advice offered by the Committee and offered a restocking grant to those landowners who were affected by ash dieback. However, we are still concerned about the lack of legislation on pre-notification for five other tree species that are at serious threat.

3.45 pm

Throughout Europe and, indeed, the world, tree disease is on the rise, and the cost of tackling it is rising also. DARD and Forest Service tell the Committee that they are handling this with their current allocation of resources. There has also been a transfer of plant health functions from DARD to Forest Service, which will apparently help. However, the Committee still has doubts about whether the cost of tackling tree disease in Northern Ireland has been properly costed and is correctly resourced.

Finally, another major financial issue for the Committee is the DARD headquarters relocation. Although we are still awaiting the business case for the main relocation of the DARD headquarters to Ballykelly, the Committee has not lost sight of the fact that many DARD functions will move to other locations. For example, fisheries will move to the east coast, forestry to Fermanagh and the Rivers Agency to Desertcreat. All that will come at a cost. DARD officials told the Committee that it will cost an estimated £18 million in capital over the next four financial years. Although the expenditure in 2014-15 will be minimal, as a Committee, we want to make sure that the costs that are associated with the proposed DARD headquarter relocations are correctly estimated and, importantly, adhered to. That is the big task for DARD in this incoming financial year.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the spring Supplementary Estimates. As a new member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I welcomed the opportunity of a briefing to the Committee from departmental officials from the central expenditure division. Speaking as an individual MLA, I can say that, since that briefing, a number of significant allocations and easements have been made over the three monitoring rounds. I just want to pay a wee bit of attention to DARD's allocation of £17 million of resource and £4·6 million in capital.

One of the main modules is a £3 million allocation for the common agricultural policy and the £5·3 million that the Executive allocated for the hardship scheme. Given that the Chair of that Committee has just spoken, I will not labour the other aspects of the funding in that budget. However, I want to pay some attention to the hardship scheme and to the much-needed funding that has been allocated to it to assist farmers who were affected by adverse weather recently and in March 2013 for such things as fodder and the disposal of fallen animals. All the funding that was given to farmers arose out of the snowstorms in 2013 and was much needed. I commend the Executive and Department for acting swiftly on the hardship scheme, and I also commend the Minister for visiting all the affected areas.

Given that, as recently as lunchtime today, we were given a yellow warning for severe weather over the next week, that payment should be available immediately if we are faced with the extreme weather conditions that we faced last year.

I also briefly want to major on the A5 and the £108 million that was handed back and reallocated to capital projects in the Department of Health and DRD. Given that the Executive gave a commitment to the A5 and that the Minister has continually repeated in the House that the A5 is deferred and not shelved, I am concerned that that construction should start soon because of the impact that would have right across the west.

Although DE is providing the money in the education budget for the campus at Lisanelly, with an estimated budget of £120 million that will cater for almost 4,000 pupils, we have been given reassurances and a commitment from the Minister that funding for the campus will be ring-fenced. Such is the importance of the project in my area, the Executive have included a specific target in their Programme for Government to progress work on the site. Indeed, the project will enhance the facilities that we have there.

I particularly commend Departments for continuing to work in a sensible way on their budgets. Although I am not speaking as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), I commend the work of that Committee in highlighting best and worst practice in departmental spend. The PAC, from time to time, will make recommendations on how best Departments can manage their budgets in a sensible and mature way.

I do not think that Members will have any difficulty with supporting the Estimates resolution, and on that basis I support the motion.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): Members will recall that we have all made contributions to this debate over the past number of years of this mandate. Last year, I contributed to a similar debate. On that occasion, I indicated that the Committee for Education had received the monitoring round information and questioned the Department throughout the financial year on its spend. I also advised the House that the Committee had endeavoured to track the changes in spending that had manifested themselves in the spring Supplementary Estimates.

As I said then, this is not an easy process for any Member or Committee to be involved in. In the first place, the Estimates can be very difficult to navigate. As other Members have mentioned, the format of the document makes it hard to sometimes identify the key changes in budget spend. For example, the increase in the net resource requirement for the Department of Education is a worrying £52 million. However, after some inquiries, it becomes clear that that is largely due to the misalignment between the 2010 opening budget and the present position. That, however, is not explained in the Estimates.

There is also an almost equally worrying increase in the net resource requirement for the teachers' pension scheme of some £10 million. Again after making some inquiries, I understand that that is a consequence of the re-evaluation of pension liabilities. The basis of that is also not explained in the Estimates document. So, there are issues that arise that make it challenging for Committees and Members to scrutinise and ensure that they have a proper understanding of the process that is before them.

The Committee will, of course, continue to ask the right questions of the Department of Education in respect of its spending. However, I suggest that, as part of the ongoing review of the financial process, consideration is given by the Minister and his Department to the simplification of the Estimates documents. I put my hands up as someone who probably needs as much assistance and help on that issue as anyone in this House.

In the Education Committee, we have a particular problem with financial scrutiny. The Department of Education does not participate in the DFP-sponsored monitoring of savings delivery plans and operates a large contingency fund, which at the start of the financial year had around £30 million in it. That is a reasonably good, healthy slush fund for any Department to have at its beck and call. That is despite the fact that in previous correspondence the Finance Minister had raised concerns about the use of such a contingency fund and that the current and previous Finance Ministers have raised concerns about the Department of Education not participating in the savings delivery plan process.

The Department indicates that it aims to have the contingency fund fully spent before the end of the year. To be fair, against a resource budget of nearly £2 billion, it is worthy of note that the Department had no resource Estimates and successfully bid for only £2 million in 2013-14. Overall, the Department has previously done quite well in respect of its total resource spending targets.

Repeatedly, the Department tells us that it has been good at balancing the books. However, I suspect that, if you were to ask some schools that face particular challenges and problems in relation to either capital or resource, they would question that comment. The use of contingency funds makes scrutiny by a statutory Committee such as the Education Committee more difficult. Indeed, the

Education Minister's recent announcement that he is to establish another contingency fund for the common funding scheme will present another scrutiny challenge for the Committee in the next financial year.

The absence of information on the savings delivery plans also makes it difficult for the Committee to determine the extent of cost savings and their impact on front line services. Of particular concern is the reduction in the Curriculum and Advisory Support Service (CASS). The details of that are difficult to pin down, but the reality and the impact are not so difficult to locate. One only has to speak to many of the professional teachers and staff in our schools and those in the education and library boards. They will concur with the challenges that that has created.

In respect of the Department of Education's capital budget, which is around £110 million, £2·7 million of Estimates were linked to asset sales and a successful bid of £5 million in 2013-14. The scrutiny of DE's capital presents another problem. The monthly summary report on capital build progress appears to include a lot of what can only be described as out-of-date information. Indeed, well over half the projects in the report have actually been concluded. I find it more than a little difficult to reconcile that information with the ongoing departmental press releases on new school builds, which could give a distortion as to the reality of delivery on the ground as regards capital. The Committee will continue to scrutinise the important aspects of DE's spend. I suggest, however, that this should not be as difficult as it is currently. Surely, there has to be a better way.

In concluding my remarks as Chairperson, I would like to pass on the Committee's thanks to the Finance Minister for the allocations received by the Department of Education this year, including the £3·5 million for the Delivering Social Change programme.

I will now make a few comments as a Member of the House before time runs out. I wish to raise the serious ongoing issue of the common funding formula scheme. I want this clearly on the record; I was accused — and the words, if you check Hansard, are correct — of "telling lies" about figures used when the Department of Education produced information on the common funding formula that stated that 76% of Catholic primary schools in the Western Education and Library Board would lose money. Despite the comments made by Members opposite, those figures have now been substantiated and those figures are correct.

Despite Members opposite trying to hide, cause diversion and find a way whereby they could ensure that their blushes were in some way concealed, the situation this week is that the responses to the common funding formula at the Education Committee will prove beyond all shadow of a doubt that there was huge concern in the community about the proposals being brought forward by the Education Minister on the continued funding of the common funding formula scheme. It is now well past the time for the Minister to come to the House and tell the schools, which are being asked to have a three-year financial plan and planning process, what he is doing about the budgets of our schools. What is happening in relation to the common funding formula scheme? After Wednesday, when they will have access to the papers that have been presented to the Education Committee today, Members will see that this scheme, proposed by the Education Minister, is financially not fit for purpose.

I will conclude on another issue. The Member who spoke previously referred to the Lisanelly project. For that project to work, it requires not only finance but faith — faith in the delivery of the model that is on the table. Everybody — I underscore the word "everybody" — and every school in Omagh, not just some schools, needs to have confidence that what is proposed is something that they are buying into.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Storey: If that is the case, the money that is allocated will be money well spent.

4.00 pm

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Members will probably have read the Hansard report of the Finance and Personnel Committee's meeting on the spring Supplementary Estimates and will, therefore, be aware of DSD's current budget position.

The Committee welcomes the allocations that DSD has achieved — for example, some £15 million has been allocated to Co-ownership. This will undoubtedly help the construction industry and will certainly be welcomed by those aiming to get on the housing ladder. However, although some have realistic aspirations to get on the housing ladder, there are many more for whom it will remain an aspiration and who simply need access to social housing. The reality is that we are not building enough social housing to meet the need. It is, therefore, unacceptable and quite unbelievable, in some respects, that, on the basis of the last three monitoring rounds, DSD now has a reduced requirement of over £66 million. The Committee recognises that much of that relates to the non-release of money in respect of planned maintenance contracts, but that is another day's discussion. We all hope that that situation can be resolved sooner rather than later. However, the Committee has been amazed and unanimously expressed its concerns, with varying degrees of stridency across the membership, at the sheer inability of the Housing Executive, the Department and the housing associations to get to grips with the barriers that prevent more social housing being built.

The Department is sending out a dangerous message that it cannot spend the money it has been allocated. That means the surrender of almost £40 million of Northern Ireland Housing Executive housing grant. People on the waiting list and those in need of maintenance work on their home will see handing back that amount of money as a dereliction of duty and responsibility. Generally speaking, people are not interested in whether the money is defined as capital or resource, what the nature of the bids is or what the Supplementary Estimates indicate; they are more interested in receiving services that they need and having the basic need for a roof over their head met.

The Department's surrender of money, monitoring round after monitoring round, has regrettably become a recurring issue and one of great concern to the Committee. As I said, members have expressed their concerns with varying degrees of strength and opposition. What we tend to see, monitoring round after monitoring round, therefore, is a scrabbling around to find areas for which the Department can bid for funds — such as the ill-conceived and ultimately failed buy-back scheme of former Housing

Executive-owned houses — rather than appropriate budgeting and spending in the first place.

As I said, the Committee broadly supports the co-ownership scheme. However, in the October monitoring round, some concern was expressed that £15 million was allocated to Co-ownership, with a bid for an additional £10 million, while there were no bids relating to social housing. A key and enduring concern in the Committee has been the Department's continued failure to spend the budget that it has been allocated for the building of social housing. This is at a time when demand is high and the construction industry is just about on its knees. One would think that building more social housing was a win-win situation. Building more housing would see more people in homes while creating much-needed employment. Although the Department has spent some of the budget on very worthwhile schemes, such as the boiler replacement scheme that we all welcome, it is the reduced requirements and subsequent handing back of moneys to build social housing that really stands out. In the June and October monitoring rounds, the Committee expressed grave concerns about handing back money that is vital for social housing; yet, the money continues to be handed back.

The bottom line for members is that the Department hands back tens of millions of pounds when it desperately needs to be spent. The Committee finds it difficult to accept that such a failure persists. The Committee for Finance and Personnel has made clear its concerns that Departments do not appear to be on top of their budget. As far as the Committee for Social Development is concerned, that certainly appears to the case for DSD.

The Committee emphasises that it does not expect to see a continuation of the recent trend of surrendering money and will treat any proposals to do so in future monitoring rounds with the detailed examination that they deserve. As Chair, I thank the Committee for its diligent work in trying to maintain a focus on the problems with the budget, particularly the social housing budget. It will remain a key focus for the Committee in the time ahead. I also thank the Committee officials for their due diligence in supporting the Committee in trying to monitor these developments.

I will now speak as a Member and not as Chair of the Committee. I just want to make a couple of points. The Minister referred to welfare reform and said that these matters were not being taken seriously. I suggest that my party certainly takes these matters very seriously. Sinn Féin cannot and will not ignore the serious and negative impact of many of the key elements of the Welfare Reform Bill. I remind the Minister that his party was initially prepared to say that, because the Bill is parity legislation, we have to have it as it is. I am very pleased to say that, despite the fact that some in the Chamber resisted any attempt to secure changes to the Bill, we have managed to agree some that will be very important in due course for mitigating measures. Nevertheless, my party believes that much more can be done. We take the Welfare Reform Bill and the issues involved very seriously, and we are particularly concerned about the impact that it will have on many people whom all the parties in the Chamber represent. If implemented unchanged, the Welfare Reform Bill, which we call a cuts agenda from London, would take a considerable amount of money out of the pockets of people whom we represent and therefore out of the local economy.

It is unfortunate that the Minister began his announcement today in a fantasy area, making up figures as he went along. That does not help, and his party would be better committing itself to working with us and others who have serious concerns about the Bill. I know that his party has concerns about the Bill, so let us work together to secure the further changes that, I believe, can still be secured for all the people whom we represent. We take the matter seriously, as I believe most people do. All the parties here would do well to work together to make sure that we make the necessary changes to the Bill, which we can do, if we put our shoulders to the wheel.

I mentioned the social housing programme in my remarks as Chair. My party and the Committee members whom I represent believe that DSD's treatment of the social housing development programme is nothing less than shameful. It is absolutely shameful that we hand back tens of millions of pounds when people are crying out for a roof over their head or trying to get maintenance carried out on their home or when contractors are virtually going to the wall because they cannot get contracts released to do the necessary work, despite the fact that the money is there in the budget. This is not even a case of people trying to get or secure a budget; the budget is there to build more homes and maintain people's homes to a proper standard.

The failure of the Department is becoming almost legendary, and, on behalf of my party, I repeat that that is absolutely unacceptable. It tells me that the Department completely lacks the capacity to take these matters forward and, perhaps, even the will to deliver a social housing programme that is fit for purpose and meets needs, particularly in light of the additional pressures that will come to bear on people through the introduction of the Bill from Westminster. More people will need access to social housing, and the people who require those houses will need different tenures. The Department is sitting on its hands and not tackling the problems.

I accept entirely that there are barriers to liberating the social housing programme. Indeed, the housing association movement came to the Committee and presented a range of barriers — I do not have to agree with all of them — to the social housing build programme, including land acquisition, procurement, planning and even local objections to particular initiatives and projects. Notwithstanding that, the Department gave us a commitment that, month on month, it will sit with the housing association movement and work to remove all those necessary barriers. To date, we have heard nothing about how those barriers have been tackled, and, again, that tells me that the Department does not have the capacity or perhaps even the will to take the social housing programme forward. As far as my party is concerned, our focus in the time ahead will be on ensuring that the moneys that have been allocated by the Executive, including the DUP members, will provide support for the social housing development programme to go ahead and go ahead much better than it has done until now.

Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Initially, I will speak as Chair of the Committee.

A couple of issues came up in Committee that the Minister may wish to address. In the October monitoring round, the Committee sought clarification and further explanation of the £17·1 million capital spend for the Invest NI headquarters. The Department responded:

> *"an opportunity had arisen to acquire the shared capital of BSDL",*

which stands for "Bedford Street Developments Ltd". The Department said that the building was under a PFI contract between Invest NI and BSDL. It continued:

> *"Invest NI was able to buy the shares of BSDL at a competitive price and it is estimated that the transaction will result in savings to the NI Block of around £7m versus the original arrangements ... the public sector will retain ownership of the building, whereas it would have reverted to the private sector under the previous arrangements."*

During January monitoring, the Committee was concerned that there was a £250,000 reduction in administration costs due to unfilled posts at the Health and Safety Executive NI (HSENI), especially given the importance of health and safety. It is not, relatively speaking, a lot of money, but the consequences of not fulfilling its role adequately could be dire. I have but to point out many of the major and catastrophic accidents that there have been, particularly on farms, over this past wee while. Such incidents have drawn a lot of media attention and, for families, brought deep, deep loss. Members sought information on the posts that remained unfilled, the duration of the vacancies, the reason for not filling posts and how succession planning had not been undertaken. The Department responded that 60% of the budget released related to unfilled trainee inspector posts. It said in its response:

> *"Eight Trainee Inspectors were appointed to HSENI in November 2013, taking the inspectorate staff to full complement. The HSENI has sufficient staff to fulfil its role, including its role in relation to the Farm Safety Campaign."*

Other underspend related to normal staff movements in the Northern Ireland Civil Service on promotion or transfer. There has also been a vacancy at senior medical officer level, following a retirement in June 2013. Attempts to fill the post have been unsuccessful, and interim arrangements are in place with the Occupational Health Service.

The Committee sought clarification on a reduced requirement regarding £30,000 ring-fenced funding for small business research initiative (SBRI) costs for nitrates that cannot be utilised in the financial year. The Department responded that the SBRI competition for the development of solutions for the sustainable utilisation of poultry litter opened in December 2012. Following an competition in which 39 bids were received, nine phase-one contracts were awarded at a total cost of £648,000. The contracts for those projects completed in November 2013. Contractors have submitted end-of-phase-one reports, which are currently being assessed by the SBRI project team. That is of vital importance to our agriculture sector and, particularly, our agrifood farmers. The House may also wish to note that a total of £10 million was ring-fenced in the 2012-13 DETI budget in the expectation that the issue of the EU nitrates directive and the disposal of chicken litter would have to be addressed. Most of the allocation was surrendered in the October monitoring round in 2012.

The Committee noted that INTERREG IVa projects have not drawn down the amounts previously forecast by the Special EU Programmes Body. That is a deferral of expenditure to future years, and the Committee wrote to the SEUPB on the matter. It responded that the situation resulted from lead partners being overly optimistic about project implementation timetables. The SEUPB must strike a balance and work largely on the basis of information provided by lead partners on potential requirements. In addition, the capital tourism projects in particular have presented significant problems. The Committee contacted the Department and is awaiting a response regarding any projects relating to the Department where there may have been a delay.

4.15 pm

Those are the views that I have been asked to relay on behalf of the Committee. That takes me neatly into an area that I will divide between potential and disappeared. I will deal with the disappeared first: funds that have been announced and have just disappeared. This does not relate specifically to the Minister, so he will have to bear with me. I know that he is fresh in post, so I cannot lay this at his table. The Emerging Europe fund was announced to provide investment in Northern Ireland, and it was announced by OFMDFM on a trip to New York in March 2009. It was established by the then New York comptroller, Thomas DiNapoli. Of a total of $100 million, $30 million was said to be earmarked for projects in the North. We have raised this, and we have sought clarification from OFMDFM. To date, of the $30 million that had been earmarked, apparently, five years later there is no mention of it. Some $30 million of funding has disappeared. Like the Emerald Fund before it, this appears to have been yet another short-term PR gimmick for OFMDFM that has delivered nothing. Announcements made and repeated; money allocated, allegedly; money sought from overseas; and money disappeared, not spent. It is important to put that on record, because we have enough smoke and mirrors around this place and enough gimmicks and stunts. People who are finding it difficult enough to put food on the table for them and their family look towards that investment for them and for the future sustainability of the North's economy.

That brings me on to something that was touched on by Mr Swann: the drawdown of EU funds in regard to what has to be one of the key elements of any form of recovery of the North here as an economy, and that is research and innovation. Specifically, I refer to framework programme 7 (FP7), now latterly merged and evolved into Horizon 2020 EU funds. I find it incredibly difficult to believe that the drawdown of FP7 here in the North amounted to €35 per capita, and, just a few miles down the road in the rest of the island, it amounted to €590 per capita. FP7 is acknowledged to have been a difficult enough programme because of its bureaucratic nature.

We are missing out on serious opportunities to help develop the economy. I know that the Minister has an interest in a lot of these matters and takes it very seriously, but I had an experience last week where we sought

information from a major stakeholder — the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce — and asked if there had been any formal engagement with it around Horizon 2020. To my surprise and disappointment, the answer was no. There had been no engagement with a major stakeholder representing 500 businesses across the North to see what opportunities could be availed of.

I mentioned that the Government in the Republic had set a target of €1·25 billion or €1·4 billion, depending on what you read. They have the ambition to do that. What has been set here — the First Minister referred to it earlier — was a target of £100 million. That is twice the previous drawdown, which was £50 million. By comparison, it is not a very ambitious target to set. Opportunities have to be availed of. Those opportunities are out there. Others just down the road can draw down those funds, avail themselves of those opportunities, get out there and search for the moneys and revitalise their economy, with their help because of the nature of the programme. We can draw down and be much more ambitious and proactive. Departments right across have to really step up to the mark.

There are other issues. I am also chair of the all-party working group on construction. I seriously do not know how many times we will have announcements made of capital projects — and announced again and announced again. We had a presentation recently where I met the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS). It told me that, in capital works on new schools that were announced in January 2012, not a brick had been laid. I genuinely want to see the construction industry move, but those capital schemes must be seen to develop and to actually happen on the ground in the interests of that construction sector and its service and related sectors. Minister, it is not immediately your brief, but contractors have been in touch with me. The work is clearly there and the money is there, yet the contracts are not happening on the ground. I refer to the window suppliers, and hopefully we will hear more from the Housing Executive tomorrow. Some sort of impetus has to be injected into it to make sure that the work happens on the ground.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: People look to us and to the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: It can be done, it should be done, and it must be done.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): My first remarks will be as Chair, and then I will address some points in my capacity as a Member. In-year, the Department briefed the Committee on its monitoring round returns and proposals. I am glad to say that the Committee was broadly satisfied with the Department's approach to the matter.

The Committee noted the easements in relation to capital spend at the Maze/Long Kesh site, with some £3·5 million returned in January monitoring. The Committee hopes that agreement is reached on a way ahead at the site in the coming weeks so that the site's full economic benefit will be achieved. The Committee is mindful of a commitment in the 2011-15 Programme for Government for the Maze/Long Kesh site for this financial year — 2013-14 — on the commencement of site infrastructure. It appears to the Committee that, in the absence of further knowledge, the £3·5 million that was returned in January monitoring was for site infrastructure that did not take place this year.

The Committee also welcomed the bid of £1·6 million in the October monitoring round that allows the Victims and Survivors Service to meet the demands for the financial assistance regular allowance scheme and some other work streams. However, the Committee had some concerns that the financial assistance regular allowance scheme was effectively closed in June last year. The Committee hopes that the current review of the Victims and Survivors Service by the commissioner will address how funding is applied for and granted. I commend Committee members for the scrutiny that they brought to bear on this area. It is an interest that has yielded positive change and some worthwhile and significant improvements for victims and survivors.

In relation to additional allocations through the year, the Committee welcomes the progress that has been made on the inquiry into historical institutional abuse. The additional funding required to progress it is to be welcomed. The Committee looks forward to a briefing from the Department on the scoping paper on options for victims of institutional abuse and Magdalene laundry-type institutions who currently fall outside the remit of the inquiry chaired by Sir Anthony Hart.

Looking at the allocations made throughout the year, we can see that there are discrepancies with what the Committee was advised of during the monitoring rounds. There seems to be around £26 million extra in capital allocations. I am led to believe that that is in relation to Department for Employment and Learning funding for the University of Ulster. The Committee has not been formally notified of that allocation, and my information comes from last week's briefing to the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister of Finance and Personnel could shed some light on that issue.

I will also highlight some Members' concern about scrutiny of the Executive's ring-fenced Delivering Social Change fund. It includes the social investment fund (SIF), which we heard about from the First Minister earlier, the childcare fund and the Delivering Social Change signature programme fund. The Committee encourages greater transparency on how those Executive funds are allocated and spent, as it seems that OFMDFM has accessed some £2 million of that funding and there has been no information from the Department on what it is intended for. I thank Committee members and staff for their attention over the year to financial scrutiny.

I now move on to make some personal comments on the spring Supplementary Estimates. It is a matter of regret that should be shared throughout the House that the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site appears to be on hold and we have no certainty about what is happening today or what is planned for tomorrow. We have Members, including the First Minister, who seem to believe that Sinn Féin holds a veto on the development of the entire site in the absence of the peace-building and conflict resolution centre, while others — Members of the House and elected representatives from elsewhere, such as Sammy Wilson and Jeffrey Donaldson — argue that they see no reason why the development of the site should not go ahead. In its forward work programme, the Committee had a briefing

scheduled for this Wednesday from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is my understanding that that will not go ahead. Officials will tell us about the development of some of the other sites under the control of OFMDFM but not about the plans for the Maze/Long Kesh.

Mr Maskey, as Chair of the Social Development Committee, made clear the anger in his community at money not being spent, perhaps being wasted and perhaps being returned to the Treasury. Here is £3·5 million that was allocated for the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site, money that is not being used in this financial year. That is £3·5 million that could be spent on infrastructure. Indeed, a portion of it could be spent on delisting and demolishing the retained prison buildings, and, perhaps, then we could move on.

The Committee has, as I said, done a great deal of scrutiny of the Victims and Survivors Service that has led to the exposure of issues that needed to be addressed. One example was a victim in a wheelchair who required a replacement wheelchair but was told that she had to source three quotes, pay for the chair and keep the receipt so that she could claim the money back. That is no longer the case, and I give credit to the Committee and the individual Members for highlighting that issue and making sure that it was addressed by the Department. The commissioner is currently conducting a review of the Victims and Survivors Service that may have resource implications. I would very much welcome that resource being made available, not least to deal with the call from victims for a fixed point of reference with the Victims and Survivors Service so that, at all times, they know that they have a champion in that institution.

The historical institutional abuse inquiry began without a budget line determined, so it is welcome that a line has been found for Sir Anthony Hart. The Committee has asked for a briefing from the senior official who was appointed by the Department to scope out what could be done for victims who were subject to institutional abuse in institutions not covered by the inquiry, particularly Magdalene laundry-type institutions. Many victims of clerical abuse were not abused within institutions, and I say frankly that it is not good enough to say that they should have recourse to either the PSNI or social services. If there is an inquiry for one group of victims, surely there should be inquiries for all. It is not good enough to say that we will let this process run out before considering the next process. Time is the enemy. I will quote Christine Smith QC, counsel to the HIA inquiry. On the first day of the public sessions in Banbridge she remarked:

> *"Unfortunately some of those individuals who might have taken part in the Inquiry are no longer with us".*

Poignantly, she went on to say:

> *"some who have spoken to the Inquiry about their experiences in preparation for the public hearings have not lived to see this day."*

Even in the period between the announcement of the HIA inquiry and the first public hearing, some of the victims of institutional abuse have passed on to another place.

Those are the concerns coming forward from the Committee and me.

The Committee would like some clarity on the £26 million in capital allocations and the £2 million as previously stated. I will also say that the Committee has some well-rehearsed issues with the Department to do with liaison and information sharing, but we are working those through. I am convinced that everybody has the will to make this better going forward. It is a critical Department in the Northern Ireland Executive. Once again, let me praise Committee members for their scrutiny of financial matters over the past 12 months.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and do so as the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development. I will start by thanking my colleague the Finance Minister for bringing the motion to the House. Like his predecessor, the Minister has been very generous to the Department for Regional Development throughout the monitoring rounds in a number of areas. I also recognise the work that has been done by the Minister for Regional Development and his staff and their efforts to allocate money, on the whole, to the best uses possible.

4.30 pm

The introduction to the Supplementary Estimates states that, overall, there was an increase in the net resource requirement of £22·5 million and a decrease in the net cash requirement of £102 million. Officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel briefed the Committee on 5 February 2014. During that briefing, they provided further detail on the allocations and easements in respect of the Department. They quite rightly described them as being significant. I would therefore like to spend a little time on those issues.

Northern Ireland has over 15,500 miles of roads, making them one of its biggest assets. Over the year, the Department for Regional Development has successfully bid for over £80 million for capital investment, the overwhelming majority of which, some £53 million, is directed towards roads structural maintenance. That should allow for a total of £119 million to be spent this year on maintaining roads.

It has been independently assessed that the Department needs some £129 million a year just to maintain the existing road network. We currently have a backlog of £830 million in respect of roads structural maintenance. The Northern Ireland branch of the Institution of Civil Engineers has called for the provision of a secure road-maintenance budget and prioritisation of existing strategic road schemes. In its 'State of the Nation' report on transport, it identified what it believed would be the consequences of not delivering appropriate levels of investment in the roads and transport infrastructure. They include increasing levels of pollution in towns; decreasing economic and social alliance between communities; decreasing levels of health arising from reliance on private cars; decreasing performance of Northern Ireland's largest asset, namely its road network; and Northern Ireland's becoming a less attractive place to invest.

In addressing the Committee on January monitoring, Department for Regional Development officials advised of the consequences of bids for the structural maintenance programme's not being met. They said that failure to meet that bid would mean that maintenance priority would focus

on repairing safety defects and only the highest priority remedial sites would receive resurfacing treatment. They said that that is likely to attract significant criticism from elected representatives and the construction industry as a whole, and that the cost of reactive patching is likely to increase, drawing further funding away from good-value maintenance activities, such as resurfacing and surface dressing. They also said that numbers and cost of public-liability claims is also likely to increase.

In the absence of a secure budget given the economic environment that we have been operating in, it is therefore imperative that DRD can bid in-year for additional money to address that deficit and that it is successful in doing so, not just because of the need to maintain our infrastructure. The benefits that accrue from maintaining our network are more than physical; for every £1 million invested in our roads, 28 jobs are sustained. The economic knock-on effect that these works have on our construction industry and the suppliers in the industry is immense; every £1 invested in construction generates £2·84 in total economic activity. The impact that the infrastructure has on tourism, driving our exports and imports and linking our communities is colossal. I again congratulate the Executive as a whole for the strategic approach they adopted when they considered the in-year bids for roads structural maintenance.

The Department has declared some significant reduced requirements. A total of £36 million is a reduced requirement for roads depreciation. This is in respect of land that the Department had been revaluing, which has not depreciated as significantly as it had assumed it would. It is a non-cash item and is ring-fenced.

The second easement was in respect of the A5 project and amounted to £108 million. That money has been reallocated, principally to the Department for Regional Development and the Department of Health. I do not intend to open a debate on the A5; the Minister for Regional Development has been very effective in keeping the House up to date on the matter.

I will return to the increased capital allocations and deal with the £7 million that has been gifted to the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company, or Translink as it is more commonly referred to. The Committee is not opposed to investment in Translink per se. The Committee remains vociferously in support of the Belfast rapid transit project and the principle of the Belfast transport hub, which is now starting to formulate. However, the Committee is opposed to the automatic awarding of long-term and lucrative contracts to Translink without proper testing of the market — testing similar to that in the Republic of Ireland, which is putting 10% of its network out to tender and is, in the process, creating more jobs. The Committee believes that it reduces the incentive for Translink to be efficient, and it brings about incentives.

We are opposed to the chief executive of Translink coming to the Committee and brazenly declaring that Translink has £60 million in the bank while consistently running cap in hand to the Department for handouts. There is scope in existing legislation for the Minister for Regional Development to recoup such profits, and the Committee has called on the Minister to ease the burden on the public purse by doing so. Northern Ireland Water pays the Department a dividend of nearly £30 million each year. Why should Translink not do something similar? These issues were raised recently when the House debated the transport issue.

As the Committee sees it, Northern Ireland Water has very successfully come from its position under the previous chief executive, Mr Trevor Haslett CBE, to a company that is very much upfront and doing a pretty excellent job.

I urge the Finance Minister to continue to look at end-year flexibility. I know that he has been doing that with Northern Ireland Water. The benefits of such an arrangement to allow Northern Ireland Water the ability to undertake strategic infrastructural programmes are enormous and, again, would be of enormous benefit to the construction industry, constituents plagued by flooding and to our environment generally. I ask the Minister to look at those areas —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Spratt: — and to consider the issues with the Treasury in end-year flexibility.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat. I welcome the opportunity to address the House as Chair of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. This year, the Department of Health had to find £139 million of savings. By September 2013, it was able to make £20 million of those savings. The latest correspondence that the Committee has received via the Department of Finance and Personnel is that the Department is still on track to make the £139 million of savings by the end of this financial year. However, given the pressures that the Department is facing, there are, in my view, some very serious questions around how those savings will actually be made.

I note that £35 million of headroom has been built into the spring Supplementary Estimates for the Department of Health. There is certainly a view that that is a sensible move, given the pressures that the Department is under.

In December, the Committee held an evidence session with departmental officials on the financial position for 2013-14, and we are due to receive a further update directly from the Minister at our meeting this week. In December, officials told us that the Department still has a funding gap for 2013-14. Given the extent of that gap, the Department submitted a bid of £67 million under the January monitoring round. That comprised £20 million for clinical negligence settlements; £12 million for elective care; £10 million for winter pressures; £7 million for safety of services; £7 million for Transforming Your Care (TYC) transitional funding; £5 million for domiciliary care; and £5 million for children's services.

The Department advised the Committee that it prioritised those bids for submission to DFP. The highest priority bid was £20 million for clinical negligence settlements. Three bids were classified at the next tier of importance, because they would have an impact on safety. Those were the bids for quality and safety of services, winter pressures and children's services.

The outcome of the January monitoring round was announced on 21 January. The Assembly was advised that the Department of Health would receive £30 million. However, there were no precise details about how the £30 million would be allocated across the range of bids

that were submitted. The Committee, therefore, wrote to the Department to seek clarification. In addition, the Department originally bid for £67 million, which means that £37 million of the bid was not met. Again, the Committee wrote to the Department to ask how it intended to meet that gap. Unfortunately, we have not yet received answers to those questions.

We are concerned, therefore, about whether money will be made available out of the £30 million received in the January monitoring round to drive forward the changes set out in Transforming Your Care. It was originally estimated that £70 million would be needed over three years to implement TYC. The Department received £19 million from the Executive in 2012-13 to fund TYC transitional costs and a further £9·4 million in the June monitoring round this year. However, further money is required in 2013-14 to keep things moving forward. This is long-term work. If the funds are not made available to implement it, a lot of hard work may come to very little.

4.45 pm

The Department of Health also made bids in the June and October monitoring rounds for 2013-14. In the October monitoring round, the Department submitted a bid of £64 million: £26 million for elective care, £20 million for clinical negligence and £18 million for Transforming Your Care. It received £14 million to address elective care waiting lists. Although the Committee welcomed that money coming into the Department of Health, it is fair to say that we are concerned that a substantial proportion of it is being spent on the private sector. In our view, that is not a sustainable solution, does not represent best value for money and is not getting to the root of the problem.

The Committee also noted that the Department has, since October 2011, been making bids in the monitoring rounds to address waiting lists. Under DFP rules, bids are supposed to be only for major and unforeseen circumstances. Given that the Department has been aware of the issue for years, there is a question over whether the problems with the waiting lists are really unforeseen. The Committee is doing a review of waiting times, and we will present our recommendations to the Minister in due course.

I will make my final comments in my capacity as an individual MLA. Concerns are rife that Transforming Your Care transitional funding is at risk. However, in return for additional in-year flexibilities, the Executive had stipulated that the Department of Health should not table current expenditure bids except in the event of «major and unforeseeable circumstances». This year, the Department of Health has received £56 million in resource and £43 million in capital through monitoring rounds. Many will challenge that £20 million for clinical negligence is major and unforeseeable.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motions, which seek our approval for the Executive's final spending plans for 2013-14 and for interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2014-15 in the form of a Vote on Account.

As a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I have had the opportunity to examine the reconciliation between the figures in the Main Estimates, which were agreed last June, and the spring Supplementary Estimates before us today. As already stated, the amounts are significant, and this process gives legal form to the financial decisions made by the Executive in the monitoring rounds during this financial year. The monitoring rounds have allowed the Executive to redistribute reduced requirements from various Departments to emerging issues, and today is an opportunity to debate the changes that happened and the allocations made during this financial year.

This financial year continued to be a difficult one for the local economy. However, there are indications that the economic climate is improving. Indeed, just this morning, we heard that, in January, local businesses experienced their fastest rate of growth in almost 10 years. The Northern Ireland growth rate was also faster than that across the UK as a whole. So it is certainly not all doom and gloom, and we should take the opportunity to be positive about some things that we have achieved in the past year.

The Minister, in his opening remarks, outlined a number of those things and mentioned that, thanks to funding in part by the Executive, we can host a Heineken Cup quarter-final at the newly expanded capacity Ravenhill ground. I just hope that the weather on 5 April is kinder to us than it was last Friday night. The recent news of increasing employment is also to be welcomed and no doubt is, in some part, due to the continuing good work of Invest NI, which has benefited from monitoring round allocations on the resource and capital sides to enable it to continue to assist businesses here to realise their maximum potential in our economy.

The Department of Health also benefited significantly through an additional resource allocation of £57 million for a range of measures, including elective care and Transforming Your Care, and £44 million of capital for a range of infrastructure and medical equipment investments. I welcome those allocations, but, given the issues that have arisen when progressing Transforming Your Care, does the Minister believe that the financial resources available for its implementation are adequate?

The Department for Regional Development received almost £50 million for a range of areas including road repairs and street lighting improvements, and that, too, should be welcomed. Indeed, I have noticed a much improved can-do attitude from it in recent months in response to many requests.

Another positive allocation was the £5 million in capital to the Department of Education for minor works. Having taken the Education Minister to visit Strandtown Primary School this time last year so that he could see at first hand the challenges that the current building poses to staff and pupils, I am delighted that it is now benefiting during this financial year and undergoing a programme of minor works. However, there is still much pressure on our schools estate and a long way to go in addressing all the maintenance issues and newbuild requirements.

The Vote on Account for the 2014-15 financial year will ensure the continuation of services into that year. As we go into 2014-15, we must recognise that we do so with a significant overcommitment on both resource expenditure and capital investment. It is therefore important that we maximise the amount that we can carry forward under the Budget exchange scheme. We must also consider the burden that the failure to implement welfare reform

will place on our Budget and, although I have concerns about some aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill, reductions of over £100 million in the next financial year are simply not affordable and will have a major impact on our public services.

Before I finish, I wish to raise again the issue of the review of the financial process. If we are to be able to scrutinise ministerial decisions effectively, we need to have better read-across between the various financial documents that are before us. I understand that the Education Minister still has some outstanding concerns about the proposed changes, and I am interested to know whether the Finance Minister believes that he can make any more headway than his predecessor in resolving that so that we can have enhance transparency and improved Assembly scrutiny. I support both motions.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate.

It is widely recognised that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has proportionately the smallest budget. Nonetheless, the Committee has undertaken a robust and active scrutiny role throughout the 2013-14 budgetary year.

In this financial year, the Department briefed the Committee on the management of its annual budget. Sessions were held with departmental officials in May, September and December, during which the Committee was updated on a range of adjustments that affected spending profiles in advance of each monitoring round. On all occasions, the Committee challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and surrendering resources.

The Committee exercised its scrutiny role of significant public investment, including the UK City of Culture project, the World Police and Fire Games, and the redevelopment of Windsor Park, Casement Park and Ravenhill.

The most significant adjustment in this financial year is DCAL's return of £9·5 million capital. Although £1·4 million of that total is from the sale of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) site at Balmoral, the substantial proportion of the return is £8·2 million from the stadia redevelopment programme. The Committee welcomes the sale of the site at Balmoral, given that it has been on the market for quite some time. However, the Committee is concerned that it was not made aware of the full extent of the easement for the stadia programme. In October, the Committee was advised that the Department was returning £3·669 million capital from slippage in the stadia programme. It has only just come to the Committee's attention that an additional £4·5 million is also being handed back from the project. On that occasion, the Committee was prevented from properly fulfilling its scrutiny role of the financial management of the project.

Following the Audit Office's findings on DCAL's management of previous capital projects, as well as the departure of the stadia programme director to the private sector, the Committee has sought assurances from the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure that her Department has the expertise to complete the project on time and in budget. The Committee is fully aware of the pressures facing the project as a result of legal challenges and objections made regarding the Windsor and Casement redevelopments. It is also aware that there has been some engagement with the Finance Minister and his officials regarding a potential extension into 2015-16 and profiling of expenditure. I look forward to hearing from the Finance Minister regarding his position on the profiling of that major capital project.

The Committee will continue to scrutinise the Department's management of the stadia redevelopment and urges the Culture Minister to ensure that it is informed of significant financial adjustments in a timely manner.

Of the £6·5 million capital that DCAL has successfully bid for in this financial year, around half has been allocated for the development of library services, including building works, replacement of mobile libraries and an IT replacement project known as E2. Libraries have been and will remain a key area of focus for the Committee.

The Committee is aware of the Minister's priorities in respect of tackling poverty and social exclusion and promoting equality in the culture, arts and leisure sectors. That commitment is evidenced through the Department's successful bids for £2·2 million capital and £2·5 million resource. The Committee sought assurances from the Department that any imbalances under its section 75 obligations that might result from the priority will be minimised and addressed.

The Committee is also aware of the Department's shift towards zero-based budgeting, and that its arm's-length bodies are currently going through that process. The method of funding is being adopted to ensure that DCAL's arm's-length bodies meet the ministerial priority. Nonetheless, the Committee will scrutinise the practicalities of such an approach, including the overall impact that the funding might have on the general development of the arts, sport and culture.

Other successful bids for the Department during this financial year secured £1 million capital and £1 million resource for the Department's legacy plans following the UK City of Culture year. The Committee is aware that that will cover the January-March period, and that the Minister has longer-term plans, including a DCAL office in the north-west to oversee and manage a new company limited by guarantee focusing on developing and delivering a legacy programme. Although the Minister has a very clear intention of how to take that forward, the financial profile has not, as yet, been drawn up. The Committee looks forward to scrutinising that and seeking an evidence base that demonstrates value for money. Given the significant public investment in the delivery of the project, and concerns about sourcing private sponsorship, a legacy programme and funding must be secured through collaboration and a partnership approach.

Another key focus for the Committee over the past year has been the World Police and Fire Games. Over the next few weeks, the Committee will hear from the Department and the World Police and Fire Games company about the evaluation of the games. The Committee will look forward to hearing whether DCAL's investment of £3·93 million in the games was value for money.

Finally, the Committee has been looking at DCAL's expenditure on the Minister's Líofa initiative. To date, over £200,000 has been spent on Líofa, with another £260,000 expected on an advertising campaign and website. All that expenditure is being considered and approved on a case-by-case basis. The lack of a budget for Líofa means that there are no parameters through which the Committee

can determine whether the initiative is value for money or whether it is being managed properly. As we move towards considering departmental budget requirements for 2015-16, the Committee calls on the Minister to properly budget for that ongoing programme.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion today. I will make a few points on education matters before perhaps finishing with some wider comments.

Despite the very tight economic conditions, the Department of Education was able to announce a large number of new school builds, minor works and school enhancements in the past year. Despite the often lethargic nature of planning processes and officialdom, the expected investment of some £500 million of public money is not merely a fantastic boost for our local pupils and teachers, who will undoubtedly benefit from world-class facilities; it will have a knock-on effect on our local construction industry and the micro-economies in our regional towns.

Like the decentralisation of the fisheries office jobs to Downpatrick, the construction of the Down High School in the months and years ahead will provide plenty of cheer and will help lead local communities in economic recovery. It is also important, of course, that those schools provide a fit-for-purpose education system, with the right number of schools in the right places. We must continue to see the creation and celebration of high-quality education through a network of strong, sustainable schools that command the confidence of the communities they serve.

The Department invested more than £50 million in the preschool programme in 2013-14, enabling 99·9% of target-age children whose parents fully engaged with the admissions process to be offered a preschool place last September.

At the heart of that admissions arrangement are criteria that enable children from socially disadvantaged areas to gain a foothold on the educational ladder and that help them to overcome the barriers that socio-economic hardship would otherwise put in their way.

5.00 pm

Sinn Féin shares the Education Minister's concerns that the current common funding scheme does not adequately support his Department's core policy objectives. We strongly advocate more being done to raise standards in all our schools to effectively target social need and to build a sustainable and equitable schools estate. For that to be achieved, a revised funding scheme would have to be not only fit for purpose but would have to meet the principles of objectivity, equality and transparency. With that in mind, the Minister's plans to reform the funding scheme are to be welcomed and no doubt will prove instrumental in raising the educational achievements of so many of our young people, as laid out in Bob Salisbury's report.

I welcome the recent debate in the House and the fact that the relationship between social deprivation and educational achievement has received the spotlight. In tandem with an extensive body of international research, we recognise that pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome and that good schools with the necessary resources can assist them in breaking that toxic link.

We agree that more must be done to ensure the effective targeting of resources. That will undoubtedly enable schools to provide the necessary support for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to address the level of underachievement that, despite recent improvements, is still too high. We cannot grow as a society and an economy if we are prepared to tolerate a situation in which, after 12 years of compulsory schooling, children from poor families have half the chances of their better-off counterparts to reach the levels of attainment that we all desire. The international experience of education systems, such as that in Ontario in Canada, prove that, by targeting resources in that way, you not only narrow the attainment gap between socially disadvantaged children and more affluent pupils but you raise the bar for all learners.

Sinn Féin strongly endorses the fact that Bob Salisbury's report focuses on the needs of all our young people, regardless of where they go to school or the sector in which they are educated. Moreover, we welcome the panel's recognition that targeting poverty is one of the five key strategic priorities of the Executive's Programme for Government. Given that the Executive's aim is to stimulate interventions that break the cycle of deprivation and educational underachievement, it makes perfect sense that the Minister should look to close the gap in achievement between those who are least and most disadvantaged and to improve the participation of young people in education, employment and learning. Indeed, the all-party Public Accounts Committee called on the Education Minister to undertake a full review of the common funding formula to ensure that funding is directed to where it is needed most. As a member of the Public Accounts Committee and, indeed, of the Education Committee, I call on those opposite to put the interests of all our young people to the fore. This is public money, and it must be used in the interests of all the people.

Finally, I want to talk briefly about the need for fresh thinking from those on the opposite Benches. Public services need to be efficient and effective, yet the duplication of services, particularly in border counties, is allowed to continue. That fails not only our citizens but the public purse.

It has been illustrated that, where cooperation is developed, such as in health or education, not only does it provide a higher standard of care but it produces better economic outcomes. It improves the economic and physical well-being of all our citizens. The new jointly funded cancer centre in Derry and the Centre for Autism in Middletown demonstrate that progressive thinking can deliver public services across Ireland effectively and efficiently. A substantial start to achieving maximum efficiencies would be for all Departments in both jurisdictions to identify mutually beneficial projects that could be jointly developed from planning stage to completion, with an emphasis on delivering targets and expected outcomes.

We need a new approach to economic development across the island that does not promote austerity, perpetuate two fractured economies or, indeed, force thousands of our young people to emigrate in search of employment opportunities. There is no difference in the effects of the London or Dublin austerity policies, which

are crippling the lives of our people. Cooperation alone will not deliver prosperity for the people of Ireland, and an economy that is built on fairness and equality will deliver a bright future for all our people in a new Ireland. There is a better way for the people of Ireland, and that is through taking control of our sovereign economic and political destiny.

Mr Rogers: The SDLP has consistently argued against the way in which the current financial arrangements are being managed. The spring Supplementary Estimates provide a welcome opportunity to assess the areas of need in our education system. I also welcome the new Bills, but my concern is with the length of time that is taken between decisions being made in the House to the first sod being cut.

The Education and Skills Authority was introduced as a means of cutting costs and bureaucracy in the education service. In fact, so far, it has had the opposite effect. It has swallowed up approximately £16·5 million without any tangible output, and that has led to a crisis in the delivery of capital programmes in our schools. When the former NIO Minister Angela Smith introduced ESA in 2005, it was with a view to delivering more resources to the classroom. The SDLP was supportive of any initiative to deliver the real changes that ESA promised. Any supposed changes to date have been achieved by scaling down the level of services, which has caused unnecessary stress to teachers. In every education debate, we speak about raising standards, but, to raise standards, we must invest in our teaching staff. We have great teachers, but they need ongoing professional development and support.

When I question the departmental officials regularly at Committee, they still refer to CASS, which has been haemorrhaging for years. Board officials will tell you that they can only firefight; they can provide only minimal assistance for schools in formal intervention. For many years, there has been a focus on school self-evaluation, but the ETI acknowledges that it is still not well enough embedded in schools. Many schools need professional help from outside to get monitoring and self-evaluation right. What did the Department do? It did not even maintain the level of continuing professional development but cut £15 million out of the budget.

I wonder what type of joined-up thinking takes place in the Department at times between ETI, the officials who report to the Committee and the accountants who balance the books. Obviously, the accountants are winning and education is losing. It is ironic that an Education Department is being driven by an economic rather than an educational agenda. Teachers will tell you that, in essence, there is no CASS, but it is not the boards' fault. Where is the power-sharing Executive? Only two parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, seem to know what is going on with ESA. The Minister must get to grips with ESA and make sure that it represents value for money.

Investment in a long-term early years strategy is essential if we are to create the building blocks for our children's educational future. Current funding arrangements favour education at secondary or third level rather than at an early stage of learning. We believe that a child's development hinges on high-quality early childhood education. Increasing investment at an early stage is essential to address poor rates of literacy and numeracy. As I indicated last week, the involvement of parents and carers in their child's development is essential. The good practice that has developed through the extended schools programme needs to be disseminated to all schools.

An Audit Office report published in February 2013 pointed to the stark reality that thousands of young people in this region leave school unable to read or write. Although there have been some modest improvements, Northern Ireland's global education position in literacy and numeracy has been falling since 2006. In 2010-11, 9,000 pupils left full-time education after failing to reach the required standard in literacy and numeracy. We must do better.

Not only is an effective early years plan right for the development of young people, but it would help to improve our economy in the long term. A well-educated population can bring innovation, creativity and ingenuity into our economy. The SDLP believes that there must be a more robust focus on attainment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) throughout our education system in order to provide young people with the right skills. As a consequence, our businesses, with the necessary skills base, will excel in this era of global competition. It must start in primary schools. The Department will tell us that it does, but it is buried in the world around us. You must satisfy the enquiring mind of the young child.

If we are to see our economic outlook improve, we need to address the skills imbalances that characterise our island economy. Critically, those imbalances lead to lacklustre productivity and stifle foreign direct investment and business start-up. Skills gaps act as an impediment to productivity and can, therefore, generate lags in growth. Skills shortages refer to an imbalance between demand and supply in the labour market. Labour demands may not be fully met if the labour supply does not possess the right skills to meet those needs. There seems to be a recognition that, across our island, there needs to be greater engagement between higher education and enterprise to ensure that there is no mismatch between the skills requirement of Ireland and the output of its higher education systems.

I await the rework of the common funding formula, as the current version will not accurately address social need or improve delivery of the Department of Education's key policy objectives. A proposal that leaves almost 80% of our schools with less money will not just leave many of our small schools at a greater disadvantage; it will close many. Maybe that is the real intention. If we add area-based planning into the mix, the heart is being ripped out of rural communities. Without rural schools, we do not have rural communities.

The SDLP is only too aware of the finite nature of the resources that are available for education services. However, increased budgetary restrictions on schools will result only in more expensive problems in school maintenance and future provision. Schools are astounded that the Department did not bid for extra funding as part of the January monitoring round. The Department stated:

> *"As the ability of DE funded organisations to commission and incur significant additional resource expenditure prior to the 31 March 2014 is limited at this late stage of the financial year it was not considered prudent to bid for additional funding; due to the risk that the budget could not be effectively utilised."*

Every principal could have effectively utilised extra resources to replace computers that are so slow that they are useless or to carry out essential maintenance such as painting classrooms and fixing leaks. All schools are sitting with little projects that they could do if they had the money. They all could raise an order before the end of the day. Remember, it was the January monitoring round: there were still 10 weeks of the financial year left.

I do not understand why the Minister of Education has advised that his Department will not be participating in any future savings delivery plan. Surely, Budget 2011-15 required him to. So, the Executive, like the rest of us, are kept in the dark with respect to monitoring and whether the Department is meeting its objectives. We know that the principle behind one of those has not been met, namely that savings should be cash releasing and should not result in a diminution of services. CASS comes to mind.

Sound financial planning is intrinsic to improving our education system. The Minister of Education must work with the whole Executive, allocate funding to strengthen the educational prospects of all our young people and ensure that ESA is not an acronym for education still awaits.

Mr Beggs: The spring Supplementary Estimates set out and seek approval for changes since the Main Estimates were approved earlier in the financial year. As an Ulster Unionist member of the Health Committee, I will concentrate on the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

When I examined the changes in gross provision in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Estimates, there were a couple of significant changes that stood out, on which I will seek further explanation from the Minister.

I refer to RfR A-13 for "Business Services Organisation", the funding for which appears to have significantly increased. Net provision was initially recorded as £15·6 million, but that was increased to £45·9 million. That represents an almost trebling of the Budget allocation. Will the Minister give an explanation of what has happened for such significant changes to be made? In particular, what has happened to the levels of savings and efficiencies that were predicted when the Minister of Health brought in the new business services organisation restructuring and when the health trust administrations were centralised?

I also refer to RfR A-7 for the Department's training and further education budget. There appears to have been a £27 million reduction in the funding originally allocated. I find that surprising because, at a time of Transforming Your Care and of many shortages in many specialities, I would have thought that there would be additional pressures on the training budget and not a 43% reduction. Again, will the Minister explain that significant change and reassure me and the community that that does not mean short-term cuts in the training budget for specialist nurses, doctors and allied health professionals that we will regret in the immediate future?

The spring Supplementary Estimates also incorporate the monitoring rounds into departmental figures. I noticed recently that, at the Finance Committee, the Chairman questioned a senior Department of Finance and Personnel official on the 2011-15 Budget's "special terms" that were agreed by DFP. Those terms held that DHSSPS could reallocate internal reduced requirements but that it should not bid during in-year monitoring rounds except in the event of major and unforeseen circumstances.

The public and I will be glad that this stipulation appears to have been put aside and that there has been a U-turn. It would be helpful if the Minister of Finance would confirm this.

5.15 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Member may remember that it was actually the predecessor to the present Minister, Mr McGimpsey, who negotiated this provision; therefore, if it is not going too well, the Member could blame the honourable Member for South Belfast. Secondly, the Member and I sit on the Health Committee, and he knows that the Minister does come forward to show that his bids in the monitoring round are for inescapable financial demands on the Health Department that could not have been foreseen at the start of the financial year.

Mr Beggs: That is interesting. When I looked at the in-year monitoring bids for 2011-12, I discovered that the Department of Health received £25 million that year, £72·5 million in 2012-13 and, if my figures are right, it will be £98 million in the current year, almost twice the amount that the previous Minister would have been given. You will recall that, although he welcomed in-year flexibility, the previous Health Minister was dissatisfied with the health budget and, indeed, voted against it. However, you and your colleagues, and the current Health Minister, appeared to be satisfied with it. What we are finding is that it is not sufficient, and with inescapable pressures, we find, in virtually every in-year monitoring round, that we have bids for elective operations in order to reduce waiting lists. That could have been predicted. It happens virtually every year, so it is not something that is unforeseen. I beg to differ with your interpretation.

The health service now faces huge pressures on its accident and emergency service; a discussion earlier today reflects that. Does the health service have enough finance in this year, and indeed, next year's funding? By examining the recent monitoring round bid of £67 million, one is able to see the considerable pressures that exist and were not dealt with in the monitoring round. Some £30 million was awarded to the Department of Health, but I notice that the Minister of Finance, in a rather Pontius Pilate-like fashion, did not allocate the £30 million against individual bids submitted. He is letting the Minister of Health decide where to allocate and ultimately what not to allocate or how else to provide for inescapable pressures that were not provided for in that monitoring round.

As far as the inescapable pressures are concerned, we have the clinical negligence settlement of £20 million, the children's services bid of £5 million for additional pressures for children in care, a bid of £7 million for the quality and safety of services and a bid for unscheduled admissions and winter pressures of £11 million — and winter pressures are fairly predictable, Mr Wells, as they normally happen every winter. What were described to the Committee and prioritised as inescapable pressures totalled £43 million.

I would first like to record my appreciation and that of the Ulster Unionist Party to all health service staff who strive to maintain our health service in Northern Ireland, despite

having insufficient resources allocated to them to meet the level of demand they are facing. As I said, only £30 million was contributed to £43 million of inescapable pressures, so a further £13 million will have to be found from the rest of the health budget in order to meet these inescapable pressures.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have already given way and I am pressed for time.

The Health Committee was advised recently that each health trust in Northern Ireland is in deficit. On top of that, we are moving into the most heavily demanding time for the health service, when we have winter pressures. The health service is expected to find cuts to meet these inescapable pressures.

Additionally, some of the other bids that were not funded included a bid for £5 million for domiciliary care services, which help to improve patient flow out of our hospitals, take pressure off our accident and emergency units and provide additional care in the community, which means that, hopefully, fewer people will return to hospital. That was not inescapable, and the Minister did not prioritise it, but clearly it is very important. An elective care bid for £12 million was also not funded. It was not prioritised, and I suspect that, regrettably, waiting lists will grow. There was even a £7 million flagship bid for transitional TYC funding. Again, funding could not be found for that because of the inescapable priorities.

Many of the important changes that we are led to believe are essential will not have been funded this year. These were described as strategically important to the Department and critical to maintaining and improving the quality of care provided to patients and clients. However, they have not been funded.

There are huge pressures on our A&Es. During 2013, some 641 people had to wait more than 24 hours. We had a major incident at the Royal recently, which was due not to a major event but to a build-up of pressures and a shortage of hospital beds. The pressures at A&E are resulting in delays in ambulances handing over patients. I notice from the figures that, in the first six months up to September, over 500 ambulances had to wait at accident and emergency for more than one hour. One even had to wait for four hours. That results in fewer ambulances being available to respond to 999 calls, which means extended waiting times, with life-saving paramedics taking longer to get to scenes of accidents and emergencies. That can be critical. A few weeks ago, at Craigavon Area Hospital, ambulances had to be diverted to the Daisy Hill and South West hospitals.

As I said, the Health Committee has been advised that each trust is in deficit and that there are inescapable pressures. I wonder whether Mr Michael McGimpsey will receive an apology —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up,

Mr Beggs: — from the First Minister and his colleagues for saying that he was behaving in an "obscene" fashion. There is an urgent need to improve funding to the health service to meet the needs of our local community.

Mr Wells: Before I go into the main part of my speech, I have to say that Mr Beggs, if nothing else, is at least predictable. When Mr Beggs sees light at the end of the tunnel, he goes out and orders more tunnel. He simply cannot accept that huge strides have been made in health since May 2011.

The obvious success has been that, despite the very difficult fiscal straitjacket that we are all in, health has continued to deliver. The Minister, rather than simply complaining, moaning and demanding more money, set about finding inefficiencies in the present budget. Since May 2011, £700 million of inefficiencies have been taken out and redirected to essential care. I will put that amount of money in context: it is more than the budgets of seven Departments in Northern Ireland and almost as much as the budgets of the five smallest Departments combined.

That has been going on behind the scenes with a great deal of efficiency and diligence. Has anybody really noticed? No, we have not. However, it indicates that there were inefficiencies in the system left by the previous Sinn Féin, Ulster Unionist and direct rule Ministers. The Department has set about getting to the bottom of the situation and taking out the unessential and inefficient element of the health service budget.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly. I will be more generous than the Member was.

Mr Beggs: The Member says that everything is behaving wonderfully. Is he aware that there has been a deterioration in performance on four-hour waiting times at our type 1 A&E units? In the best months in the past three years, an additional 1,350 people have had to wait more than four hours. In the worst months in the winter, an additional 3,000 people have had to wait more than four hours. In other words, an additional 100 people a day are having to wait more than four hours in accident and emergency. Does he call that a success?

Mr Wells: Yet again, the honourable Member for East Antrim is being selective with his statistics. He has failed to recognise, of course, the dramatic fall in the number of patients waiting 12 hours, particularly in his own Northern Trust area where the Minister moved in and took action on Antrim Area Hospital with dramatic success.

Therefore, I accept that we will never have enough money for health. In the entire world, only Brunei can say that it has enough money for health. There will always these stresses and strains.

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

We have to remember that the Minister, in addition to taking out £700 million in efficiencies — I am sure that Mr Beggs is itching to stand up and congratulate him on that, and I will give him the opportunity to do so later — is faced with a situation in which the health element has, in real terms, had a 1·9% increase in the comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. There has been no increase at all, of course, at the social care end.

As I repeat very often, demand is rising by between 5% and 6%. Therefore, to square that circle, the Minister has had to take action to remove inefficiencies. I have to be honest and say that we are now well into that programme, and I believe that the vast majority of inefficiencies have been detected and removed. There is not much left

to take. The budget is stretched, and that is probably the only thing on which I will agree with Mr Beggs. We will have to find further funding for several reasons, the first being the increase in demand. Secondly, Mr Beggs is right in saying that the Finance Ministers, Mr Hamilton and his predecessor Mr Wilson, have been generous at the monitoring rounds, and we applaud them for that. Remember, however, that over one third of the entire Budget in Northern Ireland is spent on health, and, therefore, it is to be expected that the health budget will get significant additional funding through the monitoring rounds.

However, we also have to accept that things such as the A5 will not be with us for much longer. We were fortunate, in a sense, that, for various reasons, that major infrastructure project had to be put on ice. That meant that the Finance Minister was able to give a very generous settlement to the Health Department. There will not be an A5, as far as we can detect, in the incoming year. Therefore, that monitoring round may not be as generous. We need to keep ensuring that, if possible, extra money is put into health because we know that it will be very wisely spent.

There have been some considerable successes in the year that has just passed: for instance, the Minister announced capital spending for the new children's hospital at the Royal Victoria Hospital site, for which every Member has been calling for many years. We were told that it was almost impossible to fund, but money was found. That is a success. We have had ongoing work in the hospital at Omagh and, as I mentioned earlier, a significant reduction in 12-hour waiting times. In addition, we have had the significant development of the clinics in places such as Banbridge. There has been real progress in very difficult times.

Every year about this time of year, the Health Department's chief finance officer comes before the Health Committee, and I always remind her that she is like Houdini in the glass water tank with chains and padlocks on her hands. Every year, she seems to get out of that tank later and later, but she always seems to make it, and we always seem to balance the budget. BUT, it is getting harder and harder to come out of the financial year with the books in balance, and we all have to accept that. Any additional provision that the Department of Finance and Personnel can give will be much welcomed.

Last week, the Assembly showed responsibility in the pensions debate. You may ask why I am raising that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Had the Assembly not taken that difficult decision — I accept that it was difficult for us all that we simply could not afford to pay for pension provision for the next 30 or 40 years — at least a third of any cuts required to fund a different decision would have been to health. That is how serious it was.

We are now coming to probably the most important decision that this Assembly will ever take, which is on the Welfare Reform Bill. It is a terribly difficult issue, and none of us will want to be where we will be in a few months' time with that Bill. We do not want to be in that situation, but we are stuck with it, and, because of parity, we will have to introduce measures that will bring pain to our community, and we accept that. However, remember that, if we decide to hide our head in the sand and not go down the line of social security parity, whatever we decide to spend will not come as additional money from the block grant but will be taken from it, and at least 35% of that will be shaved off our health service.

The reality is that, when you look at the money involved two years down the line, the Health Department simply cannot afford to take that hit. Before we decide to beat our breast and say that we are not in favour of any change in social security spending, we must remember that the inevitable outcome of that decision would be that our major spending Departments — Health, Education, Justice, Regional Development etc — take a very significant hit.

5.30 pm

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Thank you for giving way. Can the Member outline to the House how he believes that a £20 million bid for outstanding clinical negligence is both major and unforeseen?

Mr Wells: Funnily, I was just about to come to that point in reaction to Mr Beggs's contribution.

I think that we need to distinguish between "unexpected" and "inescapable". "Unexpected" is an element that has suddenly appeared, that we knew nothing about and that could not have been predicted. "Inescapable" is something that we put in a bid for originally but, because of the finite budget, we could not fund. In the monitoring rounds, when more money has become available, we are asking for some more. Therefore, the Minister is not living in some naive land. Much of what he bid for was inescapable, but it was not unexpected, and that is the important distinction.

On medical negligence, we have no way of predicting at the start of the financial year what will come through the system. It is the courts that decide that, and we cannot dictate what happens. When the Minister became aware of the case, he made the bid for £20 million, and that is exactly right. I make no apology whatsoever for the Minister making as strong a bid as he can for additional money in the monitoring round. I do not believe that there is anything wrong with that, and if the system that was set up by Mr McGimpsey is flawed, that is where it came from. Remember, Mr Beggs, that originally the system was such that the Health Department was allowed full latitude in the distribution of money in its budget, but it automatically got the first £25 million of any monitoring round money. It was automatic in that the Health Minister did not have to bid for it.

We now have a different system whereby, of course, the Minister can bid. I would far rather have our Minister get £90 million by bidding than £25 million automatically. That is clearly a better system, and the Department of Finance and Personnel will have looked at the competing bids and thought that those were genuinely inescapable pressures on the Department and funded them accordingly.

We are living in cloud cuckoo land if we believe that any Minister will stand up in any fiscal situation and say, "We have enough". That is impossible. We will always have conflicting demands, but the Department has done extremely well over this past two and half years. It is to be congratulated for being able to employ more people to deliver better outcomes for patients, for being able to put more people through hospitals for various procedures and for being able to do so given such a straitjacket of funding.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Last October, in a blaze of publicity, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the

Minister of Finance and Personnel announced the launch of the agrifood loan scheme. Its objective was to help local food producers, who are part of the integrated food supply chain, by providing them with finance through loans. The scheme was to start off by giving funding to broiler producers, before moving on to the dairy sector and producers of pig meat and red meat. At the scheme's launch, Minister Foster acknowledged that there were difficulties for the industry to access finance and that the scheme was very important for the Going for Growth strategy. The Minister said that they had worked very hard to ensure that the scheme was as straightforward as possible.

The Finance Minister reiterated those comments. He then said that the scheme would be rolled out on a phased basis, the first phase of which would be open for applications the following month. That would be last November. Now we are into the new year, and I have learnt that the £10 million that was given to INI for the scheme has been surrendered and that the scheme has not been put in place.

Farmers, local producers and, indeed, prospective producers are very frustrated. I have dealt with some constituents who have planning permission in place, have come to agreements with the main producers and have some matched funding in place, yet the scheme has not happened. I hope that, when he responds to today's debate, the Minister will tell us what happened. Where did it all go wrong? What is the situation with the £10 million? Will the scheme be resuscitated? The scheme is very important for the industry, and it wants answers.

Mr McKinney: I will contribute to this debate by talking about the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I have already expressed my party's concern about the moneys requested in the January monitoring round, particularly those for clinical negligence. I know that the Minister made the point that clinical negligence costs are accrued over a long time — years, in fact. However, that is not a suitable reason for simply ignoring the fact that the amount requested for clinical negligence stands in stark contrast to the other amounts. We must interrogate the breakdown of the additional £30 million requested in January, and we have not had sufficient answers.

I have to reflect on Mr Wells's comments about clinical negligence: that it is now the courts' fault. That is a classic case of issue avoidance that now it is the courts' responsibility. How do these cases end up in the courts? Is there another approach that the Health Department could take when it comes to these types of cases and mistakes being made in the health service? Perhaps the Member could point to something that the Minister has done in relation to that. How else could we look at those costs and not have to have a £20 million additional inescapable —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKinney: I will, of course.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member, in this life and in a previous life, knows that medical negligence cases can take eight or nine years before they come to court and any final settlement is reached. The present Minister was not in position when that happened, nor was the previous one. In no way can he intervene at such a late stage in those cases. He has no way of knowing what the outcomes will be, as they are very difficult to predict. That is the nature of the beast, unfortunately, as far as medical negligence is concerned. Even if he took action now, it would be four or five years before there would be any change in the system.

Mr McKinney: I notice that the Member did not actually comment on what I asked, which was: can he point to anything that the Minister has done? The Minister has a responsibility to look after historic and present costs, but he also has a responsibility to deal with future potential costs, and he has not yet been able to point at anything that the Minister has done in relation to that.

The Minister and Mr Wells should also reflect on the fact that they have taken £700 million out of the health service. The SDLP recognises that, given that 50p in every pound is spent on health here, we have to look at how that money is spent and make sure that it is spent wisely. Given the big numbers that are talked about in the January monitoring round and in other rounds, we must make sure that, with the moneys that are claimed through clinical negligence, and the practical implementation of TYC — they become even more crucial. They have a bigger impact on a reducing budget. That underscores the need to ensure that those moneys do not end up with front line services being harmed. We must properly fund front line services.

We cannot ignore the Minister's announcement this morning on issues around accident and emergency at the Royal. Our narrative has been that these cases apply all across the North, but the Minister was able to tell us that, after consulting 100 staff, he has found intolerable pressures in that system. Some of those reductions, combined with demands for money elsewhere, are adding increased pressure on to that system.

As the Minister well knows, the pressures on health are many, and they are all very genuine. We have only to look at the crisis situations recently seen in many of our accident and emergency departments to know that funding needs to be sufficient in order to maintain a high quality of patient care.

The invest-to-save aspect of the current health budget requirements has at its heart Transforming Your Care. I trust that the Finance Minister will continue to cast a clinical eye on every aspect of Transforming Your Care and whether or not the financial cuts are actually beneficial in the long term.

For it to work, it is important that investments that are made to save money down the line genuinely achieve those savings and are in credible invest-to-save options. Many in the professional side of management, the clinical side, the representative organisations, the patient groups and a significant number of Members still have reservations about aspects of Transforming Your Care being able to deliver the savings that are being suggested. Indeed, we met UNISON and the Royal College of Nursing, both of which have those concerns.

Other aspects of health and social care policy will present us with real and deep financial challenges, not least the cost of social care. Given that we have an integrated health and social care system here, it would be a great pity if we ended up having to ask people at the very limit of their means to make contributions to the social care of elderly people in particular, which are well beyond their ability to afford. In our view, such a scenario would be a breach of the basic contract at the heart of the NHS, which

is to provide health and social care free at the point of need. I trust that the Minister will continue to respect and uphold that principle.

As we reflect and begin to face up to the challenges of providing an increasingly ageing population with social care, we must do so in a way that does not cripple working families or provide little more than a shifting of debt from one generation to the other.

Finally, I want to talk about all-island efficiencies and opportunities. Those are significant in the health and social care arena, whether they are through the commissioning of specialist surgical and secondary care services, greater opportunity for cooperation in the primary care sector in and along the border region, integrating emergency services in the border region or through the specialist and strategic investments that could be made in our very good and very modern hospitals north of the border. I think about the success of the cancer centre in Belfast City Hospital and the opportunity for further cardiac services to be developed in Altnagelvin.

There are many financial opportunities out there, and we need to ensure that the Minister and his Department maximise each of them to achieve the standards that are necessary for 21st-century healthcare provision. There is one thing that the SDLP fears, and that is the provision of healthcare under the strategic direction of the 'Transforming Your Care' document must not become simply a financial exercise rather than one that has patient care and front line services at its core.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): Speaking as Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee, I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee's views on the spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14.

Given that it is one of the Executive's largest spenders, the Committee takes scrutiny of the DEL budget very seriously. The Committee understands the challenges to the forecasting of the budget, given that the Department's services are so closely linked to the wider economic conditions. Throughout the 2013-14 period, the Committee listened with interest as officials from the Department explained the subtle shifts in funding to meet changing demands and the requirements of decreasing budgets.

In this financial year, the Committee has had seven briefings from DEL officials on its savings delivery plans and monitoring rounds. The difficulty in estimating a demand-led budget such as DEL's was best exemplified by the Department coming to the Committee last May and advising that, in the June monitoring round, it included a bid for £5 million to help to ease the pressure with employment programmes. It also advised that it was confident in the success of the bid and that, if it was not successful, it would resubmit the bid in the October monitoring round. However, the bid was unsuccessful, and it did not show up again in the October monitoring round. When asked what had happened in the intervening period, the Department outlined that it had better estimates of its future spend and was able to find savings elsewhere.

From that anecdote on how estimates can be wrong, I will now move to comment on the spring Supplementary Estimates. The Committee acknowledges the £9·2 million resource easement in the Department and notes that that may have been larger if the £5 million bid had been successful. The Committee notes that £6 million of the money that was surrendered was from the further education colleges' end-of-year flexibility schemes and that up to £6 million will go back to the colleges in June if it is required.

The fact that £1 million has been returned because the youth employment scheme was unable to spend it is a concern to the Committee, given the current high levels of youth unemployment. The Committee also notes the technical changes in student loans and the adjustment of £22·1 million in resource from the Treasury to increase the student loans impairments line, which will therefore not come from other Departments. The Committee notes that that headroom has been built in to the Department for Employment and Learning's student loan budget following a very recent change in the way that student loans are recorded throughout the UK. That change was notified to the Finance Minister on 15 January 2014.

The Committee also notes with interest that DEL has made a technical transfer of £3·3 million to the Department of Health for its condition management programme. The Committee was briefed on that programme last year and has taken a keen interest in its continuance, as both DEL and the Department of Health are reviewing the funding sources. The Committee is particularly pleased to see the £25 million capital allocation from the Strategic Investment Board via OFMDFM for the University of Ulster as a loan for funding the relocation of the university's Jordanstown campus to Belfast city centre.

The Committee is content to note the spring Supplementary Estimates and looks forward to reviewing their accuracy in future briefings.

Speaking as Ulster Unionist employment and learning spokesperson, I can say that the most concerning fact to us is the £1 million that was returned, especially in the current situation, given increased levels of youth unemployment. We think that the Department should have made better use of that money to ease the critical situation at this time. There are a number of programmes and delivery schemes out there, and the Department keeps bringing forward further programmes. How is it going to tackle this programme? We think that to hand back £1 million is reprehensible in the current situation.

5.45 pm

Mr Attwood: I apologise that I have not been in the Chamber to hear much of the debate, but other duties took me elsewhere in the Building.

Mr Swann said in his contribution that his Committee took the scrutiny of the DEL budget very seriously. I think that any Chair and any member of any Committee would echo those comments. That is why, in opening, I want to make a general comment about the conduct of the OFMDFM Committee.

Two weeks ago, it wrote unanimously to the permanent secretary and head of the Civil Service asking him to come to the Committee to discuss the inability of the Committee to extract from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister relevant information for it to fulfil its statutory function of accountability, including accountability in respect of Estimates and Votes on Account. The Committee had to write to the head of the Civil Service asking that he come to the Committee to see whether he

could work with the Committee to resolve the issues that the Committee has with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in respect of questions that it has on policy implementation, the proper spending of resources and the allocation of moneys.

I could speak at length, as could other members of the Committee, about how that situation has arisen. A Committee of the House, further to devolution, is, in my view, being frustrated and is unable to fulfil its statutory function, including when it comes to budgetary issues, to the point where it has to ask to see the permanent secretary.

The Committee has agreed that, as a preamble to that meeting, the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Committee will meet the head of the Civil Service to discuss the difficulty, which long predates my joining the Committee in October, about questions to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister not being asked, papers not being provided and answers not being given to proper questions further to our statutory responsibility.

It took years of democratic struggle to achieve devolution, only to see devolution now being frustrated by the failure of one Department to account properly to the Committee to which it is answerable on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Minister has left the House, but he will be aware that, earlier today, the First Minister confirmed how 40% of the budget allocation for the social investment fund would be spent. Does the Minister accept the argument that the OFMDFM Committee is being frustrated in discharging its statutory function in the way that I have outlined?

I have a second question for the Minister. In 2011, there was a budget allocation for SIF. However, nearly three years later, the only money spent has been on consultants. Over the weekend, I heard the leader of another political party on this island, at his annual ard fheis, criticise the Irish Government for spending money on Irish Water, because all of it was going into the pockets of consultants. When I heard the leader of that party say those words in Wexford, I wondered whether the leader of that party would apply those very same words to the allocation of moneys up until today to the social investment fund. Up until today, all the money has gone into the pockets of consultants. I wonder whether I will get an answer to that question.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Not from me.

Mr Attwood: You would be tempting fate, I think, if you were to answer that, Minister.

My question to the Minister is this: what sense does it make that a Budget allocation in 2014 has, as of today, been spent only on consultants? The First Minister confirmed in the House today that the full spend of the £80 million would now stretch into the next mandate. Is there any government policy or spend where a Budget allocation of three years ago has not been spent until today and where it will take another three years to spend even the £80 million that was allocated under the Budget headline? Does it not prove that when it comes to proper management of finances, you put the money where the policy is located? When it comes to neighbourhood disadvantage and renewal, the policy is located in DSD. That is not to take away from the fact that SIF may fund good projects; but it does not take away the concern that, around SIF, there is still a level of cronyism, party politics and insider trading in the allocation of some of that money.

I have a third question for the Minister. I know that earlier, my colleague the Chair of the Enterprise Committee asked questions about Horizon 2020, the £80 billion fund for research, development and innovation that comes from Europe. I acknowledge that DETI and INI have appointed additional staff — I think that they are five or six in number, but they are nonetheless additional staff — to try to better deliver the funding opportunities that arise from Horizon 2020.

Does the Minister not agree, not least because of the need to develop the financial profile of Northern Ireland when it comes to research and development, that the current ambition of a drawdown of only £100 million from the Horizon 2020 budget for 2014-2020 is scandalous when you compare it with the anticipated drawdown in Dublin from the same budget of €1·4 billion, being mindful that, just as they surpassed their notional targets for FP7, they will surpass that and will get closer to a drawdown of €2 billion over those six years?

With regard to that low-hanging fruit, is there not an opportunity for the Government in the North to develop the systems and structures in government to draw down the potential funding that could see the money that is being allocated under these Estimates to research and development in universities, for example, being multiplied many times?

My fourth question to the Minister is one that the SDLP raised in 2009. The Minister will be fully aware of it. Where are we now, five years later, with regard to using to the public's benefit some of the money that was gathered through the Harbour Commissioners' very efficient management of the port of Northern Ireland? Are we any closer either to getting cash —

Mr Allister: No.

Mr Attwood: I am hearing over here that the answer is no. Maybe the answer will be yes from over there shortly. Are we any closer to being able to use either the cash reserves, if they have not been spent on alternative projects by the Harbour Commissioners, or, in some other way, the financing and profits of the Harbour Commissioners for the wider interest beyond that of the harbour?

The harbour is a very important asset in this part of the North. It is one of the two main harbours on the island of Ireland. It has a profit margin of 35% of its annual income. It is probably the most profitable organisation in the North of Ireland. Are we any closer to ensuring that some of its funds come back into the public purse for the wider public benefit? Are we any closer, for example, to seeing a contribution from the Harbour Commissioners to the construction of the underpass by his ministerial colleague in DRD? Given that they have responsibility for the harbour area, it seems to me that it is a small hop, skip and jump to contribute to the funding of a road and underpass that are a matter of metres or yards away.

My final point is that there is a responsibility in these times, given the profile of issues around victims and survivors generally and, not least, because of the Haass talks, for government to be looking at and probing more deeply

the work of the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). Work is ongoing. I acknowledge the work of the Victims' Commission in that regard. However, in my view, when it comes to money that is going to the VSS, a lot of it would be better spent by third-party accredited organisations who know best what needs to be done on behalf of victims and survivors generally.

Mr B McCrea: I listened to the Minister's opening remarks, when he reminded us of the purpose of the debate. I think that he rather forlornly hoped that we would stick to it but accepted that we might stray a little. However, I will try to deal with some of the issues raised.

I am disappointed by the progress towards how we look at the Budget process. Perhaps the Minister will agree. Frankly, it is rather difficult to understand what is going on in many cases. I have a Research and Information Service paper on DFP's review of financial process. It outlines quite a number of recommendations that, I understand, have the support of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. I wonder whether the Minister might, at some stage, take some time to explain to us why we have not been able to make more progress on that. He may choose to reflect on the process happening in Scotland where, because of the potential for the enhanced devolution of fiscal powers, they are looking at an even better streamlined system. The reason that is important is this: if the devolution of corporation tax is one of the key objectives of the Minister, he will know that it is one of the most volatile taxes that we can manage and we need better fiscal powers and better fiscal control to make sure that we can deal with it. That was one of the reasons why my party, NI21, called for an overarching review of all our fiscal powers.

I quote what the Minister said last week on 4 February when he said that we have had a number of difficult years. In fact, he repeated it. He said:

> *"we have had a difficult number of years — times will get tougher even as the economy improves, particularly in respect of public expenditure." — [Official Report, This Bound Volume, p316, col 1.]*

That is a really interesting statement to make only last week: even as the economy improves, things will get tougher. That means that we need better financial control.

I put to the Minister a quotation from Liam Fox, a member of the Conservative Party, speaking about his desire to stop the ring-fencing of health:

> *"I think we've tested to destruction the idea that simply throwing ... money at the health service will make it better."*

That is a stark warning. A lot of our revenue is unhypothecated, and, if we lose health and education's ring-fenced status, we will have real problems with our Budget.

I will move on to some of the specifics that the Minister may wish to deal with, since this is something of a tidying-up exercise. I will continue where the previous Member left off, with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. One of the things that was interesting in the Hansard report of the Finance and Personnel Committee meeting was this:

> *"The DRD has a number of significant allocations and easements. In allocations, £20 million went to the DRD to make up the shortfall in the release of funds from the ports, which we thought we might get but did not work out that way."*

That is a really interesting statement. It relates to the Budget statement. The Executive have agreed that the Harbour Commissioners will take forward measures to ensure that they can make a direct financial contribution of £20 million a year for 2013-14 and 2014-15. In answer to a question asked by Mr Attwood, Mr Len O'Hagan said that they had very clear legal advice:

> *"I think that is the same as that of DRD — that there is no way in which any of the assets or cash of Belfast Harbour can be transferred to the Assembly."*

Given that you had that warning, you wonder why we have it in the Budget and why we were expecting it to come along but it did not work out that way.

I want to make some other points. In health spending, £56 million resource and £46 million capital were reallocated this year. Mr Wells was waxing lyrical about it. Did no other Department have any requirements? Where is the link to that expenditure in the Programme for Government? We had an agreed position, and suddenly we are just dishing out money. I am not saying that it was not right to give the money — I just do not know — but the idea was that it was supposed to be tied to the Programme for Government, and other Members have made the point that this is not really working out terribly well.

6.00 pm

The Principal Deputy Speaker will probably be familiar with this point of argument, and I will quote him. In Committee, Mr McLaughlin asked:

> *"Are we giving the money to health because it can spend it?"*

Mr Jakobsen replied, "Yes". Mr McLaughlin said:

> *"It is not that health needs it."*

Mr Jakobsen said that health did need it because it had made a bid,

> *"but it can spend the money now, towards the year end. Most Departments cannot ramp up their spending quickly. That is the issue."*

When we look for details, we cannot find them. So it comes down to this: how are we meant to manage a Budget when we do not get the figures and do not agree to the protocol? I want to hear from the Minister whether he thinks that the process is fit for purpose, regardless of the merits of the actual allocation. It seems doubtful to me.

I also want to mention social and affordable housing. Demand continually outstrips provision, yet, as far as I can see — I stand to be corrected — DSD has made limited in-year bids for extra resources to boost house building. Why is it that we cannot try to meet that build? Why did we decide to put all the money in health?

The social investment fund was announced today to great triumph. I read the tweets from the 'Belfast Telegraph' about how wonderfully we have done. In any other place,

a budget that was delivered two and a half years late, after probably our worst recession, would be greeted not with cries of joy but with derision. How are we able to manage this Budget if we still do not know what has been paid for?

We then get to welfare reform. I see that we have made a provision for £5 million a month from January and that there has been £15 million for the past three months. How long will that carry on?

I am not sure whether the issue about the Titanic building is in the Budget, but Mr Allister was the last person to ask a question about this — a full year ago. You will remember that because, at the time, there was also a debate about the value of mints at the front of the Chamber. We were able to discuss who should pay for the mints in great detail, but, when it came to the £18·3 million, we were told that it could not be drawn down, would be put somewhere else, would be reallocated, might be lost or might not be lost. There is some talk about it in Hansard, but I still do not know what happened to that £18·3 million.

Going through the details, I see that, in the monitoring rounds, £17 million is allocated to the Invest NI building: 'Invest NI Snaps Up HQ Building'. That is £17 million that we have just spent. That seems rather strange. Paragraph 3.36 of the Budget for 2011-15 states:

> *"The Executive has now endorsed the establishment of a Central Asset Management Unit who will work to deliver the £100 million of additional capital receipts identified in the draft Budget."*

In the Budget, we were planning to sell the estate and raise money, but suddenly we have decided to buy buildings. It may be that that is the correct decision — I do not know — but I am telling you that that 180-degree turn without any real discussion or oversight is a bit of a surprise, given what was agreed in the Budget. I have an issue about how we conduct our business in all these matters.

These debates, during which we stand up and say the same old thing time and time again and have 10 minutes to try to fix the travails of the world, are not the proper way to do government or to engage. We should have a Budget, and it should be discussed. Committees are entitled to paperwork and information, and we should have proper oversight. That is good governance, but it is not what we get. I want the Minister, in his response, to state what he intends to do about it.

Mr Allister: Today, in this debate, I have heard a number of Members dutifully laud the Executive for the production of their Estimates, the diligence and thoughtfulness that goes into all these matters and the delivery that comes with it. Is this the Executive whose joint leader described them as an embarrassment? Are we talking about the same Executive?

Of course, if we want to talk about embarrassment, Mr McCrea has just referred to the episode today of the announcement of the social investment fund. When did we first hear about the social investment fund? It just happened to be just before the last election in 2011. We heard about the £80 million that was hard won by the DUP and Sinn Féin. They were going to spread it to causes of need throughout the community, and things were going to be wonderful. Today, three years later, after £42 million of it has had to be given back during various monitoring escapades, we have some announcements. However, the First Minister was careful to make sure that there was no scrutiny of the announcement by keeping the detail off the website until the time for OFMDFM questions in Question Time had passed. What do I find as a representative for North Antrim? I find that not one penny will come to North Antrim under this tranche of the social investment fund. The whole northern region is getting £400,000. This is the great announcement that was promised for years. Little wonder that the joint First Minister is embarrassed by the Executive. So he might be, though he seems to forget that he is their joint leader and therefore a great source of that embarrassment.

I have a few questions for the Minister. When you examine the financial process through the year and the changes in the in-year monitoring, it is noticeable that four Departments — three in particular: DARD, DCAL and the Department of Education — never give up anything under a single easement during the year. Is it just a coincidence that they are the three Sinn Féin Ministries? Not one penny was surrendered in the easements. While other Departments were expected to make savings to allow redistribution, they operated on the basis of holding their hand out and giving nothing. Why was it that those three Sinn Féin Departments had nothing to offer in easements? Are they the freeloading Departments of the Executive for which it is all take and no give? Of course, their Ministers are from the party that is holding up the review of financial processes. It is courtesy of them that we do not even have basic transparency in our budgetary arrangements. If it is not a coincidence, why is the Finance Minister not going after them hard for their failure to deliver on easements? Of course, the same party is piling up the penalties on welfare reform and again wanting to freeload on that front but taking none of the pain in its Departments.

Indeed, some have had most lavish uplifts during the year. DCAL's cultural policy and language line increased by 100% over the year. And yet, other Departments are required, of necessity, to pull their weight. Why are the Sinn Féin Departments not pulling their weight in financial easements? That is a question that I would like to hear answered.

I would also like to hear what progress the Minister is making in dealing with another freeloading issue to which I referred in my question to the Minister for Employment and Learning: free education for students from the Irish Republic in our regional colleges. That costs over £7 million a year. Some 5% of the DEL budget for further education is spent on providing free education to Republic of Ireland students, and not a penny of it is paid back by the Southern Government. What progress is the Minister making there?

What progress has been made on the free healthcare that is provided on a cross-border basis, or is there just another saga of freeloading in that regard? Perhaps the Minister can tell us what progress has been made in balancing the books in that regard.

Something else that the Minister can maybe elaborate on is the progress that he is making in dealing with the outstanding equal pay claim of civil servants from the PSNI and other arms in Justice. How long will that saga continue? How long will those people be held out on before they get the equality of provision that others obtained? The Minister has told the House a number of times that he is looking at the matter. I hope that he is doing more

than looking at it; I hope that he will deliver on it. Maybe it is now close enough to the election for him to make the announcement that he will deliver on it. Maybe tonight he will tell us.

There seem to be some very favoured organisations in the Estimates. One of them, I note, is the Strategic Investment Board, which gets an uplift during the year of not 100%, 200% or 300% but 400%. It gets a 400% increase in its funding. Why is that? One is left to wonder.

Something else that puzzles me about the Estimates is the uplift during the year for Invest NI of some £30 million, yet it is a serial underspender. In monitoring round after monitoring round in recent years, it has been returning funds. Will the Minister give the rhyme or reason for Invest NI nonetheless seeing that increase during the year?

How are we doing on the dispersal of and reduction in the number of quangos? I remember another brave, bold announcement that we were going to cull quangos, that this Executive were going to tackle the issue of quangos. Of course, they were also going to tackle the issue of surplus Departments, and we had a great to-do that DEL was going to be disappeared, only for there to be a total U-turn. How about the quangos? Why is it that tonight we have more people serving on quangos that when this Executive came into being?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is almost up.

Mr Allister: In 2007, in OFMDFM alone, there were 94 appointees on quangos. In just five years, that had increased to 108.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: So, where is the cull of quangos?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: Of course, there is also the £30 million that we continue to squander on the useless North/South bodies.

6.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel. You have used 16 minutes of your allocated hour.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to respond as best I can to Members. I would have been disappointed if the last Member had not got in the last point. I am sure that he would have been more disappointed, though. At one stage, I thought that he was going to whip himself up into such a frenzy that he might have put additional pressures on the Health Minister's already pressurised health budget.

I thank all Members, including the last Member, for their contributions to the debate today, particularly those who spoke on behalf of their Committee. This has been my first Supply resolution debate as Finance Minister but certainly not my first as a Member of the House. Over my time, I have seen a growing awareness and understanding in the House of the nature of the debate. I welcome the comments of those who contributed to that understanding. Nevertheless, as predicted, some Members took the opportunity to, shall we say, air subjects more loosely connected to the Supply resolutions before us. I will attempt to respond as fully as possible in the time available to me to as many of the relevant issues discussed as possible.

I acknowledge the confirmation today by the Chairperson of my Committee, Daithí McKay, on behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the spending plans reflected in the motions and that the Committee is content that the Budget Bill, which I hope to introduce after this debate, should proceed via accelerated passage. I very much appreciate the assistance, as always, of the Committee in this matter.

I now turn to the issues raised by Members. I will deal with one of Mr Allister's points. I know that he made several points, and I will endeavour to respond as best I can, but I lead with one about which there is — how can I put it? — an inexactitude in the facts. He made comments about how there had been no reduced requirements from Sinn Féin Departments. I am happy to stand corrected if he did not say that there had been no reduced requirements, but one does not have to go too far back — back to January, in fact, and the January monitoring round — to find that, in the first table supplied to Members after the statement, the first reduced requirement was from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. It was £500,000 on a forestry fund, and there was a reduced requirement of £0·8 million for the Northern Ireland food and animal information system. There was a reduced requirement of £1·1 million in Department of Education surplus asset receipts. There was £4·5 million of a reduced requirement in DCAL's regional stadium programme. If you go back a little further to the October monitoring round, there was a reduced requirement of £3·7 million from the Culture Minister, and there were surplus asset receipts from the Department of Education of £1·6 million. It is not entirely accurate to say that there have been no reduced requirements from Sinn Féin Ministers.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Allister: In fact, I was quoting from a document produced by the Minister's Department as a briefing paper to the Finance Committee just a short time ago. It provided at annex A the reconciliation of DEL from Main Estimates to spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14. Under the column on easements, it showed DARD — nil; DCAL — nil; and the Department of Education — nil. The source of my allegation is a departmental document from the Minister's Department.

Mr Hamilton: Reduced requirements are the important aspect of the management of finances in the Executive and the Assembly. It is very clear that all Departments — periodically some more than others, for various reasons — *[Interruption.]* The Member has been in the House for long enough now to realise that the papers that are produced and put forward, both in January monitoring and October monitoring — I am sure that I could go back to June monitoring last year and, indeed, monitoring rounds before that in previous years — show that DARD, DE and DCAL in this mandate have offered reduced requirements on every occasion. It is not for me, as Minister of Finance and Personnel, to in any way defend the reasons behind all of those, but there are certainly reduced requirements coming forward in every case. If the Member looks at the annex that he has been brandishing, he will see that

easements on the resource side have been zero. On the capital side, there have been significant easements and reduced requirements.

Of course, other Departments have had very low figures, but I do not hear the Member criticising them. Far be it from me to defend any Minister's Department, but, when the Member reads in Hansard his comments that there have been no easements — I think that that is what he said — he will, even by the piece of paper that he is brandishing, be shown to be wrong. I will not go into it further, as I have already used up five minutes of my time. I want to address some of the other issues that the Member and others raised.

Mr McKay and Mr Bradley raised issues about headroom. In fact, the Chair of the Committee described the quantum of headroom this year as perhaps a preparation for bad financial management. I have to say that I do not agree. It is important to emphasise that we are factoring in to the headroom an additional £15 million for welfare reform penalties. Should progress on welfare reform be made before the end of the year, we might be able to utilise some of that funding. I believe that the inclusion of headroom in that case is prudent planning; it is certainly not preparing for bad budget management.

I also want to point out that Departments should be totally focused on adhering to their budgets as they stand, and I expect them to come in within those budgets. Headroom is in place only should significant late easements arise that allow us to avoid handing back funding to Her Majesty's Treasury. It ensures that we spend all our money and do not relinquish any of it back to the Treasury. I am sure that we would all agree with that.

The Committee Chair advised that the Committee of Finance and Personnel would like a report to be issued annually outlining the final out-turn position. Historically, the out-turn position has been reported to Departments at provisional out-turn stage, along with my statement to the House accompanying the June monitoring round. That is available much earlier than the final out-turn stage. There is rarely much change at the final out-turn stage, and it usually manifests itself in or around the summer period. My officials and I are happy to work with the Committee to develop reports that will provide an update at the final out-turn stage.

Mr McKay is a keen cyclist, although I am not sure whether that is still the case with the recent weather. I agree with him that there is enormous prestige in Northern Ireland being selected as the venue for the Grande Partenza of the Giro d'Italia. That, once again, proves that Northern Ireland is a world-class tourism and sporting venue. In recognition of the importance of the event, the Tourist Board has committed £3 million to it, and I understand that DETI dedicated a further half a million pounds to the Tourist Board to cover some Giro d'Italia-related activities. The Member also mentioned that DSD had committed funds for what is perhaps best described as a spring clean for some of the towns along the route. Of course, the Executive would have to consider any further funding requirements for the event. I am certainly content to look at more spending if it is required, although I have to say that losing £15 million to welfare reform this year certainly does not help matters.

Mr Givan: Hear, hear.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Givan — right on cue — raised a number of issues on the Department of Justice's —

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Wells: The Minister quoted the figure of £15 million. Perhaps he could also alert the House to what the likely outcome will be in the following year if we do not adopt the Welfare Reform Bill in its entirety?

Mr Hamilton: I am happy to reiterate what I said in my opening statement about the estimated cost for next year being £105 million. I am sure that, having spoken to and debated with colleagues on the health budget, the Member will appreciate that that will have a very serious impact. There is a danger in dismissing £15 million as a paltry amount in the context of a £12 billion departmental budget overall. Once it rises from £15 million to £105 million and then escalates to over £1 billion in total over the next five years, the impact on vulnerable people and public services in Northern Ireland will be exceptionally acute.

Mr Givan raised issues about the Department of Justice's budget, and he is the Chair of the Justice Committee. I welcome the work of the Minister and the Committee in making efforts to manage the Department of Justice's budget, especially its legal aid budget. The Department of Justice's budget faces many pressures, and the Executive will, where possible, support the Minister in his work. Indeed, alongside the £115 million allocated by Treasury, the Executive supported the Department with some £16 million this year. The Department of Justice's budget, however, remains ring-fenced, and I expect the Justice Minister to continue to contain those pressures next year. The Member might be interested to know that I am scheduled to meet the Chief Constable and the Minister of Justice soon to look at pressures in future years.

The Member mentioned headroom for the Prison Service exit scheme. Although there is no guarantee that money will be available, I am hopeful that we will be able to meet that bid if funding becomes available between now and the end of the financial year.

A number of Members — Mr Bradley, Mr Cree, Mrs Cochrane and, latterly, Mr McCrea — raised the issue of the review of financial processes. I am as frustrated as everyone who raised the issue at the lack of progress on the review. I strongly agree that this is an area where we need to see reform of what are outdated processes. It has, as Mr McCrea mentioned, been agreed by my Committee. Clearly, it has widespread support in the House.

As Members will be aware, and I think that Mr Cree and others mentioned this, the Education Minister has expressed concern around aspects of this review and, more specifically, around the level of scrutiny applied to his budget. I share the concerns of others, as, in my view, the Education Minister's issues have been addressed. However, I am willing to have further discussions with the Education Minister on this subject, as progress will, of course, require Executive agreement.

I am sure that many will agree with me that we want to get rid of an archaic, out-of-date and direct rule-era system of budgeting. I am sure that the Education Minister would similarly agree with the need to get rid of a direct rule-era system of budgeting.

Mr Bradley and Mrs McLaughlin, as did many other Members, raised issues about special arrangements for the Department of Health. It is true that the Executive have provided substantial additional funds to the health service in this financial year. I am sure that all Members would welcome that, although at times I listened to Members, Mr Bradley included and others, who sounded as if they were complaining about additional money being spent on the health service. The original agreement precluded Health from tabling routine bids, but it did not preclude allocations being made to the Department of Health.

The monitoring rounds exist to ensure that resources are distributed to the Executive's priorities, and the Executive have rightly considered our health service to be one of those top priorities. In the context where significant funding became available this year, I think that the Executive would be short-sighted if we decided not to fund our health services when this was considered a higher priority than other requests, especially at a time when the health service is facing considerable pressures.

I move to Anna Lo's comments; she was speaking as Chair of the Environment Committee. I thank her for her comments on the Budget. Although I am sympathetic to the call for budgets to be made available for cleaning up illegal waste, the Member will know that that is a matter more directly for the DOE Minister to prioritise and bring to the Executive if necessary.

The Member also raised the issue of local government reform and the Planning Service budget and road safety budget. The Member will know that the budget for planning and road safety is a matter for the DOE Minister, who will prioritise his overall budget accordingly. The Member drew attention to the reduction in the Planning Service's line by £2 million in the spring Supplementary Estimates. That is a result of some internal reallocations of budgets in DOE to ensure that back office costs are correctly apportioned across the various business areas, particularly planning and the NIEA. It does not represent a cut in front line services with the Planning Service and does not have any bearing on the transfer of responsibilities to local government under RPA.

Michaela Boyle raised issues in respect of hardship funding through DARD. She mentioned the £5·3 million that was allocated to DARD. I am glad that the Executive were able to support our local agricultural industry in that way. The Member acknowledged that I was on record in stating that the Executive remain committed to the A5 project, and that is true. As we all know, the legal challenge by the Alternative A5 Alliance resulted in the statutory orders relating to the A5 scheme being quashed. The Regional Development Minister is seeking to address the area of concern that the court identified.

Mr Cree asked about a number of in-year financial movements, and I will do my best to address as many of those as I can. As part of January monitoring, DARD declared a small easement of £500,000 from the £4 million awarded to the Department to improve the tourism potential of our forests under the economy and jobs initiative. I am sure that Members will agree that our natural assets have considerable tourism potential. Therefore, I encourage the Agriculture Minister to ensure that this fund is prioritised.

Mr Cree also raised the issue of the £2·7 million capital receipt from the Department of Education. I can confirm that, in Education's case, that resulted from surplus capital receipts realised from asset disposals that arose as a result of the school sectors disposing of assets earlier than planned and above the level of Education's planned receipts budget.

Mr Cree queried the £9·2 million reduced requirement by the Department for Employment and Learning. I can confirm that £6 million is related to the further education (FE) college end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme, which is similar to the scheme that the Department of Education has. There was £1·5 million, which was related to employment schemes and initiatives, and £1·8 million, which was related to ring-fenced depreciation.

6.30 pm

Invest Northern Ireland's headquarters PFI buy-out, which Mr Cree and Mr McCrea raised, will result in a saving of approximately £24 million over the lease period, representing an internal rate of return of 16%. All Members will agree that that represents a good deal for the Executive.

The £5 million surrendered by DETI from the economy and jobs initiative was reallocated and will not be held for redistribution next year. The £1·6 million released by my Department related to staff costs, and I am sure that the Member will welcome the work done by my Department to reduce the cost of administration.

Mr Cree and Mr Maskey raised the issue of the £66·3 million of reduced requirements from DSD, which included almost £15 million from the Housing Executive. Most of that related to the housing maintenance contracts, an issue that the whole House will be well aware of. My colleague the Social Development Minister has done good work to ensure that the contracts will be fit for purpose. He is right not to proceed if the contracts do not represent good value for money. I would rather see, as I am sure all Members would, the money being spent on the clear need in our housing stock. It should not be wasted on overly expensive contracts or on those that are not value for money.

Of the OFMDFM allocations that Mr Cree spoke about, the £5 million balance relates to almost £3 million for good relations, almost £1 million for PlayBoard and £1·3 million for the Hillsborough agreement sites.

Finally, the Member mentioned blank pages in the initial document. I can only assume that this was due to a printing error, but I am sure that he would agree that there are enough numbers on the other pages to keep him and the House well occupied.

Mr Frew, in his capacity as Chair of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee, mentioned the 'Going for Growth' report. The agrifood sector has performed well, very much bucking the trend during the difficult economic conditions of the past number of years. We should commend the level of ambition that the Agri-Food Strategy Board outlined in its 'Going for Growth' report. 'Going for Growth' calls for major investment from government, which, as the Member highlighted, should lever in significant investment from the industry. Ministers are in the process of considering a proposed response to the report, and I expect the way forward to be announced in the future. I have already indicated my support for it,

and I have also publicly said that when it comes to backing 'Going for Growth', because of the value that I and the whole Executive place on that important sector in our economy, I will not be found wanting.

Anna Lo and Mr Frew raised the issue of funding for the 2014-2020 rural development programme. The Executive will need to engage in a Budget process for 2015-16 very shortly, and the issue of funding for the next rural development programme can be addressed as part of that process.

Mr Maskey, speaking as Chair of the Social Development Committee, raised issues in respect of the social housing development programme. That has been allocated £83·9 million to fund 1,275 new social and supported units, work on which will start this year.

I mentioned work being done by my colleague the Social Development Minister. He has done some good work on making sure that the new social housing maintenance contracts are designed to eliminate the potential for contractors to overcharge for services as highlighted in the 2012 Audit Office report on the management of response maintenance contracts. Setting aside the problems on the maintenance programme, the social housing development programme is on target and is expected to exceed the Programme for Government target of 8,000 new and affordable homes by 2015.

We can see the outworking of the performance and efficiency delivery unit's review of the programme, with more than half of the 25 recommendations for improved delivery already in place. For example, the regulatory burden on social housing design has been reduced to align them with those used for private sector housing so that associations can produce a more cost effective bill. I expect that we will see a less back-loaded delivery programme from this year on.

Mr Mervyn Storey noticed concerns about a lack of transparency in the education budget, particularly in relation to the information presented to the Education Committee. The Department of Education has significant flexibility to move resources within its budget and has significant scope to recycle reduced requirements rather than declare them to the Executive. As with all departmental budgets, my officials will closely scrutinise the out-turn position for this year, revealing how Departments have used the resources available to them.

I share the Member's frustration that the Education Minister failed to participate in the Executive's process to monitor savings delivery plans. That takes away from the Executive's savings delivery plans monitoring process and forces me to present an incomplete picture to the Assembly. Transparency in the Executive's finances is vital in engendering confidence among the electorate. Non-cooperation in the provision of information, as demonstrated by the Education Minister, damages the Executive as a whole.

Mr Spratt, who is Chair of the Regional Development Committee, asked about Northern Ireland Water gaining greater end-year flexibility. I want to report back to him that my officials have been discussing the possibility of some flexibility being granted to Northern Ireland Water in its capital spending profile. However, this flexibility can be limited only to movements within the DRD capital budget, and any such flexibility will need to be agreed by the Executive.

With a Budget exchange scheme limit on the capital side of some £12 million annually, there is no scope to grant any end-year flexibility to a particular Department. This is because such flexibility would significantly increase the risk of funding being surrendered to the Treasury at year end. The Member should also note that this Budget exchange scheme limit is not open to negotiation with Her Majesty's Treasury. Although I have some sympathy for the Member's points, I think that he would agree, and I am sure that his Committee would agree, that things that would seriously jeopardise our overall block position are not a good idea.

Mr McGlone, the Chair of the Enterprise Committee, raised various issues about EU funding. He mentioned the drawdown of such funding, and I welcome his comments on trying to maximise the drawdown. It is imperative that we seek to do that, but as Finance Minister, I must caution that we should do so only when a scheme has proven to show value for money and to contribute to our Programme for Government priorities. There is no point in drawing down funds for projects that do not represent value for money, especially when the Executive are providing match funding to those projects. He mentioned a couple of other funds including the Emerald Fund, and I point out to the Member that such funds, perhaps including the other one that he mentioned, are not our funds, so we do not have responsibility for the reasons why they spend or do not spend.

Mr McGlone mentioned, as did his colleague Mr Attwood, Horizon 2020. He made a specific point that there had been "no engagement" — that is the phrase that he used — with the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce. I appreciate that that statement is being relayed by Mr McGlone as a third party, but I find it hard to fathom. I am sure that, if the Enterprise Minister were here, she would find it even more difficult to fathom, not least because Horizon 2020 is mentioned in the Executive's draft innovation strategy, DETI has its own Horizon 2020 action plan and a website dedicated to Horizon 2020. Although I appreciate the comments about having more ambitious funding targets, and I think that that is a measure for the Enterprise Minister to consider, I do not think that we can say that there has been no engagement, or at least no attempt at engagement, with any business organisation.

Mr Nesbitt raised some issues around financial transactions funding, specifically the £26 million capital allocation in OFMDFM's budget: £1 million of that is for the Crumlin Road Gaol development, and I am surprised that the Member is not aware of that bid; and the remaining £25 million, which the Member seemed confused about although I notice that his colleague Mr Swann had a good grasp and understanding of it, was allocated to OFMDFM for the Department for Employment and Learning's University of Ulster relocation project. The loan to the University of Ulster, which I announced a few weeks ago, is being channelled through the Strategic Investment Board because the Department for Employment and Learning did not have the legislative vires to issue the loan. This was agreed by the Executive in the January monitoring rounds, and, as such, officials may not have had time to update the Committee. This is a good example of cross-departmental working to deliver significant investment in our higher education infrastructure.

Mr William Irwin, on behalf of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, raised some issues around the stadia programme. I welcome his comments on the early surrender of funds by Departments, and I am sure that we would encourage all Departments to do that. It is imperative that Departments, once they know of reduced requirements, surrender them for reallocation as early as possible in the financial year so that the Executive can redistribute them in line with their priorities. There is no doubt that the stadia projects will enhance the reputation and capacity for local sport, and, as I mentioned, I am particularly pleased with the progress at Ravenhill, where an expected 18,000 — including me — will watch the Heineken Cup quarter-final in April.

Mr Hazzard›s contribution, which I think contained elements of his ard fheis speech from the weekend, raised public service delivery and public sector reform. I know that he is an advocate of recycling, but I think that recycling a speech two days later is pushing it. As somebody who wants reform and innovation across the public sector, I encourage him and congratulate him on reusing his speech in an efficient way, even if I did not agree with the content. He mentioned the increased cost of public service delivery in border areas, a point that Mr Allister raised in a slightly more tangential way later.

I agree that we need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of all aspects of the public service. That is why I established the public sector reform division in my Department. The role of the division will be to work collaboratively with Departments, business areas and front line staff to develop further reforms in the delivery of local public services and make improvements to existing plans for reform with a focus on reducing costs and enhancing the quality of public services.

Mr Beggs, Mr Wells, Mr McKinney and others raised issues about health changes. At times, I felt like a bit of a spectator at the Health Committee and felt that we should all step outside and let the Members continue with a debate that is obviously raging in the corridors of the Building. The arrangements for health do not preclude an allocation being made to the Department of Health, which we did in this financial year. It remains the case that the Executive decide whether the Department of Health should get an allocation in the monitoring rounds. I am barking so badly that I may need some assistance from the Department of Health if it continues.

Mr Beggs accused me of being Pontius Pilate in allocating money to the Department of Health in January monitoring, because I did not specifically allocate it. I have to say that I do not allocate. Mr Deputy Speaker, it is a point that you will appreciate given your extensive experience on the Finance Committee. Unfortunately, as much as I might like to be able to do so, I do not allocate any money. I recommend to the Executive. It is the job of the Executive to allocate funding to Departments. It is their decision that results in allocations being made. Of course, the Executive includes one Danny Kennedy.

Mrs Cochrane, Mr Wells, Mr Givan, Mr Bradley, Mr Maskey, Mr McCrea and others raised concerns about welfare reform. I share those concerns. As detailed in my opening statement earlier today and pointed out in response to Mr Wells›s question, the penalties are forecast at £105 million next year and will increase to over £300 million by 2018-19. This will require substantial cuts to departmental budgets and have a significantly detrimental impact on public services. I am also extremely concerned about the potential impact on claimants when, in the not too distant future, we reach the point of being unable to process payments to hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable because we can no longer use Department for Work and Pensions IT systems. My opening statement also referred to the potential loss of over 1,400 jobs at local service centres in Belfast and Londonderry, which causes me grave concern.

The Chair of the Social Development Committee referred to the economic consequences of not implementing welfare reforms and suggested that we negotiate further concessions with the UK Government. As the Member well knows, there is no scope for further concessions beyond those that my colleague the Minister for Social Development has valiantly negotiated already. I suggest that any conversation at this stage with Treasury, as it sees savings that should have been realised not materialising, would be very short.

The economic cost to Northern of failure to progress welfare reform significantly outweighs the costs arising from implementing the reforms. I have highlighted the costs of not implementing the reforms. In addition, a key aspect of the reforms is that they will make work pay. This will undoubtedly incentivise many people back into work and help to grow our economy.

I also point out to the Chair of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Maskey, that the numbers that I put forward are not fantasy figures. They are very much real, and, very soon, we, and more importantly our constituents, will all begin to see and feel how real those figures are. In the spring Supplementary Estimates, a provision has been made and approved by Sinn Féin Ministers in the Executive of £15 million now and £105 million next year. That is the equivalent of 2,500 nurses, 2,100 teachers or a 1% cut to all Departments. The extent of that is so severe that I cannot see how it could be dealt with in-year through the monitoring rounds. I will have no option other than putting forward what can only be described as a cuts paper when we come to June monitoring.

The cost is now estimated to be in excess of £1 billion over the next five years.

6.45 pm

I listened to Mr Maskey give off extensively about handing back housing money. He may well have a point about people who need the money not getting it, but as he gives off about handing housing money back to me to redistribute through the Executive to other priority areas, at least we can point out that none of that money has been lost to London.

Declan McAleer raised issues around the agrifood loan scheme. I share his disappointment that the scheme has not been the reality in this financial year as we expected and hoped that it would be. He mentioned that he had talked to some people who had wished to avail themselves of the scheme, and I am sure that he appreciates that it is necessarily an incredibly complex scheme, given that it involves dealing with at least four parties, which are the farmer, the producer, the bank and government in the shape of Invest Northern Ireland.

I can assure him that, given the announcement that was made in October monitoring that a further £10 million would be allocated to the scheme, there is money there. We hope that it will be in place early in the next financial year. Certainly, if the Member is correct and the soundings that I have picked up are correct, there will be significant demand for that money next year. I hope that we will see that starting to benefit a growing agrifood sector in Northern Ireland very early in the next financial year.

Mr Attwood raised a series of issues and asked a considerable number of questions. I will do my best to answer them, although I am absolutely certain that it will not be done to his satisfaction. He asked about Committee engagement, and I have to say that, particularly for the OFMDFM Committee, I cannot account for Committee engagement, or lack of it, as he might perceive by any other Department. I try to be responsible as best I can for my Department's engagement with its Committee, which, I hope, is of a sufficiently high standard. That is a matter for each Department and is an issue that is better taken up with the relevant Ministers.

He also mentioned issues around SIF funding, as did others. He begrudgingly acknowledged that there were allocations of some £33 million in total, for 12 capital schemes and 11 revenue-based schemes, accounting for almost half of the spend now being made. He begrudgingly accepted that the money was being spent on good projects.

Mr Attwood and Mr McCrea spoke about Belfast port. Again, that is a matter more directly for the Minister for Regional Development, and I encourage both Members to direct specific questions at that Minister. However, I support the objective that is contained in the Budget, an objective that is still being pursued in order to gain value from Belfast port. Progress has been slower than we would have liked, and the matter is still being dealt with on an ongoing basis by the Budget review group, which is discussing and exploring a range of options to realise that value from the port. I accept that it places a pressure on the DRD budget, but it is not an issue that has been given up at all.

Mr McCrea quoted me at least half favourably. In fact, he said that he was interested by what I said. I am glad that I can interest the Member. I do not interest everybody, but at least I seem to have interested him. *[Interruption.]* My colleague to my left has uncharitably said that very little of what the Member says interests anyone, but I will not go down that route.

Mr B McCrea: I was being nice to you.

Mr Hamilton: I know, but I pretended that it was not me who said it.

Mr McCrea acknowledged the public spending pressures. He made a very good point, so I will try to be as nice to him as I possibly can. I have made the point before and will say it again: the impression will be given, as we see a weekly, if not almost daily, diet of good economic news, that our private sector continues to grow and flourish.

Today's purchasing managers' index (PMI) results from Ulster Bank have shown for seven months in a row that all sectors are doing well, including sectors that have been under the cosh, such as construction and retail. They are all doing really well, and, in fact, the growth in the Northern Ireland manufacturing sector is higher than that in the rest of the UK as a whole and is higher than any of the markets that RBS Group measures in its PMI surveys. We should be very grateful for that and should recognise that the investments that made by the Executive to ensure that we could capitalise on growing economies globally are now starting to pay off.

I think that that will give something of a false impression to people, and I want to try to ensure that it does not give a false impression to Members here. Just because the economy is booming — we will see the British economy, even the euro zone economy and the global economy starting to take off this year, with the Northern Ireland economy following that and doing equally well — that does not necessarily and automatically translate into public spending going up at the same pace.

We have heard very clear indications from the Chancellor that, over the next number of years, he will continue to pursue an austerity programme. He has said that he wishes not only to balance the books but to create a surplus by the end of this decade. Indicators from the Office for Budget Responsibility show that, affirming what the Chancellor has said, austerity will continue to at least the end of this decade, if not beyond and into the 2020s. We have heard recently the Chancellor say that he thinks that there is scope to take a further £25 billion out of the UK Budget as a whole. The Barnett consequences of that for Northern Ireland will be around half a billion pounds.

We have had a difficult number of years, and the 2011-15 Budget was an exceptionally challenging Budget, but I think that it will be nothing compared with the pressures that we will face. The Member quoted Liam Fox, but I am not entirely sure that I would take that as an authoritative view on Tory thinking at this time. Certainly, if the ring-fencing of hospitals and schools at an English level does not continue, the impact on Northern Ireland will be quite severe, because that protection that has been afforded to Northern Ireland has been quite significant over the past number of years. I think that it is a reason why we should continue to pursue reform, and I have not suggested that we should reform the public sector in Northern Ireland just because I think that it is a good idea. There are some areas where there are obvious cuts and reductions that could be made.

Mr Allister mentioned the ugly scaffolding in this place, and those are obvious areas where savings could be made, but the bigger prize is in changing how we do things and how we get more for the money that we invest and how we get that elusive prize of doing more with less. So, when I come to this House or publicly and say that we need to reform, it is because of the Budget pressures that I see looming down the line. It is not a pet project or some hobby horse; it is a firm belief that we need to do that or else we will face very serious pressures before this decade is out.

The Member admitted to getting most of his information from Twitter and from newspapers. I suggest to the Member that he is better coming into this House and listening, or even asking his deputy, who sits on the Finance and Personnel Committee. Had he done that, he would have heard the good news that there was a good deal for the Executive on the Invest Northern Ireland headquarters. As I highlighted earlier, that is realising over £20 million in savings for the Executive over the life of the lease. He mentioned the Titanic building and the £18 million that could not be drawn down from Europe for

that. Perhaps if he followed the right Twitter accounts and read the right newspapers, he would have heard that that money has been reallocated to various transport projects, including, if I am right in recalling, the A8 and the A2. So, that money was not lost.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will, to take a breath more than anything.

Mr B McCrea: I am grateful that the Minister has taken time to cover my points in detail. I only mentioned the Twitter thing because that is what the public are hearing. Perhaps he can direct me, or maybe I should write to him, about where these announcements are in the public domain. I did search to see what had happened with the £18·3 million that came down, because I understood that it had to be reallocated, and, I have to confess, I could not find it in official sources. So, if there is a particular place to look, I will gladly look. This is a point that I think we have common cause in. We are saying that we want to have open and transparent government, and it is just difficult, given the current system.

Mr Hamilton: There is a worrying friendship starting to develop here, and I must do my best to ruin that. I can recall, both as Minister and from sitting in the seat beside when I was assisting Mr Wilson when he was Minister of Finance, that those very announcements, particularly on the Invest Northern Ireland headquarters and the Titanic building, were made in monitoring round statements. Of course, we are seeing the product of those today in that we are wrapping everything up and giving it a legislative authority.

Both of those issues and, probably, some of the other issues that the Member is concerned about have been addressed in that way, because that is the proper way in which the Finance Minister, on behalf of the Executive, should be reporting those issues back to Members of this House. Of course, there are avenues through the various Committees to explore the issues in more depth. I appreciate that the Member is in a party that does not have broad representation on the Committees of this House, but I am sure that he could follow that through Hansard and the appropriate channels.

I will move on to an issue that Mr Allister raised — the issue of what he referred to as equal pay for people in the justice family. As I said to the previous Member to speak, I encourage him to listen to what has been said in the House. In fact, he could have listened to a response that I gave in the House to a question from Mr Givan about a fortnight ago when he asked me for an update on the matter. I point out that I am happy to inform the Member at any time about the issue if he asks me personally or in writing, but I cannot recall having received any correspondence from him on it in the recent past.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Allister: The Minister will find that there is an outstanding question for written answer of three months' vintage from me on this very issue.

Mr Hamilton: I am happy to respond to the Member's query now, in the same fashion as I responded before. You will not find a terrible lot of difference between what I will say today and what I said to Mr Givan a number of weeks ago. The Member mocked me for looking at the issue and for demanding that more be done. However, it is very clear that the Member is powerless to do anything on this matter and that he would need me to take action in consort with Executive colleagues.

I have been carefully considering it, and I will point out to the Member that the issue was sitting in a state of stasis and not moving until I looked at it again and breathed some life back into it. It was always with the caveat, which I made very clear over the past number of months, that I do not want to unnecessarily raise the expectations of anybody who may be affected. That is because I think that they have had their expectations unnecessarily raised in the past.

Although I have some sympathy for the arguments that are put forward on a moral basis, there is no legal basis for me to extend the Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement to those members of the justice family. However, I continue to examine options. I recently had a discussion, which was followed up with discussions between officials in my Department and the Department of Justice, to look at ways in which the issue could be addressed satisfactorily so that some recognition could be given to the people in the broad justice family who are affected.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, very briefly; my time is short.

Mr Givan: I am sure that the Member for North Antrim is acutely aware that that legal entitlement, or lack of it, was established by the courts. So, I am sure that the Member for North Antrim will recognise the courts' decision on that. Nevertheless, I appreciate this Minister's efforts to try to overcome the issues that that decision has presented to us.

Mr Hamilton: Absolutely. The Member is right. It was very clearly established in the court last March that there was no legal entitlement to extend the equal pay settlement to those members of staff. However, that does not take away, denigrate or dilute the moral argument that they put forward. I reassure him, I reassure Mr Allister, I reassure the House, and, more importantly, I reassure the members of staff who worked in the broad justice family that I will continue to make every effort to see what can be done, and we will attempt to expedite that as quickly as possible.

To draw my remarks to a conclusion, and with just over a minute left, I thank again all Members and Committees for their contributions. This financial year has seen welcome growth in our economy that has not been seen for some time. That is a testament to our private sector first and foremost, which continues to innovate and to perform in domestic and international markets.

Credit must also be given to our public sector, which has assisted in providing the conditions that have aided recovery. We have implemented, among many things, the jobs and economy initiative, directed resources to areas that have helped to educate our young people, develop our workers, equip those seeking employment and resource our businesses while ensuring that we continue to care for the vulnerable and the elderly.

The distribution of funding this year reflects that balance of priorities, and it is important to acknowledge that the spring Supplementary Estimates represent the final

outcome of those decisions made in the best interests of the citizens of Northern Ireland.

We must stop or even pause at this point; there is more that we must do. The spring Supplementary Estimates represent a point in time when we must put in place the necessary legislation. However, we must continue to stay focused on service delivery. We must also continue to reform our public services to ensure that we have the right components in place to continue on the path to economy recovery.

On that note, I commend the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2013-14 and the Vote on Account for 2014-15 to the Assembly, and I ask Members to support the motions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £15,530,883,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,606,564,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3(c) and 2(c) of table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14 that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014.

7.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move to the motion on the Vote on Account, which has already been debated. I remind Members that this vote also requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

> *That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,062,352,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £7,545,788,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2014-15 document that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

Budget Bill: First Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill (Northern Ireland) 2014 [NIA 32/11-15], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31 March 2014 and 2015; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31 March 2014 and 2015; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31 March 2014.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that confirmation has been received from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, in accordance with Standing Order 42(2), that the Committee is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill and that the Bill can therefore proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. The Second Stage of the Bill will be brought before the House tomorrow.

The House will now take its ease while we change the top Table.

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

Tobacco Retailers Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Tobacco Retailers Bill.

> *Moved. — [Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety).]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Tobacco Retailers Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at the Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Private Members' Business

Safer Internet Day 2014

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 to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Weir: I beg to move

> *That this Assembly endorses and supports the Safer Internet Day 2014 campaign entitled "Let's create a better Internet together"; recognises that whilst it poses significant dangers to children and young people, used properly the Internet can also positively affect social, economic and educational advancement; acknowledges that all users have a part to play in making the Internet a safer and better place for everybody; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to encourage a cross-cutting approach to online safety by incorporating it into the school curriculum, by affording parents and carers easy access to sufficient information to take necessary action and by encouraging businesses and industry to self-regulate their web-based content and services.*

I rise to propose the motion and welcome the opportunity to debate it. There was an opportunity at Westminster with a similar motion, which was proposed by my colleague David Simpson, but I think that it is important that this House has an opportunity to give its view on what I believe to be a very important issue. I say at the outset, for those who are unfamiliar with Safer Internet Day, that we are facing what is effectively its tenth anniversary. It was initiated in 2004, originally from an EU project.

For those of us who are more sceptical about the European Union, I suppose we can at least find something positive to embrace. What started out as an annual Safer Internet Day has moved beyond the EU and is now embraced by over 100 countries worldwide. It is something that is being done in Northern Ireland, the rest of the UK and across a wide range of countries. The theme this year is, "Let's create a better internet together".

I believe, in the spirit of togetherness, that the whole House can unite around the motion. Different parties in the Chamber will have slightly nuanced views on the wording, but, for the sake of clarity at the start of the debate, I want to indicate that I am very happy with the amendment proposed by Mrs Overend and will be asking Members to support the motion and the amendment, and therefore the motion as amended. On this very important issue, the House can speak with one voice.

To dispel one potential myth, I will deal first with the fact that supporting the Safer Internet Day campaign is not some sort of Luddite opposition to the Internet or a belief that the Internet itself is in any way wrong. The Internet has transformed all our lives and society in many positive ways. The opportunity for education and information flow has been enhanced greatly in recent years by the Internet, particularly in the field of communication. What would have been regarded, in the lifetime of many of us in the Chamber, as almost some sort of fantastical science fiction is now reality; people can, in an instant, communicate with one another across continents.

So, it is right that we pause to pay tribute to the very positive aspects of the Internet. However, with that, undoubtedly and unfortunately, we need to ensure that sufficient safeguards are put in place against those who would use the Internet for evil purposes. In particular, we should look to protect our children and vulnerable people on the Internet.

The one thing that is beyond discussion is the all-pervasive nature of the Internet. For example, the latest figures from Ofcom suggest that 78% of households in Northern Ireland have access to the Internet and that nearly half the population has access via the mobile phone. From a generational point of view, it becomes all the more pervasive the younger you are. Around 93% of children between the ages of five and 15 in Northern Ireland have home access to the Internet and about 80% of children regularly use the Internet at home. Therefore, it is important we ensure that they are protected.

There are three main sources of concern. First, there is the extent to which young people have access to inappropriate imagery through pornography. Secondly, there is the issue of child sexual abuse, through imagery and grooming. Thirdly, there is the issue of online bullying. I will talk briefly about each of those in turn.

Looking at the statistics; a parliamentary inquiry held in 2012 found that one in three children aged 10 or under has seen sexual imagery online and that that figure increases greatly when you move into the teenage years. On numerous occasions, we have seen action taken by police on an international level to combat Internet sexual abuse.

Looking at the issue of grooming; across the UK, in 2012, there were 1,145 public reports related to incidents of grooming. On a number of those occasions, attempts were made by those online to meet a child offline. It is, if you like, being seen as a vehicle that could be used.

I suppose that the third issue is cyberbullying. Again, with regard to statistics, indications from the Department of Education highlight that around one sixth of children have been victims of cyberbullying. Perhaps, even more surprisingly, the same survey indicated that 5% of children in year 6 and nearly 7% of pupils in year 9 admitted to being bullies themselves. As we have seen, the all-pervasive effects of any form of bullying on children can have a very disturbing impact on their lives. Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland and beyond, we have seen it taken to extremes at times when children have felt so bullied that they have taken the ultimate sanction and taken their own lives. That is why I believe that this is a vital issue.

The motion, with the inclusion of the amendment, details four areas where we see that positive action needs to be taken. The first is the idea of a cross-cutting approach to incorporating safety in the school curriculum and addressing it at that level. The second is to ensure that parents and carers have easy access to sufficient information in order to take necessary action. The third is to encourage businesses and industry to self-regulate. In the amendment, there is the useful addition of the e-safety forum, which, I think, OFMDFM will spearhead. I look

forward to the junior Minister's response on that. All those goals are quite achievable.

If we look first at what is available in the school curriculum with regard to Internet safety for pupils, we see that there is a range of activities, from the Internet proficiency scheme at Key Stage 2 through to the Kidsmart scheme at Key Stage 4; Know IT All for schools; and Thinkuknow. A range of things can be done and provided through that. Indeed, training can be given to teachers as well.

Similarly, via Safer Internet Day, a range of information could be provided and training given on Internet awareness for parents and carers. It is important that it is not something that is simply tackled in schools. Given the fact that the greatest level of Internet access is in the home, it is important that parents be given the opportunity to learn further about the issue. A wide range of practical advice can be given to parents, pupils and teachers on tackling cyberbullying via the Department of Education, an organisation called BeatBullying and the Anti-Bullying Network. The opportunity is there to be grasped.

There are two other aspects. From the point of view of a local initiative, work that can be done via OFMDFM to help to coordinate what is there is vital. There is also a challenge for Internet providers. There has been some progress by Microsoft and Google towards self-regulation. If it can be effective, self-regulation is always the best option. Concerns have been raised about it, particularly in the House of Lords by Baroness Howe, who has looked at putting forward legislation on the subject. That might be the route that ultimately has to be gone down. A challenge should be thrown out, in the first instance, to the large companies to try to deliver on that issue. There is a wide range of things that they can do, such as stopping auto-complete features from offering people child-abuse search terms; new algorithms that will block child-abuse images; and ClickSafe functions that can ensure that there is a degree of blocking mechanisms. Various things can be done by the major server providers.

I see you looking at me, Mr Deputy Speaker, so I will wind up my remarks. In conclusion, I think that the issue is one on which the House can unite, take very positive actions and send a clear signal from the Assembly that we can all enjoy the Internet in a safe way, particularly one that protects all our children.

Mrs Overend: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "everybody;" and insert

> *"calls upon the Northern Ireland Executive and Her Majesty's Government to encourage a cross-cutting approach to online safety by incorporating it into the school curriculum, by affording parents and carers easy access to sufficient information to take necessary action and by encouraging businesses and industry to self-regulate their web-based content and services; and further calls upon the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assist with the prompt establishment of an e-safety forum, as recommended in the recent Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, 'An exploration of e-safety messages to young people, parents and practitioners in Northern Ireland', and to coordinate e-safety responsibilities across all Executive Departments".*

I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate, and I thank the Members who raised this important issue. I thank the proposers for indicating their support for my amendment. I welcome the presence of junior Minister McCann this evening. I look forward to her response.

7.15 pm

As children and young people's spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party, and as a mother of three children, I have a long-standing interest in ensuring the safety of children and young people online. Although we are always mindful of the dangers of Internet use, the aim of Safer Internet Day 2014 is to put the focus on the creative and positive things that young people are doing online.

The contrast between the potential risks and the rewards of Internet use are seen day and daily. Only this weekend, my eight-year-old son looked up a remote control car that he wanted to upgrade or something similar. He and I were both amazed to find a flashing advertisement at the bottom of that website showing pictures of half-naked women and asking the question: do you need a date? That is just one example.

On the positive side, I was delighted to learn that pupils from Cookstown High School had qualified for the national finals of RTÉ's 'Dragons' Den' with their location awareness GTracks app, DavaghNav, which offers route options and hazard warnings for cyclists who use the cycle trails at Davagh Forest outside Cookstown. That follows on from pupils in the same school who won a prestigious award last year for an app that they designed. That demonstrates the positive opportunities that can be opened up through the effective use of the Internet.

Of course, the potential positives of the Internet do not end there but neither, sadly, do the dangers. Those are often broken down into the four Cs: content — exposure to harmful material; contact — participation in adult-initiated online activity; conduct — as a perpetrator or victim in a peer-to-peer exchange; and commercial — exposure to inappropriate advertising or hidden costs, something that is now more prevalent with free apps such as Candy Crush or Angry Birds offering helpful add-ins at a price. We have also seen the negative influence that peer pressure can have over online behaviour as our young people become young adults, with the recent Neknominate drinking game craze.

Developments in technology advance at such a rate that parents' ability to keep up can be severely tested. The fact remains that parents are often less technology-savvy than their children, making it even more important for them to be able to access the right information, and that is a very challenging issue.

The exponential increase in smartphone and tablet use among our children and young people vastly increases the ability to access the Internet and makes e-safety an even more pressing issue. We simply cannot sit on our hands or rest on our laurels when it comes to this issue. Taking responsible steps, such as the use of antivirus software, parental controls and privacy settings and providing helpful practical advice such as not sharing personal information, keeping your profile private, talking only to people you know, using only secure and trusted websites and password protection can go a long way to protect your child online.

Some of the best advice for parents that I have read is simply to have conversations with your children about staying safe online, something that I have tried to practise. You do not need to be a technology expert by any means; it is just like other types of parenting. It is best to have regular conversations with our children about what they like and dislike about the online world, what websites they use and view and agree on a set of rules together.

There are so many statistics that illustrate the scale of the task that we have in making the Internet a safer place, and I will highlight a few. According to Ofcom, as Mr Weir mentioned, 93% of five- to 15-year-olds have access to the Internet, and that number is rising year on year. This is not a matter for a minority; it is a matter for all of us.

ChildLine recently revealed that it had experienced a 65% increase in young people contacting it for support and advice on how to deal with Internet safety issues in the past year and reported a very worrying 85% increase in the numbers contacting it for support and advice on cyberbullying over the same period. This is a cross-cutting, cross-community and cross-generational issue. We all have a role to play: Departments, schools, community groups, sports clubs, and parents, children and young people all have a role to play.

A number of organisations provide much-needed support in research, programme delivery and raising public awareness. The NSPCC's contribution has been very influential. I also pay tribute to the work of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) in compiling the report, 'An Exploration of E-safety Messages to Young People, Parents and Practitioners in Northern Ireland'. It was prepared on behalf of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, and I join others in commending its recommendations to the House.

Similarly, I recognise the valuable work of the PSNI on Internet safety. It is taking a proactive approach by going into schools and delivering e-safety messages to pupils. I know that the PSNI is to visit my children's school shortly. I look forward to meeting the PSNI soon to discuss its Risk Avoidance and Danger Awareness Resource (RADAR) project, which will have e-safety as one of its key focuses.

Access to up-to-date information is important. We need to make the most of the resources available to us by building on the work of the three main UK organisations — the UK Safer Internet Centre, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) Centre and the UK Council for Child Internet Safety — and tailoring our efforts to best meet the needs of our children and young people. Coordination is key. With so many organisations offering information, we must not complicate matters and consistency of message is crucial.

Locally, we have arm's-length bodies and charities such as C2K, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum and, I am sure, many others operating alongside the Departments and UK-wide bodies.

The Prime Minister's intervention last summer was welcome. Her Majesty's Government, of course, have a significant role to play and, perhaps, could do so most usefully by pressing businesses and service providers to self-regulate. However, there are steps that we can and must take in Northern Ireland. That is where I want to bring the focus of today's debate — to Northern Ireland and the responsibilities that lie with legislators in this place.

I very much welcome the junior Ministers' commitment. I have lobbied both junior Ministers extensively on Internet safety. Most recently, I met them in November ahead of their visit to Brussels in December, where, I understand, e-safety was on the agenda. Any lessons learned from other European states and opportunities for partnership will be of benefit.

I was particularly pleased to hear them endorse the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's report and speak of their desire to put measures in place to keep children safe online and support parents in their efforts to protect their children when using the Internet. I know that OFMDFM has undertaken a gapping and mapping exercise, and I ask it for an update on its work in the area.

Once again, I call on OFMDFM to take the lead and help to bring forward the establishment and development of the e-safety forum and coordinate e-safety responsibilities across all Departments. The e-safety forum can act as a starting point for the coordination of a strategy that will work to identify gaps and opportunities and ensure consistency in messaging. A coordinated strategy is vital. We cannot afford to duplicate resources, and we cannot allow there to be gaps.

Through the work of the industry and the UK Government, much has happened at a UK level to protect children better, but there is a massive local element, and the need for a cross-Government e-safety strategy remains. As I said previously, time is of the essence, so I urge a speedy response and speedy work by OFMDFM to push the matter forward.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Today, we will support the amendment moved by Mrs Overend. The safety of our children, particularly e-safety, is paramount. I think that we all agree that it is more difficult to protect young people online, given the vast nature of the Internet. We welcome the fact that the amendment gives the Executive a role. The motion called on the British Government to interfere with the school curriculum, but education is a devolved matter. Thankfully, the British Government have no input or say in our curriculum. That is not to take away from the point that is being made. It is hugely important that young people are fully aware of the dangers associated with the Internet and that children and parents have the necessary skills to stay safe online.

We should also recognise the huge benefits of online advancements to education. There is a wealth of information at our fingertips. Wikipedia, for example, has over 13 million articles, five million of which are in English, and, every minute, 72 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. The Internet has made the world a much smaller place. Young people are more engaged now than ever before, as information about world events is instantaneous.

We no longer search for the news; the news finds us. In fact, some in New York received tweets about a recent earthquake 30 seconds before they felt it.

That having been said, there are inherent dangers associated with the Internet, and, as Mrs Overend said, there have already been tragedies associated with NekNominations, which have spread around social media

like wildfire. Of course, we cannot solely place the blame on Facebook, Twitter or other social media sites. It has a lot to do with our society's unhealthy relationship with alcohol. There are almost 90 alcohol-related deaths a month in Ireland. However, social media sites were a catalyst for the dangerous behaviour and undoubtedly fuelled the fire.

Another obvious danger that has grown along with the Internet is cyberbullying. Bullying is now inescapable for young people. No longer is it confined to the schoolyard or the classroom. Bullies now have 24/7 access to their victims. That comes with serious consequences for the mental health of our young people and has unfortunately led to too many suicides across this island. A website such as Ask.fm is a pertinent example of that. Users can post anonymous opinions about other people, often in the form of abusive comments. Threats and comments made online must be taken as seriously as if they were said anywhere else. Whether they are homophobic, sectarian, racist or sexist, we cannot tolerate them.

I note that, in Britain, the so-called porn filter has been introduced. However, there is a fine line between regulation to protect our children and censorship. Cameron's porn filter was never meant to be just about tackling pornography, but it was cleverly packaged in that way. It is, in fact, being used to promote a heterosexual lifestyle. In some instances, LGBT websites have been blocked, along with sites such as ChildLine, domestic violence refuge websites and sex education websites. There is a balance to be found, and there are obvious concerns over how children are being sexualised at such a young age. I know that parents are worried about the dangers that children can be exposed to, but the question remains about who exactly decides what is dangerous.

Although there are real and genuine dangers associated with the Internet, we must also be positive about the impact that it can have on young people's lives. Social media, for example, provide young people, particularly teenagers, with access to an online community that is dealing with similar issues, and it brings a whole new meaning to the word "community". Social networking has now become the number one online activity. It is a way for young people to socialise and express themselves, and it unites young people across the world. With 50% of the world's population under the age of 30, social media represent a fundamental shift in the way in which our world communicates. The evidence for that can be drawn from a single website. Facebook now has one billion users, and, if it were a country, it would be the third largest in the world.

We need to embrace change and technology while being mindful of children's safety. The world is a rapidly changing place, and it will not be very long before the iPad replaces the blackboard. We need to ensure that all young people have equal access to this vast resource. Rural broadband is still a huge issue in many places, and access to the Internet, particularly in areas of high deprivation, should be provided.

I welcome the motion from the DUP and the amendment from the Ulster Unionists. However, it rings slightly hollow, given that their track record on children's rights leaves a lot to be desired. Neither party supports extending age discrimination legislation to allow young people equal access to goods, facilities and services. The party opposite's use of flammable language around issues such as marriage equality and blood donation has adversely impacted on many young people's lives, yet it continues to take a discriminatory stance. I welcome this concern for children's rights and safety. Hopefully, it is a sign of improvement for the future.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the motion and the amendment, which adds to the motion. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate and fully endorse Safer Internet Day on 11 February. It is imperative that we create an effective statutory framework for keeping our young people safe when they use the Internet. The Internet knows no boundaries. I call on Brussels, as Mrs Overend did, to encourage a cross-cutting approach to Internet safety.

The Internet is an incredible tool and has many positive benefits that have transformed our society. Ofcom's 2013 annual review of the communications market in Northern Ireland indicated that 78% of households in Northern Ireland had access to the Internet and that 45% of people now use their mobile phone to access the Internet. We must, however, do all that is necessary to protect children from the inherent dangers of the Internet. Children often have more knowledge about electronic devices than their parents do. As a result, they need to be protected. Last year, Ofcom demonstrated that 93% of children aged five to 15 have access to the Internet at home.

Much violent and inappropriate material is too easily accessible online, and social networking sites can be used as a means of intimidating, threatening or bullying users. The phenomenon of cyberbullying is a serious issue in Northern Ireland for children and young people. According to research conducted by the Department of Education in 2011, 15% of year 6 pupils and 17% of year 9 pupils indicated that they had experienced cyberbullying in the past couple of months. Even more worrying, that research is now three years old. The Internet has got more sophisticated in the intervening time, and so has cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can have serious detrimental effects on victims, damaging their sense of worth and their self-esteem. In some cases, it is found to have contributed to children and young people self-harming or taking their own life. It must be acknowledged that, in recent years, that phenomenon has been taken increasingly seriously by schools and statutory agencies, with positive outcomes. However, much work is left to be done.

7.30 pm

There are shocking websites that are pro-suicide and pro-eating disorders. That material is extremely damaging to the well-being of our young people. Only last year, a mother from Burren in my constituency highlighted that issue when she walked from Burren to London to highlight the issue after the death of her son. The latest dangerous online drinking game — NekNomination — in which participants are challenged to down a drink, is disturbing. The popularity of this reckless craze has become increasingly concerning for parents and families across the North. It is believed to have begun in Australia and spread from there. Many of our young people take it to extremes, downing large quantities of spirits and other alcoholic and intoxicating mixtures, sometimes with dangerous results. Most people who take part make a video of themselves carrying it out and post it on a social media platform. This is not a game; it is jeopardising the lives of our young people. Anybody who saw the father of Jonny Byrne — the

Carlow teenager who lost his life in the River Barrow — tell his story on TV last weekend would certainly be moved. In fact, I believe that such interviews should be shown to our young people.

The Assembly should support the Online Safety Bill, which is before the UK Parliament. Schools must also pursue a robust programme of education for our young people on safe Internet use. It must start early in primary school, and parents need to be actively involved in the education process. The era of the Internet has lots of positive consequences, but we must build in protection for our children and young people.

Mr Lyttle: I am delighted to offer the support of the Alliance Party for the motion and the amendment and to join the Assembly in celebrating Safer Internet Day 2014 and the creative possibilities of the Internet. We should also use it as an opportunity to check whether our Government are delivering on their responsibility to protect our children and young people against its dangers. The website for Safer Internet Day is saferinternet.org.uk, and there people can find out more information about how they can get involved on 11 February.

As many Members have said this evening, we are experiencing a communications revolution. Quite simply, information, both good and bad, can travel at the speed of light. Three billion people are connected by the Internet, and around 3 million emails are sent every second. There are almost as many mobile devices as there are people on the planet. The birth of Prince George — probably of more interest to some Members than others — was heralded by around 25,000 tweets a minute. So, evidence of a hyperconnected world and an immensely powerful communications tool that offers immense hope and opportunity is readily available all around us. The Internet is a platform from which to foster creativity and innovation, tackle inequality, break down barriers of all types and promote an inclusive and shared society. Cloud computing and smart technology achieve better outcomes for businesses, communities, children and young people across the globe. In recent months, I have been delighted to work with a group of young people in east Belfast to develop a youth services directory app and to support the work of an organisation called Thinkspace that is going to create app development rooms in schools and youth clubs across Northern Ireland.

The Internet is indeed a power for great good, but it can, as we have heard this evening, be used to cause great damage and danger. That is the reality that we have to face up to in the Assembly. As a Member of the Assembly and the father of two young children, I believe that we share a significant responsibility and duty of care for our children and young people. We need to maximise the opportunity of the Internet and protect children and young people from the dangers of the digital world.

What are the significant dangers? Mrs Overend eloquently set out the four Cs: content, contact, conduct and commercial. There are some very specific dangers that we have also heard about this evening, one of which is cyberbullying. Figures from the Department of Education from 2011 show that 15·5% of year 6 pupils and 17% of year 9 pupils had experienced cyberbullying. Some great work is ongoing by the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum to tackle the issue. In 2011, the Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre showed that particular groups were at greater risk of cyberbullying. They include children with special educational needs and children from black and minority ethnic groups. We also heard about the dangers of pornography and other harmful content, and 11% of nine- to 16-year-olds in the UK in 2011 reported exposure to pornography.

How adequate is the current approach taken by our Government here? There seems to be a lack of overarching policy to address e-safety. There is, however, a cross-departmental review of current and future actions in the field of e-safety. The Northern Ireland Direct website provides some advice and information on different aspects of e-safety for young people and parents. We also have work to promote Internet safety day here in Northern Ireland, which is to be welcomed. However, if we want to keep pace with what is a communications revolution, we need to see an e-safety revolution. We need to empower our parents, children and young people to remain safe in a digital world. I add my support to the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland/National Children's Bureau report, which has called for the establishment of an e-safety forum in Northern Ireland to lead that work. The motion states that industry self-regulation of web-based content and services is essential. The UK Government's work in that regard should be supported by the Northern Ireland Executive. We need to see greater adequacy and effectiveness of self-regulation.

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

Mr Lyttle: I strongly support the work to coordinate approaches, raise awareness and enhance protection for our children and young people while they explore the possibilities and opportunities of the digital world online.

Mr Givan: Undoubtedly, the Internet has, in the main, been hugely positive and beneficial to our society. We can think about how it has impacted on our economy in commerce, e-banking and conference calls. Socially, it has enabled families and friends to be connected all across the world. As recently as Christmas, I was able to Skype my sister, who was holidaying in Australia over that period. It shows how small this world really is. Educationally, it has changed the classroom environment. Practically, we can think about how people really have no excuse for getting lost now, because you can very quickly Google Maps somewhere and you should be able to find your way.

Undoubtedly, the Internet has brought huge benefit to our society, but it has also created extreme dangers. It is right that we focus on that and ensure that, where gaps are found and established, action is taken. We can think of some of the dangers that Members have highlighted. You can throw out statistics, and, although they do not always resonate, it is frightening to consider that a third of three- to four-year-olds in the United Kingdom have used the Internet. I have three daughters: one is six, one is four and one is 14 months old. Already, I watch my youngest girl scrolling across on the iPad, trying to get access to the different apps. My eldest girl, who is only six, has already been able to memorise my password. She was able to get into it, so I had to change my password. Whenever you are on apps such as Angry Birds or Candy Crush Saga and you get stuck, it asks whether you want to pay 69p to get to the next level. Thankfully, she does not know the password to access my credit card details, which are already on the iPad, but that just shows how young people

are so advanced in how they can navigate the Internet and different electronic devices. Although that can be a good thing, it is also important that there is an awareness of how we can address that.

Colleagues have talked about the inherent dangers, and we should consider how pornographic material is being accessed, particularly by young boys. Over 56% of 15-year-olds admit to regularly viewing pornographic material. That is those who admit to it. That will have a huge impact on their cognitive thinking and how they consider people. Rather than recognising them as persons, they will see them as commodities. There are dangers that we need to be alert to.

Recently, I have noticed the number of adverts for online gambling. That also has an impact. The growing evidence shows that around 2% of children aged between 11 and 15 have gambling problems because of the Internet. Look at how it impacts on adults as well. We should be rightly concerned about that.

Members have touched on the cyberbullying and grooming aspects. There are clear dangers that need to be considered and addressed.

Awareness is key, and parents need to be aware. The research shows that the overwhelming majority of parents would take action to deal with something if they were aware that it was harmful. However, many parents do not understand the different technologies. They are often not properly aware of the dangers that exist or of their children's ability to access material. One statistic shows that 62% of 12- to 15-year-olds now have a smartphone that can access the Internet. However, 70% of those with smartphones do not have any parental controls on them that could be used to block inappropriate images. Parents need to be responsible.

We can encourage the businesses involved to be responsible and self-regulate — that is obviously where the first port of call should be — but government should not rule out taking a form of statutory control over this area. If that is needed, it is right that government should act. We have a duty to protect the most vulnerable in our society, and that should be considered if there is a failure to self-regulate.

Finally, the other aspect —

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

Mr Givan: — is the National Crime Agency. It would be remiss of me not to mention it. It is key to tackling the exploitation of children and young people, and the parties opposite need to consider their continued blockage of it and the risks that that presents.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As my party colleagues have said, we welcome the motion and are more than happy to support the motion as amended.

Some of our counterparts on the Benches opposite have been fascinated by the Sinn Féin ard fheis at the weekend and some of the speeches at it. One of the contributors at our ard fheis was Catherine Seeley, a young teacher who had been harassed and bullied through the Internet and felt intimidated and unable to go back to her workplace. We very much saw the dangers of the Internet and what can happen. On the flip side of that, the young pupils of the school in question went on to social media to support their teacher and showed that the Internet can be empowering and a force for good, just as it can be a negative force. That is an appropriate example of why we need balance.

Chris Lyttle talked about the communications revolution, and we need to face the fact that no lawmakers anywhere will ever keep pace with the communications revolution. By its very nature, a revolution is not to be contained. We need to build a culture and a respect among our young people, our teachers and everyone else that teaches our young people how to deal with it. Our young people are growing up in a very different world from that which most of us could have imagined. They connect, share, learn, explore and play in a way that was simply unimaginable a generation ago. That is the only world that they know, and their parents, teachers, political leaders and even the media are all doing what they can to catch up.

The emergence of social media in all its forms pushes the boundaries of what we think of as private, while giving us and our children a platform to express ourselves at any time and anywhere. Undoubtedly, it can be a very unnerving prospect for a parent or a teacher to see their kids pack so much processing power in their pocket. The media have played on those fears to a large extent with screaming headlines and nightly news leads about online predators, pornography, cyberbullying etc. Indeed, some lawmakers have proposed online safety legislation following one incident or another. One such proposal was an age limit of 16 years for accessing social media and the Internet. Although understandable, those reactions are not always helpful or healthy. The promotion of fear, uncertainty and doubt may make for provocative headlines, but it does little to create an informed and empowered young citizenry that is prepared to take on the challenges of the future.

7.45 pm

The power of social media and the Internet and new technologies as a whole has transformed the notion of citizenship, the pro-social set of behaviours that enable people to be connected to the world around them. With these new powers ultimately come new responsibilities. Parents and educators must be prepared to guide their kids in a new digital world. Policymakers must help to advance the right ideas that help to keep kids safe, and teens must be equipped to make smart, safe and responsible choices online in order to reap many of the opportunities presented in this new world.

We should not allow negative hype or let it preclude us from providing social media opportunities for our kids. We should be frank with ourselves and our children and young people in developing online environments that protect younger kids but are not so limiting that they stifle all the benefits of social media and the Internet.

We need to ensure that our children are fully aware of how to navigate the Internet and social media safely. However, we need to avoid the fear-mongering of social media and the perpetuation of myths that are focused solely on raising alarm. There is ample evidence that the Internet in general, and social media specifically, provide our children with opportunities to learn, interact, participate and connect with the world to make a difference like we never had before. A Harris Interactive survey of teens found that

68% felt that the benefits of social media outweighed the risks, especially when people were coming together to promote positive social change. In addition, more than half of teens said that social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter had made them more aware of the needs of others.

Dr Michael Rich, director of the center on media and child health at Boston Children's Hospital, said:

> *"We should not view social media as either positive or negative but as essentially neutral. It's what we do with the tools that decide how they affect us and those around us."*

Indeed, much as we can control positive and negative aspects of automobiles by observing the speed limit, employing intellect and caution and collaboratively working with drivers, social media requires its own behaviours, commonly referred to as "digital citizenship". Industry, policymakers and others stakeholders, such as schools, need to ensure that some simple ideas and best practices are applied to social networking services that cater to children. Employing key safety principles will help to change a deeply damaging cultural attitude that makes technology something to fear. We should build media literacy skills, focus on the good and promote the idea of family accounts for young children. Let us not give into the myths but focus instead on the positives —

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

Mr Hazzard: — and benefits of our evolving digital lives. Our next generation of entrepreneurs, philanthropists and cultural leaders will have the Internet and social media as part of their DNA. We need to work together to provide our children with a strong foundation of life skills that will enable them to convert this into a means of doing good across their entire life.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I welcome the opportunity to respond to what has been an extremely encouraging debate, given that there seems to be an agreed view on how serious an issue this is and how we need to tackle it.

I indicated in last year's Assembly debate on child Internet safety that it was a real concern for me as a parent of three teenagers and as a Minister. In both roles, I am very aware of my responsibility to help ensure that our children and young people are safe and protected from dangers online. That remains the case.

I very much welcome the opportunity to debate the issues around Internet safety and hear the concerns and issues that Members have brought forward. The increased focus on Safer Internet Day reflects a broader concern in society on the issue, and Junior Minister Bell and I will reflect that through a number of activities that we have planned for tomorrow to promote and celebrate Safer Internet Day. I do not want anyone to be in any doubt about our continued commitment to the issue of child Internet safety.

Everyone here this evening will know just how capable children and young people are in embracing new technology with relative ease, instinctively finding their favourite website or game and song to download. For many adults, it can be daunting to keep up with them and worrying to know that, alongside the fun, games and educational sites, there are considerable dangers from which children and young people need to be protected. As a parent, therefore, you are left with a dilemma. You want your children to learn all those digital skills and have that educational tool, which is essential in everyday life, but you also want to protect them and keep them from the danger they are exposed to, particularly in a place where people would exploit it.

So, in response, we must educate and empower our young people, parents, teachers and everyone who plays a role in educating and caring for our children. With the right information, and the explanation that every action has consequences, we can arm children with the right information and the tools to keep them safe online.

I empathise with all those who feel confused and daunted about how to protect our children from the potential risks online. Part of the problem is that children are very often more digitally active than their parents. I know that from first-hand experience. However, there is a lot of advice and help on offer. Indeed, that is one of the issues that the recent SBNI report, which some Members mentioned, demonstrated. We need to ensure that we are providing clear and consistent messages for children and young people, their parents and those who are working with them.

In light of the report from SBNI, I will make some points. I will try to answer some of the questions that Members asked: if I do not answer a Member's point, forgive me, but I will try my best.

First, I congratulate the Safeguarding Board and the National Children's Bureau for the report, which marks an important staging post in our efforts to protect children online. Just as we need to educate children to have the confidence to say no, we need to empower and engage those looking after children with clear and relevant e-safety messages so that they are not alone when objecting to what children are being enticed to access. Ms Overend was at the launch of the report, and, time and time again, it came across that the messages were not clear.

Secondly, the theme for Safer Internet Day this year is, "Let's create a better internet together". That recognises the balance between encouraging users to embrace the positive opportunities offered online and responding to, and dealing with, the negative aspects of the online world.

As the motion sets out, and as I said when I mentioned the launch of the report, we should not lose sight of the positive side of the Internet as a fantastic educational resource, even as we seek to protect the most vulnerable from its negative side. Unfortunately, however, we know that it can also subject children to inappropriate or harmful material. Children can also, through their behaviour, inadvertently put themselves at risk. It is important that we recognise that children need to be empowered with the tools and the skills to know when they are putting themselves at risk.

The most recent survey evidence bears that out. Although access to the Internet can be seen as beneficial for educational and social development, one in six children indicated that they had seen something on the Internet in the past year that had upset or worried them. Also, one in eight children told a recent ARK survey that they had been bullied by someone sending nasty texts or putting up bad things about them on the Internet. We have work to do to make sure that clear, concise and consistent messages

are provided to our children and young people, their parents and carers.

However, it would be unfair to expect people who look after children to take all the responsibility for making sure that children are safe when they go online. The industry and retailers have to share the responsibility for e-safety messages as well. They must do all that they can to support those looking after children in understanding how to ensure that their children stay safe. They have a big responsibility in this. In that context, we welcome the recent announcement by the Internet service providers on work that they are taking forward to block child abuse and other illegal content on the Internet.

Turning to some more specific aspects of the motion and taking account of the amendment from Ms Overend, the Department is fully supportive of cross-departmental working on the issue and of the development by the Safeguarding Board of an e-safety forum.

Some Members asked about the mechanics of that forum. The Safeguarding Board is spearheading the forum, but OFMDFM will be playing an active role in it. We will be helping to coordinate the forum, and we will be using the framework that we use for Delivering Social Change because that will give us the cross-departmental mechanism that we need. We are keen to use that and the existing children's champions in the various Departments. I emphasise that the Safeguarding Board will have the spearheading role.

As I said, e-safety is an issue that cuts across all Departments that interface with children and young people. A number of Members mentioned the Brussels visit that Minister Bell and I were on and how we can learn from the European example. We met Commission representatives when we were there last November and discussed the research that we were doing here as well as the research that they were carrying out in a European capacity. Again, it is about learning best models of practice and how the type of information that they can give us can inform our policy here when we take it forward. It is important to recognise European developments in helping to inform our policies at a local level.

We recognise that there is considerable merit in the adoption of an overarching approach to ensure that our children are adequately protected in all areas of their lives, particularly in e-safety. Another Member, I think that it was Mr Lyttle, mentioned the NCB report that was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board, which looked at an Executive strategy around e-safety. Again, we would use the forum to develop that. Although the Department of Health has the overarching responsibility for child protection and safety, we will play our part to ensure that, through the mechanisms that we have in our coordinating role in OFMDFM, other Departments will also hopefully play their part.

In 2013, we carried out an exercise to identify any risks to children and young people from access to the Internet across Departments. You asked for an update on that. We have compiled a report that we gave to the Safeguarding Board, as we said during meetings that we had with the Member, so we are waiting for the Safeguarding Board to come back to us with a report on that research. I will let Members know when that meeting happens.

As I said, I am very pleased to have taken part in the debate. I support the amendment on the importance of establishing an e-safety forum, as recommended by the SBNI. The forum would provide an excellent opportunity to bring together those organisations best placed to contribute to the development of an Executive-wide approach that would incorporate that forum and an Executive strategy on it. For its part, OFMDFM will be happy to take part.

I believe that the steps that the Executive have put in place over the past year represent a strong foundation through which we can address the challenges posed by the Internet. On that basis, I would welcome cross-party support today. I ask everyone to support Safer Internet Day tomorrow.

Mr Nesbitt: As is traditional, I will begin by thanking the proposers of the motion and Mrs Overend for her amendment. It is an important debate, and it is good to see Members in the Chamber and, indeed, Members in agreement on the issues. However, look around the Chamber, Members. Who is here? The DUP is here, Sinn Féin is here, the SDLP is here, the Alliance Party is here, and the Ulster Unionist Party is here. The five parties of the Executive. The so-called parties of opposition are absent.

I thank Mr Weir not only for tabling the motion but for making it clear early on that he has no difficulty with Mrs Overend's amendment, which gives us a very good platform for unanimity this evening. I also thank him for acknowledging the positive influence of the Internet, not least for people such as us.

On Friday, in my constituency office in Newtownards, I dealt with a woman who had an issue that involved me sending some data to another agency. Luckily enough, I did it as she was sitting there. The recipient of the email came straight back and said, "Yes, but could I refer you to somebody else?" I pinged the email on. Incredibly, within the time of the meeting, the second person came back to me. We had an answer for that woman in the space of 90 minutes. By first class post, it would have taken, at best, five working days. We can now do in 90 minutes what used to take us over a week.

8.00 pm

The Internet is technology that is fantastically beneficial when it goes our way. However, as with anything and everything in life, there are those who are out to exploit it and to do damage with it. We, as an Assembly, have a duty to act to protect and prevent. Mrs Overend gave the example of her eight-year-old looking for a toy on the Internet and coming across an entirely inappropriate adult advertisement. Mr Givan talked about a six-year-old cracking his password but being thankful that the child did not get the password for his bank details. I am tempted to say, "Your wife was on the phone. You are to call home urgently. The bank manager is in the driveway."

On a more serious point, the fact that we do not have the full protections of the National Crime Agency (NCA) is a very important point for the House to reflect on. As we go forward, we will continue to return to the damage done by an ideological decision not to bring the National Crime Agency into Northern Ireland.

Mrs Overend defined in some detail the sort of software and behavioural advice that is available today to make the positive difference that we seek. We do not have to go off and do an awful lot of research; it is out there to be grasped.

Ms Fearon gave data that provided some definition of the fact that 93% of five- to 15-year-olds have access to the Internet. She gave us some startling figures on the activity of uploading videos and images, which emphasised the scope for abuse. Ms Fearon also talked about goods, facilities and services (GFS) and how she wants GFS to be made available to young people as well as older people. I just wonder whether, in suggesting that protections be brought in, you are admitting that GFS are not entirely suitable for younger people. You would have to legislate to take account of the age of these people.

I thank junior Minister Ms McCann, who confirmed that OFMDFM will lead the drive in establishing the e-safety forum. That is extremely welcome news, but, of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Much reference was made to the Safeguarding Board. Sharon Beattie, its director of operations, talks about a parent who likened looking for information on e-safety to looking up something that the doctor tells you on the Internet and being put off because:

> *"so much comes up when you do a search".*

We have to help to mould this. I searched "NI Assembly" —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — on Bing and got 6,680,000 references. Let us hope that the next one is a reference to the fact that the House was united tonight in supporting the motion as amended by Mrs Overend.

Lord Morrow: I am pleased to wind on the motion. As my colleague Peter Weir said, we are quite content to adopt and accept the amendment moved by Mrs Overend. I do not intend to comment on individuals who have spoken, except to say that I feel that all the speeches were of excellent quality. I am delighted that the House is united. It is good to see that the House can unite around some things. There is nothing more important or better to unite around than this motion.

I have taken a close interest in online safety over recent years. On 28 January, I attended a debate in the House of Lords on the Children and Families Bill, which included a discussion on online safety. Baroness Howe, a cross-Bench peer, moved an amendment to introduce in statute an opt-in system of online regulation. She really struck me when she mentioned some statistics related to tube sites, which offer hard-core pornographic and violent material at the click of a play button, with no warnings, no splash pages or any means of restricting children's access. She said:

> *"If we look at some Experian Hitwise statistics for UK visits to just six 'tube' sites, the figures are staggering: PornHub gets 66 million monthly UK hits; xHamster, 63 million; XNXX, 29 million; RedTube, 28 million; Xvideos, 28 million; and YouPorn, 26 million. That is a total of 240 million hits from the UK in a single month to adult sites, without any form of onsite child protection."*

Members, no doubt like many of you, I find those statistics to be truly shocking and very worrying. It is abundantly clear that easy access to such material for children and young people can be deeply damaging. I could point to a range of academic studies that outline that point, but in the limited time available to me, I will highlight only one. In 2010, Dr Linda Papadopoulos, in a Home Office report considering the sexualisation of children, stated:

> *"The evidence gathered in the review suggests a clear link between consumption of sexualised images, a tendency to view women as objects and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes and behaviour as the norm."*

Confronted with the very real dangers online that face our children and young people, I believe that it is crucial that we take action. To my mind, two steps must be taken. First, we must seek the introduction in statute of an opt-in system to protect children and young people from stumbling accidentally on or purposely seeking harmful material online. Secondly, we must seek to ensure that parents and children are effectively educated about online safety. It is not one or the other; it must be both.

In the time available to me, I want to concentrate particularly on the opt-in, default adult content filters that can be lifted at any time with age verification demonstrating that the person is over 18. I know that the Assembly does not have the power to introduce such a system in our Province, but I believe that we should urge our parliamentary counterparts at Westminster to make the change.

The first thing to say is that I very much welcome the progress that has been made over the past year on a self-regulatory basis. Since we debated the issue last February, there has been considerable progress. The introduction of a code of practice for the four major Internet service providers is clearly a positive step forward. It is fantastic that three of the four have voluntarily introduced an opt-in system.

However, there are six major problems with self-regulation, which Baroness Howe set out powerfully in the debate in the House of Lords on 28 January and in a recent article on politics.co.uk. I will quickly run through the problems that she outlined.

First, it is important to recognise that self-regulation does not cover all the market. Between 5% and 10% of the market, which amounts to over one million homes and hundreds of thousands of children, will not be covered by the default filters. Put quite simply, what is the point of plugging a leak if it covers only 90% of the hole?

Baroness Howe notes that one Internet service provider (ISP) — namely Andrews and Arnold Ltd — has no plans to introduce default filters at all. Indeed, on its home page, it proclaims its commitment to "Unfiltered Internet for all". To my mind, it is clear that, if effective protection is to be provided for all children, we need a statutory approach that will cover the entirety of the market.

Secondly, in the context of ISP self-regulation, there are very real fears that big corporations are given too much power, because it is up to companies to define what constitutes adult content. Currently, there is no requirement for the definition of adult content to be consistent across the sector. There is no accountability of those companies.

I do acknowledge that there is a legitimate concern about websites being blocked in error. The statutory approach that Baroness Howe has proposed addresses both of these concerns by giving Ofcom, an accountable public body, responsibility for defining adult content and for providing a mechanism for dealing with claims of over-blocking in a timely manner.

Thirdly, if default filters are to achieve their goal, they must be complemented with effective age verification so that we can be certain that those people who are disabling adult content filters are 18 years or over. The current approach that is used by the industry, which is called the closed loop, involves sending the ISP account-holder an email informing them that their filters have been disabled. This presents two problems. First, no age verification takes place before default filters are disabled. Secondly, it depends entirely on parents reading and acting on these ISP emails immediately, and, in many cases, that simply will not happen. It seems apparent to me that the UK Government need to require all ISPs to introduce robust verification of the age of the person who is deciding to disable default filters before filters are disabled.

Fourthly, it seems very strange to me that the UK Government are reluctant to introduce such statutory regulation. As the eminent peer Lord Mackay of Clashfern has argued, it is illogical for us as a society to believe that child protection is a sufficiently important subject to merit statutory protections offline but then to decide that self-regulation will do online.

The British Government have been very quick to make the point that what is illegal offline is also illegal online. However, Members, we need to ask the question: if that was sufficient security, why have the Government seen the need for default filters? The reality, of course, is that legal protection for children is not just about pronouncing some things to be illegal. It is also about using the law to protect children from coming into contact with things that are illegal and, crucially, about using the law to protect children and young people from accessing things that, although not illegal, are, nonetheless, inappropriate for children to access.

Fifthly and finally, the mobile phone operators code has not been properly adhered to by the industry. As many Members will be aware, many children and young people these days access the Internet through their phones. In 2010, it was revealed that BlackBerry mobiles were not offering default filters, in contravention of the 2005 code. That had left children able to access inappropriate material for five years.

Last month, Tesco Mobile was similarly found to be ignoring the code. Fortunately, both companies have now rectified matters, but the history of the code makes the weakness of self-regulation obvious. Moreover, it has been ignored by companies not once but twice, and, no doubt, it could easily happen again. Indeed, it is quite possible —

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

Lord Morrow: — although I am not certain, that other mobile companies could be ignoring the requirements of the 2005 code. It seems clear that we need to see the default filtering obligation, with effective age verification, in statute so that mobile phone operators take their responsibilities more seriously. I commend the motion to the House.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That this Assembly endorses and supports the Safer Internet Day 2014 campaign entitled "Let's create a better Internet together"; recognises that whilst it poses significant dangers to children and young people, used properly the Internet can also positively affect social, economic and educational advancement; acknowledges that all users have a part to play in making the Internet a safer and better place for everybody; calls upon the Northern Ireland Executive and Her Majesty's Government to encourage a cross-cutting approach to online safety by incorporating it into the school curriculum, by affording parents and carers easy access to sufficient information to take necessary action and by encouraging businesses and industry to self-regulate their web-based content and services; and further calls upon the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assist with the prompt establishment of an e-safety forum, as recommended in the recent Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, 'An exploration of e-safety messages to young people, parents and practitioners in Northern Ireland', and to coordinate e-safety responsibilities across all Executive Departments.*

Adjourned at 8.14 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 February 2014

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Yesterday we learned of a letter that the Minister of Finance sent to his ministerial colleagues only — a letter of alarming facts and figures, which the House is so far unaware of. Subsequently, the letter was leaked to the media by obviously at least one Minister. Is that not a breach of the ministerial code? How seriously do you view the matter?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If you have information, you can bring it to the attention of the Speaker's Office, and we will then consider the matter. I have to say that it is something that I am completely unaware of as we speak. So, if you can supply that information, or, indeed, if you have done so already, it will be considered in due course.

Mr McNarry: Further to that point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, just for your information, the information that I bring is very much in the public domain. I am very surprised that no one from the Bench that you sit on listened to the news last night.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The latter point is not a point of order. The Speaker's Office will take its own counsel on the matter.

Mr Allister: On a point of order. I want to refer back to the statement that the Health Minister made about the situation in our emergency departments. The House may recall that, yesterday, I directly asked the Minister whether there had been any deaths in consequence of or related to trolley waits and delays in the hospital. The Minister ducked the question and did not answer, yet this morning on the radio, we heard from Dr Tony Stevens that there may have been as many as five deaths in connection with that. Surely the expectation of the House is that, when Ministers come to the House and are asked questions, they should frankly and openly supply the information that is requested, rather than duck the issue. Is that not a reasonable expectation in the House?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member, and Members generally, that, on 26 January 2009, the Speaker gave a very clear ruling that it is not for the Chair to judge whether a Minister is giving a satisfactory answer. If Members are not satisfied with an answer, they should be persistent with the Minister and table further questions, which I recommend to the Member.

It is not the job of the Chair to make judgements on answers, and I addressed that point last week. I will not take any more points of order on these matters. Members have recourse if they are not satisfied with the response from a Minister or, indeed, with subsequent disclosure, and they know how to follow those matters up in their own diligent fashion.

Ministerial Statement

Organ Donation

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety wishes to make a statement.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I wish to make a statement concerning the future of organ donation policy in Northern Ireland.

In April last year, I announced the key measures to be taken forward by my Department in developing its organ donation policy. In July 2013, I launched the NHS Blood and Transplant's (NHSBT) new UK-wide organ donation and transplantation strategy, 'Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020: A UK Strategy'. The strategy was developed by NHSBT in collaboration with all UK Health Departments and all those involved in organ donation and transplantation, including professional bodies, patient groups, transplant surgeons and the wider health service. The overall aim is to match world-class performance in organ donation and transplantation. The strategy does not propose that soft opt-out legislation should be introduced as a UK-wide policy. The strategy proposes that three groups — society and individuals; NHS hospitals and staff; NHSBT and commissioners — need to act for the strategy to be successful and achieve the desired outcomes. Support action from government, professional bodies and the voluntary sector will be essential, too.

In addition to the actions set out in the strategy, at my request, the Public Health Agency (PHA) has completed a major survey to test local public opinion on organ donation. The findings of that survey will be addressed by a public information campaign, which the PHA will launch on 12 February. The campaign is aimed at encouraging people to let their family know whether they wish to donate their organs at the end of life. The aim is to increase public awareness of organ donation and the number of donors. Following the campaign, the PHA will conduct a second public attitudes survey into organ donation later this year. When the results of that survey are known, I will be better placed to reach a decision on what further action might be required, including whether we need to move forward with statutory measures on organ donation policy.

For the past six years, Northern Ireland's organ donation policy has been driven initially by advice from the UK organ donation task force (ODTF) and, since June 2012, by the Northern Ireland Committee for Organ Donation and Transplantation (NICODT), a group comprising commissioners, DHSSPS officials, clinicians, NHS Blood and Transplant, local regional collaborative members and the voluntary sector. In January 2008, the ODTF made 14 recommendations addressing the obstacles to organ donation throughout the whole of the UK, aiming to increase donor rates by at least 50% by 2013. During that time, there was considerable investment in organ donation. Clinical leads and specialist nurses were appointed in each trust, donation committees were established and regional collaboratives developed to share good practice and provide a platform for shared learning. As a result of the developments, and the dedication of the staff involved, the 50% increase in donation was reached by the UK as a whole. Northern Ireland exceeded the target by increasing donation rates by 82%. That is rightly an achievement that we should be very proud of, but we cannot be complacent as more still needs to be done. Currently, around 160 people in Northern Ireland are actively waiting on a transplant and, unfortunately, around 15 people die in Northern Ireland each year while waiting for a transplant. Having achieved, and indeed surpassed, the aims of the ODTF, in July 2013, I launched a new UK-wide organ donation and transplantation strategy, 'Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020: A UK Strategy'. The strategy was developed by NHSBT in conjunction with the four UK Health Administrations. The overall aim of the strategy is to match world-class performance in organ donation and transplantation.

Last year, I announced that I intended to initiate a public engagement process to establish attitudes towards organ donation to inform my decision on the future policy for organ donation in Northern Ireland, including the possible introduction of an opt-out system for organ donation, if necessary. This work was taken forward by the Public Health Agency and consisted of a public attitude survey and focus group meetings. It was to be followed up by a widespread media campaign. The results of the PHA's public engagement process were published in October 2013. In response, I stated that I wished to consider the report in detail before making my decision on the future of organ donation in Northern Ireland.

The PHA's public engagement process involved a representative sample survey of 1,012 members of the Northern Ireland public and 16 focus groups with key stakeholders, such as charities, people on a waiting list, those who have had a transplant, donor families and health and social care staff. The results of the work highlighted that with regard to organ donation and registration on the organ donor register (ODR), 84% of respondents supported the idea of organ donation. However, support was lower for the idea that we should all register for organ donation, at 55%, or that it is unacceptable not to donate your organs, at 26%. More than a third, 36%, of respondents were not aware of the ODR. Knowledge about organ donation was generally low among respondents, who answered, on average, three questions out of seven correctly.

Four factors were found to drive respondents' attitudes towards organ donation, of which spiritual or traditional beliefs, such as that the body should be kept whole for burial, was the main one. That was followed by medical distrust; for example, "If I sign an organ donor card, doctors may take away my organs before I am actually dead". There was the "icky" factor; for example, "I do not like the idea of my body being cut into when I have died". Another factor was the perceived benefits; for example, "Organ donation is the gift of life for whoever receives it". Seventy-eight percent of respondents said that they would be willing to accept an organ if they needed one.

Seventy-eight percent of respondents agreed that it is important to discuss organ donation wishes with family and/or friends. However, only 38% had done so, and only 43% thought that their family or close friend would actually know their wishes. Just over half of the respondents, 52%, said that they knew the donation wishes of their wife, husband or partner, and fewer knew the wishes of their parents, 32%; siblings, 27%; children, 29%; or close friend, 26%.

Eighty-eight percent of those who said their family or close friend would know their donation wishes thought that they would agree with those wishes. However, that fell to 29% when they did not think their family or close friend would know their wishes. This suggests that people may be less likely to discuss their donation wishes with their family or close friend if they are concerned that their family or close friend would not agree with their decision.

What can be done to improve organ donation in Northern Ireland? Stakeholders felt that it was important to normalise organ donation. Informing the public by providing correct information and dispelling myths was considered essential. There was unanimous support across all stakeholder groups for a well-resourced and sustained public information campaign to raise awareness of organ donation and make it a cultural norm.

The soft opt-out/presumed consent debate has been happening. Fifty-six percent of respondents said they would be in favour of changing to a soft opt-out/presumed consent system. However, when asked whether they agreed with the statement that, "Everyone should be presumed to be an organ donor unless they register a wish otherwise", fewer, 49%, agreed, indicating that there is some confusion about the idea.

With regard to stakeholders, support for soft opt-out/presumed consent was higher among organ donation charities, transplant recipients, those on the transplant waiting list, and the British Medical Association (BMA). Those who were less supportive of the proposed legislative change believed that now is not the right time and raised concern about public readiness. Concerns among stakeholders about the introduction of soft opt-out/presumed consent included the possibility of feeding into medical distrust — public perception of a conflict of interest for medical staff when considering end-of-life care — a general feeling that people would not actively seek out an opt-out register and fear that use of the ODR, which would still be in operation, may decline.

That means that more families could be in a situation of not knowing their loved one's wishes, so decision-making consent among donor families could become more difficult. The pool of potential donors could reduce from the current situation whereby all families are asked to consider donation if medically appropriate, whether their loved one is on the ODR or not, to one whereby only the families of those not on the opt-out register are asked.

10.45 am

Other concerns included the following: losing the notion that donation is a gift; creating public confusion that stops people opting in; and the issue becoming a political football. There are general concerns that the gains made in Northern Ireland over the past six years could be lost if the public are not fully in favour of a change. Some stakeholders said that they had changed their opinion from being supportive of the proposed legislative change to becoming more cautious about implementing it at this time. Finally, 43% of respondents felt that more can be done with the current opt-in system before changing to soft opt-out/presumed consent.

Following on from the public engagement, tomorrow, the Public Health Agency will take forward the next phase of the work that I announced last year, which is a major public information campaign aimed at tackling the obstacles identified to organ donation in Northern Ireland. A major theme of that will be letting your family and friends know of your wish to become an organ donor after your death.

As I have publicly stated, making a decision on any legislative change for organ donation is not one to be taken lightly. The last place that we want to be is, in seeking to do the right thing for the right reasons, actually doing the wrong thing. Making such an important decision warrants taking sufficient time to assess the available evidence and reach a final decision on the long-term future of the service. Part of that evidence will be to see how the public respond to the information campaign that is about to be launched. I will also follow closely the view of the professionals and will be cautious about legislative change without clear clinical support from those with expertise of working day in, day out in this field.

There is much more to consider here than simply whether or not we proceed with legislation. We also need to look at how we further improve awareness of the organ donor register, organ donation in general and highly sensitive issues such as how to encourage people to discuss their wishes with loved ones. Those areas must be given further impetus and the response of the public carefully considered if I am to arrive at a properly informed decision on the future development of policy on organ donation in Northern Ireland.

In the meantime, I urge all those who have not already done so to join the organ donor register and to discuss their wishes with friends and family. Our shared aim is to reduce the numbers of people on the waiting list for life-saving organs by increasing the numbers of families who consent to making healthy organs available for transplantation.

In conclusion, I firmly believe that increased public awareness, education on the key issues and the further development of transplantation services through UK-wide action is the right way forward for organ donation in Northern Ireland at this time. I will be happy to continue these discussions with all who have an interest in this important issue later this year, after I have had an opportunity to consider the further survey of public opinion following the PHA's public awareness campaign. Thank you.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his statement. He outlined that 84% of respondents supported the idea of organ donation and that 55% supported the idea that we should all register for organ donation. However, the opt-out debate is not about registering in as opposed to opting out. We should all advocate public awareness, but given that, specifically, Wales has adopted a two-pronged approach through legislative change and a public awareness campaign, is the Minister simply stalling legislative change? How will he give guarantees now that a soft opt-out system or any legislative change will be advanced in this mandate?

Mr Poots: I am not against soft opt-out legislation. We are dealing with something that is hugely sensitive, and I am of the opinion that a person's organs belong to the person. They do not belong to the state; they belong to the individual, and it is for the individual to make the decision.

However, if we go down the soft opt-out route, it may well ensure that more lives are saved by increasing organ donation, but we have to do that on an evidence basis. The evidence base in Sweden, where the soft opt-out was introduced, is less conclusive. Spain has seen a significant benefit, but that did not come immediately after the soft opt-out was introduced; in fact, it came many years later and after public information campaigns. Therefore, we need to work more closely with the public to make them more aware of the benefits and importance of organ donation and the importance of discussing those matters with their relatives. We then need to go back to the public to see whether we can get a more confirmed view. We have public consultation for garnering the public's views on these matters before the Assembly makes decisions. That is why we have had this extensive consultation and why, given the confused responses from those who participated, we need to have a further extensive consultation.

Mr Wells: The Minister is aware that there has been a significant increase in the number of live kidney donors. Does he see that as an option to try to make up the gap between the demand of those requiring organs and the number of those prepared to donate?

Mr Poots: We have a target of 50 live kidney donors annually, and that has been surpassed in recent years, which makes Northern Ireland one of the leading countries in the field of live organ donation. We need to congratulate our staff for the excellent work that they have carried out. However, that will help out only with kidneys, and there is a range of other organs that can be donated. It is important to drive up the number of people who donate organs when deceased. So there is a course of work that needs to be continued.

A huge success story is the increasing number of people, up to 82%, donating organs. Much of that is down to the excellent work of our specialist nurses in organ donation. We have six specialist nurses based in the Belfast Trust, and they provide excellent support for families going through the most traumatic period in their life, which is losing their loved one. They do things in an incredibly sensitive way, and that has enabled us to increase massively the number of people who are donating organs. We need to consider that in all of this, and we need to ensure that we can develop it further, because I think that we can make further ground in increasing the number of organs donated.

Mr McKinney: Does the Minister accept that the statistics in the consultation responses are sufficient for action of a legislative nature? One startling statistic that underscores the point is that 15 of the 160 people currently on the transplant list may not survive their wait. Therefore, for them, every day is a delay.

Mr Poots: The statistics demonstrate that there is massive confusion. They certainly do not give us a clear pathway. I encourage the Member to read through the statistics. The fact that 15 people die each year should be a major incentive for us to act. The truth is that many of the organs that are obtained in Northern Ireland are not used in Northern Ireland.

If we are to make a real impact on the 15 lives that are lost each year, we need to do it across the United Kingdom, because we are part of a pool of organs that exists in the United Kingdom. Therefore Northern Ireland is leading the way in driving up organ donation. We need to get other parts of the United Kingdom to move as quickly as Northern Ireland. That is where the real benefits can be obtained across the United Kingdom, not just in Northern Ireland. It is important that we work with our colleagues in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure that we maximise organ donation, to ensure that many more people benefit from organ donation as a consequence, and to ensure that we make a real impact on those numbers — the 160 who are waiting on the list and the 15 lives that are lost each year. That is something that we are absolutely committed to doing.

Mrs Dobson: Minister, your statement proves one thing in the House today: the personal commitment of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister means little. You can survey an issue to death; meanwhile people continue to die. Will you give a commitment to the House that, when you know the results of the second public survey, which, I gather, could be up to a year away, you will bring a soft opt-out system before the end of this mandate? Or, perhaps, you will commission another survey, followed by another survey, followed by yet another survey.

Mr Poots: I do not know what the outcome of the second survey will be. I did not dictate people's responses in the survey; we asked people questions, and they came back with answers. I know that organ donation is hugely important to the Member and that her family has benefited personally from it, as has mine. My uncle was one of the earliest recipients of a kidney transplant in Northern Ireland and is still alive today as a result. I could have benefited further from organ donation for my mother who died early of liver disease, in spite of the fact that she never drank. However, she did not have the opportunity to get that. This issue is very important to me personally, as I want to save lives through organ donation.

I am not against the proposals that Mrs Dobson, for example, has produced on soft opt-out; it might be the right way forward. However, it is important that we educate the public and bring the public with us on those issues if we are to take what is a very significant step. It may be the right step, but, at this moment in time, I do not have the powerful evidence base that I think we should have to move ahead.

Mr McCarthy: The issue of organ donation has been with us for a very long time. I am disappointed that we seem to be going for more time. Of course, we want to make the right decision. I welcome the statement's indication:

> *"The overall aim is to match world-class performance in organ donation and transplantation."*.

However, the statement also says, as has been mentioned, that 160 people are waiting for a transplant; therefore urgent decisions are required. Can the Minister advise whether his Department is looking at the success or otherwise of what is happening in other places where soft opt-out is in operation? Given that, will the Minister give the Assembly an assurance that an early decision will be forthcoming?

Mr Poots: I already have mentioned Spain and Sweden. Wales has introduced legislation but is not enacting it until late in 2015, I believe, so we will not have any evidence base arising from that. This is not about creating inordinate delays. In fact, we will continue to drive up the numbers

who donate organs over the time in which we are doing this work. I am absolutely confident of that. One of the benefits of the proposals on both pieces of legislation is that they have created debate, and public awareness is now much higher than it was. So there has been significant benefit.

11.00 am

However, it is important that the public are more engaged and that they have those conversations with their families. I ask Members this: have they had those conversations with their families? Many people have not had that conversation and do not know the wishes of their loved ones, and, as a consequence, when the worst possible thing happens and that leads to the death of a loved one, people are in a confused state. We need to keep getting a message out there that will help remove confusion and help bring clarity to the situation and, consequently, we can save more lives.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. What does international evidence say about the opt-out systems for organ donation?

Mr Poots: Internationally, as I indicated, Spain has driven up organ donation quite significantly as a result of soft opt-out legislation, but that did not happen until public information and education was driven up, which was quite a number of years after the legislation was introduced. Sweden has not had the real benefits that it might have expected to derive as a result of introducing soft opt-out. So, in that respect, it is patchy. We really need to focus on how we can maximise organ donation in Northern Ireland but also in the pool that we receive organs from, which is right across the United Kingdom. It is very important that we work very closely with our colleagues across the other UK regions to ensure that many more organs are donated at a UK-wide level. We have a population of 1·8 million people, and the organ donation pool has a population of 60 million people. So, if we make a 100% increase and they only make a 10% increase, that is not as significant as it could be. We need to work closely with our colleagues across the UK to ensure that the increases take place on a UK level and, consequently, the benefits are maximised. Matching livers, hearts and other organs is very challenging, and that is why we really need more organs to come in from the wider pool, which is the UK pool, as opposed to from Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers to date. Quite recently, on a number of occasions, I have heard an MLA in the Assembly make the point that, when a Department or a Minister wants to kick something into touch, they ask for more evidence. Given the evidence-based campaign led by Joe Brolly, is this a case of looking more evidence or are you simply kicking the ball into touch? By the way, the MLA was Jim Wells.

Mr Poots: Well, I cannot argue with Jim Wells. I am not interested in kicking this into touch. I am interested in getting the best outcomes. People can either judge that as genuine or not. I sincerely believe that we should encourage more people to donate their organs. It is a hugely sensitive issue, and we need to be very careful in how we manage the public and not take the public for granted. We carried out an extensive survey and asked a wide range of questions, and it demonstrated that the public are not as well informed as we want them to be. Immediately, on the back of that, we are engaging in a public information campaign, and as soon as that concludes, we will take a further evidence base. If that gives us the nod to go ahead, I will be very happy to proceed with it. It is not about holding things back.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement. I concur with his call for us to have those conversations with friends and families and let them know our wishes for after our death.

Minister, in the Public Health Agency findings, there is a significant variation from other figures that have been quoted. How robust do you consider the PHA process to have been?

Mr Poots: It was a robust exercise. It certainly questioned a wide range of people across Northern Ireland. The work carried out met all expected standards. The process involved a statistical representation of the population of Northern Ireland, which indicates that it is a truer reflection of the thoughts of the whole of Northern Ireland than it would be had it included just those people who may be exercised to respond to an individual consultation.

I plan to repeat the public attitudes survey later in the year following the public awareness campaign, so I hope to establish whether the campaign has the desired impact of increasing awareness and understanding of organ donation issues. That will allow me to make a decision on the future policy for organ donation in Northern Ireland. I encourage people to read the statistics that the Public Health Agency produced. They are very interesting, indicating that there can be a community and religious difference when it comes to organ donation. For example, people from the Roman Catholic community are less inclined to have their organs donated than people from the Protestant community are. There are issues that we may need to discuss further to ensure that people feel more comfortable, even in their faith, that the right thing to do is to help others to live after they die.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the statement, and I have no doubt that the Minister is honourable in his approach. It is clear from his language that the matter is a very emotive and sensitive one. I share the concerns of a number of Members about a delay of another 12 months. As the Minister said, it will mean that another 15 families will lose a loved one. Given that we regularly get statistics from the Department, what research or study has it carried out into how many lives would be saved if presumed consent were introduced?

Mr Poots: I state very clearly that, if soft opt-out were introduced today, and, indeed, if we drove the numbers up, we would still not save the life of 15 people, or anywhere near that number. We should not confuse that. Nonetheless, we should make an effort to save the life of as many people as possible. If the strategy saves one or two lives, it is very important to the one or two who are saved. Let us be very clear about that. However, I want to go after the 15. I want to maximise the number of lives saved. What we do in Northern Ireland and what other parts of the UK do will help us to achieve that. Therefore, we will work closely with others to drive forward the campaigns and ensure that they have as good success as we are having in driving up the numbers of people donating organs. As I indicated before, we have achieved

success thus far, but we have not, by any stretch of the imagination, plateaued. There are massive opportunities for us to increase the numbers further.

Not proceeding straight away with soft opt-out legislation will not stop us from increasing organ donation at this point and ensuring that more lives are saved in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom. If others can keep pace with us, that will certainly ensure that lives are saved here as a consequence of organs being donated in other parts of the UK and coming to people who live in Northern Ireland.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, but he said little in it to assure those who may have personal concerns about organ donation. The soft opt-out proposals include a register so that those who have concerns can ensure, for the first time, that their wishes will not be overridden by others, as can happen at present. Will the Minister explain why he did not explain that in his statement?

Mr Poots: One of the issues identified was that, for people not on the organ donor register, new problems will be created as a result of the legislation. Consequently, there are issues for them. There were also issues for people who are on the organ donor register who indicated that they believed that their donation is a gift. They said that, if the Government decided that they owned the organs, they would remove their names from the register and not donate their organs. That is a relatively small number of people, but it is a couple of percent of those who are on the organ donor register.

So, not everybody takes kindly to the notion of the Government saying, "Organs belong to us". That is because people believe that organs belong to them. We need to work on that to ensure that people are more conformable with the fact that the organs that they donate after their lives have been lived will help others to live a full and healthy life. I think that it is most important that we continue to get those messages out to the public, that the public in Northern Ireland are widely receptive to our proposals on organ donation and that more and more people sign up to donate organs.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. There has been considerable focus on what has been done in countries outside the United Kingdom, such as Spain and Sweden. However, all of us in Northern Ireland live in Her Majesty's United Kingdom. With that in mind, will the Minister advise us of the English view of the soft opt-out approach?

Mr Poots: Members may be interested to know that I met David Cameron when he visited Northern Ireland just over two years ago. I was not in this position very long, and I asked him what his opinion was on organ donation, as I was somewhat inclined to go for the soft opt-out option. Mr Cameron made it very clear that neither he nor Andrew Lansley was sympathetic to that option, and it would appear that Jeremy Hunt is not particularly sympathetic to the proposal. Indeed, the previous Labour Administration were not particularly sympathetic to it either. That alerted me to the fact that, we could go down a particular route, but we would not get the changes that we would want by having a massively increased organ donor pool. That is because the largest body of people who would contribute to that pool would not engage in it.

As with my English colleagues, my Scottish colleagues said that they would find it difficult to recommend changing the current opt-in system, as they have seen a significant rise in organ donations of around 63% in the UK as a whole since 2007-08. That level is predicted to increase to 68% by the end of this financial year. There has also been an increase of 33% in organ transplantation over the same baseline years. Those rates continue to rise.

So, England and Scotland do not seem inclined to go down this route. Wales has done something different, but it has not been demonstrated at this point that it will increase the organ pool. We will do our thing and develop our policies. However, it is important that we develop our own policies on the basis of qualitative information. This is not an emotive issue; rather, it is about having factual information at hand that can demonstrate that we can make a real and tangible difference.

Mr Ross: I commend the Minister for taking a sensible decision on this sensitive issue. Two things jumped out at me from the PHA consultation. First, a third of people are still unaware that there is an organ donor register, and secondly, the more that people learned about presumed consent, the more that they were opposed to it. Indeed, over 50% of respondents to the consultation were opposed to presumed consent.

Does the Minister agree with the transplant specialists and the consultants who work closest with potential donors that the opt-out legislation would be unnecessary and could be counterproductive? I cite the fact that the 1979 Spanish legislation that introduced presumed consent there has never been enacted and that presumed consent legislation in places such as Sweden, Norway, Chile and Brazil has been counterproductive and they have worse rates of donor donation than we do in the United Kingdom.

11.15 am

Mr Poots: If we put our minds to it, we could probably do it better than a number of the countries named. Nonetheless, it is absolutely correct to say that the closer you get to intensive care units and specialists who deal with people at the end of their life, where most organs are obtained, there is greater reticence and reluctance to go down the route of soft opt-out. The BMA indicated that it supports it, but the closer you get to the doctors and clinicians who deal with the people who provide us with most organs, the more reluctance you find. It is important that we take cognisance of what professional people tell us and say.

As I indicated, we have six specialist nurses in organ donation in the Belfast Trust. They do a fantastic job. I spent a full afternoon with them and the consultants in the departments. I came away with the view that we should proceed on these matters very carefully. We should not take things for granted or make assumptions, and we should operate on the basis of evidence, fact and what can make an absolute, real and tangible difference. We need to deal with this in a way that is not around emotions but is on the basis of fact, and we need to stick rigidly to that.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's statement. I have never made it much of a secret that I do not support legislative change to introduce presumed consent, but I do support what the Minister says in respect of conversations with family members and the need for people to get on the register. However, people need to do that based on their

own mindset rather than a legislative change to state-own organs, as it were.

Does the Minister accept that if the presumed consent soft opt-out legislative change is brought about, it could result in people going the opposite way, as he said, in removing themselves from the register? Would having the legislative process changed not be more detrimental to the number of organs coming into the system than giving people the choice?

Mr Poots: When Mr McCrea goes one way, that normally encourages me to go in the opposite direction. We are probably looking at a relatively small number removing themselves from the list, with greater potential for increased numbers joining the list. However, that is not something that we should easily ignore, and we need to reflect on the fact that people who willingly indicated that they wished to have their organs donated are indicating that they would remove their names. We should not ignore that in how we do things.

It is absolutely important that we continue to drive upwards the number of organs donated. We can make a significant impact on that. The public awareness raised by the work that Joe Brolly, for example, has done, and the work that Alastair Ross and Jo-Anne Dobson have done, has been beneficial. Let us be clear about that. However, we can and should do more to continue to improve the number of people on the organ donor register.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his statement. I have no doubt that he is sincere in what he is attempting to do, but I sense, by the nature of the questions, a great deal of frustration and impatience in the House about not getting on with some legislative initiative à la the outline Bill that Mrs Dobson presented to the House. The delay of a year in the public consultation is something that people have found unacceptable. Can the Minister speed up that process? Does he accept that, unless a concrete proposal is given to the public, the public will not make up their minds in a decisive and influential way?

Mr Poots: I accept that the latter part of that argument has a lot of strength. Regarding the pace of the process, we are starting the public information campaign tomorrow, so that obviously cannot happen sooner. We can look to see whether we can hasten the process. When I took up my position, I was more inclined towards soft opt-out than I am now. My view is a consequence of speaking to a lot of key people who are engaged in the delivery of the service and provide care and support for those who are at the end of their lives.

I encourage people to research the issue themselves. Do not take my word for it. Go and research the findings of the PHA yourselves, talk to those who are engaged with people who are at the end of their lives, particularly those in intensive care units, and arrive at your own conclusions. Do not let me try to influence you on this. My position has changed, although I am not necessarily opposed to the soft opt-out option. If we are to get there, we should do more work to bring the public with us and ensure that those in the medical profession who deal the most closely with people who are at the end of their lives are with us as well.

Mr Agnew: I want to leave no confusion: I want my organs to be donated when I die. I also would like to dispel some of the myths that the Minister set out. Your body does not stay whole after you die: it rots and your organs will rot unless they can be kept alive by keeping someone else alive.

The Minister said that we need to increase the pool across the UK, but surely if we introduce soft opt-out and make it work, we can make it harder for England and Scotland to resist such a change.

Mr Poots: I said that I have no religious opposition to this, but I have to respect people who say that they do. That is an issue for them. Most of the people were not of my faith, so it is not something that affects my electorate to the same extent either. You still have to show respect for people's views and give them consideration. I can make that decision for myself, and I did so many years ago, long before I was a politician. For one reason or another, others have not made that decision or have not made their decision clear.

It is very important that we encourage people to have those conversations with their families. I confess that our conversation was more recent: it is probably something that we should have done years ago. Everybody wants to donate, should the situation arise. I suspect that, if more people had the conversation, more would be content in the knowledge that donating organs can make a real difference.

People who I know very well lost their very young child relatively recently. They decided that their child's organs would be donated, which saved the lives of five other children. It is a massive comfort to them that, in spite of the fact that they do not have their little child, other children are alive as a consequence of them donating their child's organs. So, it is something that can bring peace and satisfaction to individuals who have lost a loved one. However, again, we need to be very careful that we do not take people and the public for granted and that we seek to bring the public with us on these issues.

Mr Anderson: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, what percentage of organs received by Northern Ireland residents came from Northern Ireland donors?

Mr Poots: One hundred and sixty organs were donated in Northern Ireland over the past 11 years, of which we received 22·4%. Around three quarters of the organs donated will go to other parts of the UK, and less than one quarter will stay in Northern Ireland. As I said, the real benefits here will be through ensuring that England, Scotland and Wales drive up their organ donation in significant ways. If they are not to go down the opt-out route, how can we ensure, and encourage them to ensure, that those numbers go up quite dramatically? That will involve our liaising closely with them, which may or may not be assisted by our doing our own thing. We will give consideration to that at some point.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for the very sensitive way in which he has handled this emotive issue this morning. I am certainly not ideologically opposed to Mrs Dobson's Bill, and I commend her for her work in taking it forward and the public debate that it has created.

Everyone in the House wants to do the right thing and wants organ donation levels to increase. I am registered and have had the conversation with my wife and family about what could happen to me. We want the best evidence to guide us, and I have had conversations with nurses who work in intensive care units in Belfast who

have told me how difficult the conversations can be with families at the end-of-life stage. To that end, has the Minister been able to identify the way in which families approach the issue when they are in this tragic state of having to consider these issues and having those very difficult conversations with clinicians?

Mr Poots: Families can approach the issue in different ways and, because the view has not been expressed to them, will not do it and will err on the side of caution. It is hugely unfortunate that there is an issue of medical distrust, but some people have the notion that doctors and medical staff will not do as much to save lives if they think that they are going to receive their organs. That is wholly and completely wrong. That is the perception among a minority, but, nonetheless, a significant number of people hold that view.

We need to be very clear with families that we will do everything that we can to save the lives of individuals who come into our healthcare system. Hospitals in Northern Ireland have the lowest mortality rates in the United Kingdom. Every one of our trusts has a lower mortality rate than the average in England, but we need to dispel that myth to ensure that people have confidence.

I cannot do very much to persuade people on the faith side. Others need to do that, and I would encourage them to do so, because lives can be saved as a result of people donating organs. More work can be done with families, and we can do work to help, particularly on the medical distrust issue. Others could assist us in some work, and I encourage them to do so.

Executive Committee Business

Carrier Bags Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Minister of the Environment has advised that he is not in a position to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill today. However, as it still stands as an item of business in today's Order Paper, it will need to be disposed of formally.

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I confirm that I do not intend to move the Bill to Further Consideration Stage today. Given the policy implications of the amendments tabled on Thursday 6 February, I wish to consult my Executive colleagues to seek reaffirmation of their commitment to existing policy direction. However, I stress that I remain committed to progressing the Bill through the Assembly and will seek to reschedule Further Consideration Stage at the earliest possible opportunity.

Not moved.

11.30 am

Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill [NIA 27/11-15] do now pass.

As I said at Second Stage, the purpose of the Bill is to make a number of necessary amendments to the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. There are two main amendments proposed in the Bill. The first deals with support services that the regional Business Services Organisation (BSO) can provide. The second covers functions that can be delegated to the BSO.

As Members will be aware, the Reform Act established the BSO and defined its role as being to provide or secure the provision of a range of support services to the Health and Social Care bodies listed at section 1(5) of the Reform Act. However, as currently framed, the Reform Act does not enable the Department to secure support services from the BSO, nor does it provide the Department with the power to direct the BSO to provide support services to three of the Department's arm's-length bodies: the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery and the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service Board.

Clause 1 seeks to address the issue by giving the BSO the legal cover to provide support services to the Department and all the Department's arm's-length bodies. Clause 1 also seeks to provide greater clarity on the nature of the fraud prevention support service provided by the BSO. The counter-fraud and probity services unit in the BSO carries out a range of activities that include fraud investigation, fraud prevention and probity services. However, the Reform Act refers only to fraud prevention. Although it is felt that this definition covers the complete range of activities undertaken by the BSO, the Department has taken the opportunity to provide clarity on the definition by adding the words "fraud investigation" and "probity services" after "fraud prevention". I point out that this amendment does not alter the activity or scope of the services that are currently undertaken by the counter-fraud and probity services unit on the ground — they remain unchanged.

I move on to clause 2. Section 26 of the Reform Act contains a provision that enables the BSO to exercise those functions that the Central Services Agency had exercised immediately before its dissolution in 2009. However, the Reform Act does not currently permit the BSO to exercise any new functions relating to the administration of health and social care. What clause 2 of the Bill will do, therefore, is enable the Department to direct the BSO to exercise any new functions of the Department with respect to the administration of health and social care.

Clause 3 seeks to deal with the membership of the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation. The Reform Act currently provides the Department with the power to prescribe conditions for persons appointed as members of these organisations. However, the Department does not have the power to prescribe conditions for their chairs. Clause 3(6) provides the Department with a power to make subordinate legislation to prescribe conditions for appointment for the chair of the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation. I also wish to point out that the Department proposes to prescribe for chairs in similar terms as for members of these organisations.

The schedule to the Bill includes amendments that should originally have been made under schedule 6 to the Reform Act, which includes a number of blanket amendments to references to particular bodies in other existing legislation: for example, the name of health and social services trusts was changed to Health and Social Care trusts. Section 1 of the Reform Act renames the Health and Personal Social Services Regulation and Improvement Authority (RQIA) to reflect the correct legal title of the organisation, the Health and Social Care Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority.

However, schedule 6 to the 2009 Act did not carry across the change to the title of the organisation into other legislation. For that reason, the amendments proposed at paragraphs 1 and 2 of the schedule to this amending Bill seek to change the title of the organisation in other pieces of legislation. Finally, paragraph 3 of the schedule seeks to amend the reference to "personal social service" in the Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 to "social care service".

In conclusion, I am sure that Members will agree that there is a sound rationale for the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill and that the amendments to the 2009 Act are clearly necessary.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill.

As the Minister said, its purpose is to make a small number of amendments to the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act 2009. The amendments are designed to correct oversights or anomalies that were contained in the original legislation rather than to introduce any new policies. Although the Bill is fairly technical in nature, the Committee welcomes the fact that it will result in more uniformity across the Department's arm's-length bodies.

The Bill was referred to the Committee on 24 September 2013. To ensure that there was enough time to scrutinise the legislation, the Committee sought an extension until 11 December. However, I am pleased to say that we finished a week ahead of schedule, thanks to the hard work of Committee members and the cooperation of departmental officials. The Committee received written submissions from seven organisations and, because the evidence was straightforward and supportive of the Bill, we chose simply to take oral evidence from departmental officials.

The majority of the groundwork on the Bill had been done by the Committee during the pre-introductory scrutiny phase. We had been concerned that the proposals in clause 3, which require that the chairs of the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation must satisfy prescribed conditions, were an attempt to prescribe new criteria on who could apply for the position of chair of those

three bodies. The Committee was of the view that the appointment criteria for a chair should be consistent across all the Department's arm's-length bodies.

Departmental officials explained that clause 3 was aimed at correcting an error in the original legislation rather than at implementing a new policy. An oversight had occurred when the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act 2009 was made that meant that the chairs of the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the Business Services Organisation did not need to satisfy prescribed conditions. That was not the intention of the Department, as its view is that the chairs of all its arm's-length bodies must satisfy prescribed conditions. Following the clarification provided by the Department on the matter, the Committee indicated that it was content with clause 3.

The Committee received written evidence from the Business Services Organisation and the Health and Social Care Board in support of clause 1, which gives the former legal cover to provide support to the Department and the full range of arm's-length bodies. The Committee welcomed the clarification around the nature of the counter-fraud and probity services provided by the Business Services Organisation.

The Committee considered written evidence from the RQIA on the schedule to the Bill. The RQIA had suggested simplifying the wording of its title. However, during the oral evidence session with the Department, officials explained that RQIA's full title — the Health and Social Care Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority — needed to be used in the Bill as it is the organisation's legal title. The Committee was therefore content with the Department's explanation of the issue. To conclude, the Committee welcomes the Final Stage of the Bill.

Mr Wells: If bonuses are being paid to Ministers in the House, the present Health Minister would be due a very substantial payout. *[Interruption.]* Yes, the Finance Minister has also been very busy over the past few weeks.

At least 75% of the business in the Assembly this past month has been on health, and here we are again with the Minister on his feet several times.

I am glad to say that, on this particular occasion, he will get a very fair wind from Members, because the Committee discussed this piece of legislation at length. We took evidence from the Department, and, as the Chair said, there really were no problems with it.

During RPA and the whole review of the structures of health and social services in Northern Ireland, with the huge change that involved the abolition of the old trusts and boards and a move towards a more centralised and streamlined approach, it was inevitable that there would be a few gremlins in the system that needed to be ironed out later and that there would be a few pieces of drafting errors that had to be dealt with. That is very much what we are dealing with this morning.

Clause 3 brings into line what should have been there already in the criteria that are required for the chairs of various organisations. Knowing, as I do, the chairs who had been appointed under the legislation pre-amendment, I emphasise that this is no inference about their quality and ability. They are all outstanding individuals who have done a lot already in a short period to further health service provision in Northern Ireland. It is just a tidying-up exercise, and, indeed, despite not having this technically in the legislation, the Department has been adhering to good practice and has, in my opinion, got the right people. Apart from that, there is nothing contentious about this. There was cross-party support throughout the Committee. Following the consultation, everyone agreed that this should be given a fair wind. Therefore, as Deputy Chair, I support the legislation.

Mr McKinney: I welcome the opportunity to speak at this Final Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill. We have discussed this in Committee some eight times. The main amendments that the Committee ratified are on the functions of the Business Services Organisation, as has been described. The Bill will allow that body to provide support services to all Departments' arm's-length bodies and to administer any health and social care functions on behalf of the Department of Health. It must be noted, as it has been, that this amendment Bill is merely a refinement of the original 2009 legislation and that it is in line with the purpose for which the BSO was established. The Committee feels that that is important, given that the BSO is currently providing services to arm's-length bodies without legislative cover.

Another key amendment is on the appointment of the chairs to three of the Department's arm's-length bodies. Those are the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency and the BSO. The Chair described the issue with the oversight in the original legislation, and the amendment in the legislation attempts to rectify that. Another key point as we discuss the legislation is that all the organisations that responded to the Committee's call for evidence were in favour of the Bill, and there were no objections to any of the clauses. The amendments are sensible and logical and refine the original legislation in a way that is agreeable across the spectrum. The Committee, and, by extension, the SDLP, is content that the amendments that were put forward in this legislation and that have been discussed will serve to correct the anomalies in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act 2009.

Mr Beggs: Like other Members, during scrutiny of this new legislation, the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill, and while taking evidence from others, I can say that no issues were raised that gave me concern. Therefore, I am content that the amendments in the Bill are sensible. As others said, the Bill perhaps regularises some of the minor omissions that were in the original legislation when it went through.

The Business Services Organisation has the potential to bring about improvements and effectiveness and efficiencies in how the support services of a range of arm's-length bodies are delivered. By specialising, there is the potential to bring that efficiency about, but care has to be taken that we do not become overbureaucratic, that those efficiencies are delivered and that there are improvements in how services are delivered. Therefore, I continue to support that aspect of the Bill.

The widening of the definition of "fraud prevention" to "counter-fraud and probity services" seems to enable greater protective action to be taken to reduce risks and to minimise the risk of potential fraud in organisations. Therefore, that is a sensible adjustment, and I am supportive of it as well.

11.45 am

As to widening the governance of committee chairs to the same level as would exist for other members of boards of arm's-length bodies, that again seems to be eminently sensible, and, as others have said, it may simply have been an oversight when the original legislation went through.

I am therefore content that this Bill should be supported and I will continue to support it.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I say very briefly, on behalf of the Alliance Party, that I support and commend this Bill as it passes its Final Stage. This has been a fairly straightforward Bill, and, as a member of the Health Committee, I am happy and content to agree with the others and respondents to the Bill. I take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in contributing to the Bill and its smooth passage through all stages. I look forward to its implementation.

Mr Poots: It is truly a privilege to be here to have listened to one of the best speeches ever made by Mr McCarthy. I thank him for that, and I thank the Members who contributed to the debate for their remarks.

Mr McCarthy: Did you understand it all? Did you get the gist?

Mr Poots: Yes, I understood.

The Committee has done considerable work on this, and we appreciate that. It is largely a tidying-up exercise, as the Act left some gaps. It is important that that aspect was carried out. As Mr McKinney pointed out, it creates a greater degree of uniformity, which is something that needed to be done. Although this is not the most significant legislation that we will ever pass, it is nonetheless necessary. My officials met the Health Committee on various occasions to discuss the rationale behind the proposed amendments, and I appreciate the work that they have done in helping to increase the understanding of the necessity for this. I thank the Committee for so readily receiving that information. I will conclude on that, and I again express my gratitude for moving this legislation forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

> *That the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill [NIA 27/11-15] do now pass.*

Financial Provisions Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Hamilton, to move the Consideration Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill.

> *Moved. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members will have a copy of the Marshalled List of amendments detailing the order for consideration. The amendments have been grouped for debate in the provisional grouping of amendments selected list. There is a single group of amendments that deals with changes to the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 and other technical issues. We will debate the amendments in turn. Once the debate on the group is completed, any further amendments in the group will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Questions on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points in the Bill. If all that is clear, we shall proceed.

No amendments have been tabled to clauses 1 or 2. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to group these clauses for the Question on stand part.

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

New Clause

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment Nos 2 to 10. Amendment Nos 6 and 7 are technical. The remaining amendments deal with rates in relation to landlord liability, information gathering and discounts. Members will note that amendment Nos 8 and 10 are consequential to amendment Nos 1 to 5, and amendment No 9 is consequential to amendment No 2.

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move amendment No 1: After clause 2 insert

> ***"Rating of owners instead of occupiers in certain cases***
>
> ***2A**.In Article 20 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (rating of owners instead of occupiers in certain cases)—*
>
> *(a) in paragraph (1)—*
>
> *(i) in sub-paragraph (a), after "hereditament" insert "(where the hereditament does not have a net annual value and a capital value)";*
>
> *(ii) in sub-paragraph (b) for "£55,000" substitute "£150,000";*
>
> *(iii) in sub-paragraph (c), for head (ii) substitute—*
>
> *"(ii) its net annual value does not exceed £1,590;";*
>
> *(b) in paragraph (1A), for the words from "both conditions" to the end of that paragraph substitute "the conditions in sub-paragraphs (b) and (c)(ii) of paragraph (1) must be satisfied, but the condition set out in sub-paragraph (c)(i) of that paragraph does not apply in relation to such a hereditament.".".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: After clause 2 insert

"Repeal of Articles 23 and 24 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977

***2B**.Articles 23 (liability of occupier for rates unpaid by owner) and 24 (recovery of rates from tenants and lodgers) of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 are repealed.".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

No 3: After clause 2 insert

"Power of Department of Finance and Personnel to require information

***2C**.—(1) Article 26 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (power of Department to require information as to ownership, etc.) is amended as follows.*

(2) In paragraph (1)—

(a) at the end of sub-paragraph (a) insert "and the date on which he acquired that interest";

(b) after sub-paragraph (c) insert—

"(cc) the date on which he began to occupy the hereditament;".

(3) After paragraph (1) insert—

"(1A) The Department may, for the purposes of this Order, serve a notice on the owner of any hereditament requiring him to state to the Department in writing, within a period and in the manner specified in the notice—

(a) the date on which he acquired ownership of the hereditament; and

(b) the date, if any, on which he began to occupy the hereditament.".

(4) In paragraph (2B)(a) after "(1)" insert ", (1A)".".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

No 4: After clause 2 insert

"Discount on rates on dwellings

***2D**.—(1) Article 30 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (discount on rates on dwellings) is amended as follows.*

(2) After paragraph (2) insert—

"(2ZA) An allowance shall be granted in accordance with paragraph (2ZC) to any person entitled to possession of a hereditament to which paragraph (2ZB) applies who pays the net amount due on account of a rate in respect of that hereditament in a single sum before such date as the Department may notify to him.

(2ZB) This paragraph applies to a hereditament in the capital value list in respect of which rates are chargeable under Article 25A where the hereditament is a hereditament which—

(a) is not in use; and

(b) is a hereditament which the Department considers will, when next in use, be a dwelling-house or, though not a dwelling-house, will be used partly for the purposes of a private dwelling; and

(c) is not the subject of an agreement under Article 21.

(2ZC) The allowance shall be by way of a discount of 4% on the amount payable on account of the rate as is computed by reference to the rateable capital value of the hereditament.".

(3) In paragraph (2A) after "(2)" insert "or (2ZC)"."— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

No 4: After clause 2 insert

"Discount on rates on dwellings

***2D**.—(1) Article 30 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (discount on rates on dwellings) is amended as follows.*

(2) After paragraph (2) insert—

"(2ZA) An allowance shall be granted in accordance with paragraph (2ZC) to any person entitled to possession of a hereditament to which paragraph (2ZB) applies who pays the net amount due on account of a rate in respect of that hereditament in a single sum before such date as the Department may notify to him.

(2ZB) This paragraph applies to a hereditament in the capital value list in respect of which rates are chargeable under Article 25A where the hereditament is a hereditament which—

(a) is not in use; and

(b) is a hereditament which the Department considers will, when next in use, be a dwelling-house or, though not a dwelling-house, will be used partly for the purposes of a private dwelling; and

(c) is not the subject of an agreement under Article 21.

(2ZC) The allowance shall be by way of a discount of 4% on the amount payable on account of the rate as is computed by reference to the rateable capital value of the hereditament.".

(3) In paragraph (2A) after "(2)" insert "or (2ZC)"."— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

No 5: After clause 2 insert

"Temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments

***2E**.In Article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments)—*

(a) in paragraph (1) after "percentage" insert "or a specified amount";

(b) in sub-paragraph (a) of that paragraph for "exceed a" substitute "exceed such other".".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

No 6: In clause 3, page 2, line 13, leave out "make provision as" and insert "give directions in relation".— *[Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

No 7: In clause 6, page 3, line 6, after "regulations" insert "subject to negative resolution".— *[Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

No 8: In clause 8, page 3, line 21, leave out "Section 5 comes" and insert "Sections 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D and 5 come".— *[Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

No 9: In the schedule, page 4, line 15, at end insert

"The Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 Articles 23 and 24.".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

No 10: In the long title, after "authorities;" insert

"to amend the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Hamilton: I would like to convey my thanks to the Committee and its staff for their timely and helpful consideration of the Bill and associated amendments. Their extensive engagement on this Bill is very much appreciated.

Amendment Nos 1 and 2 deal with some changes that have arisen from the recent consultation exercise undertaken by my Department in relation to liability to rates in the landlord sector. Amendment No 1 revises the landlord liability provisions within article 20 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. It has the effect of removing the outdated and unnecessary article 20(1) frequency-of-tenancy criteria for the domestic rental sector in relation to properties with a value of £150,000 or less. The existing valuation threshold is not being changed.

The present criteria in article 20(1)(c) state that only properties in respect of which rent is paid or collected less then quarterly and with a value of £150,000 or less fall within landlord liability. In reality those sorts of tenancies are extremely rare if not non-existent, so the existence of the criteria makes no difference and only causes bureaucracy and confusion. The removal of the criteria has the support of landlords, as represented by the Landlords' Association, and tenants, as represented by the Housing Rights Service. It is also welcomed by Land and Property Services (LPS) as it removes red tape and the requirement on it to examine tenancy agreements.

Amendment No 2 serves to repeal articles 23 and 24 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. The current article 23 provision states that if a landlord defaults, LPS can recover the rates due from the tenant. The other provision, article 24, relates to a power to allow the Department to step in and act as landlord should there be an issue of default. The articles have never been used and have been sitting dormant in the rating legislation. The Department deems the provisions to be unsuitable for use and legally challengeable. Again, that amendment also had support during our consultation.

Amendment No 3 clarifies LPS's ability to request effective dates for occupation under article 26 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. The change is aimed at enabling the Department of Finance and Personnel to establish and maintain more accurate records for the purposes of rates collection and the correct backdating of bills. It addresses concerns that the existing powers available to LPS may be inadequate and puts that matter beyond doubt. It will not change LPS processes and practices but it will clarify its authority.

Amendment No 4 serves to extend the current discount allowed for early repayment of rates in relation to occupied dwellings to also cover unoccupied dwellings. That is a change that follows from the rating of empty homes policy introduced into the rating system by my predecessor.

Amendment No 5 provides for an adjustment of article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, which currently provides for the small business rate relief scheme. Currently, article 31C only provides for a reduction in rates to take the form of a specified percentage. The amendment would allow such a reduction to also take the form of a specified amount if required. I am making that change in advance of a full policy evaluation in the next financial year to ensure that the Department has greater legislative flexibility to address the outcome of that review. It is not intended as a limiting measure.

Amendment Nos 6 and 7 are provisions for the Department of Justice. Amendment No 6 amends clause 3 of the Bill following advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules that, where a change is being put through to the Court Funds Rules (Northern Ireland) 1979 to allow interest rates to be amended by way of ministerial direction, that needs to be expressly spelt out. Amendment no 7 amends clause 6 of the Bill, where the Examiner of Statutory Rules has asked that the provision clearly shows that the power given to the Department of Justice to make regulations providing for the constitution, functions, procedures and financing of the Northern Ireland Police Fund and the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust are subject to Assembly procedures.

Amendment No 8 makes provision for the commencement of the aforementioned new rating provisions brought forward as amendment Nos 1 to 5. Amendment No 9 makes an amendment to the schedule to reflect the repeal of articles 23 and 24 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 given effect by amendment No 2. Amendment No 10 makes an amendment to the long title of the Bill to reflect the aforementioned new rating provisions brought forward as amendment Nos 1 to 5.

That concludes my comments on the proposed amendments to what is a technical and, hopefully, non-controversial piece of legislation. I am content to address any queries that Members might have when I sum up later, but I urge the Assembly to support the amendments before us.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Before I address the amendments tabled today, I first want to take a little latitude as Committee Chairperson to refer briefly to our scrutiny of the Bill. Financial provisions Bills, by their very nature, are generally considered catch-all legislation. Their purpose is generally to deal with routine, minor and non-controversial amendments to governing legislation or to regularise an existing practice. As such, the Bill contains provisions that are relevant not only to the Department of Finance and Personnel but to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Audit Office, the Department of Justice and the Department for Social Development. The Committee for Finance and Personnel, however, fulfilled a coordinating role in seeking and collating submissions from the respective Committees on the Bill's provisions in addition to considering evidence from departmental officials on provisions relevant to DFP itself. During a pre-introductory briefing to the Committee, members raised issues relevant to the Department for Regional Development, the Department of Justice and the Department for Social Development portfolios and referred those to the appropriate scrutiny Committees for further consideration.

I shall refer only briefly to the clauses relating to other Departments' remits, as the Minister has previously outlined their purpose, and representatives of the applicable Committees may wish to contribute to the debate today. Suffice it to say, the Finance Committee was content, although it was mindful of comments from other Committees.

First, the Committee was content with clauses 1 and 2 as introduced, although it was mindful that the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development did not have any concerns with those clauses. Secondly, following advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, the Committee highlighted issues with the technical drafting of clauses 3 and 6 as introduced, hence today's tabled amendments. Members sought clarification on the use of alternative short- and medium-term investment options for moneys held under the court fund and on the status of the police fund and the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust. Members were generally content with the clarification that was provided.

After receiving clarification from officials on the disparity of land disposal costs between transaction and administrative costs, as well as an indication from the Social Development Committee that it was content with the explanation given by DSD officials, members of the Finance and Personnel Committee were content to agree clause 4.

Likewise, following an indication from the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee that they were content with clause 5, members were content to agree that clause.

Clauses 7, 8 and 9 deal with repeals, commencement and the short title respectively. The Committee was content with those as drafted and with the consequential amendments to clause 8, the schedule of repeals and the long title.

As I said during Committee Stage, members were informed of four new clauses that would introduce provisions for rating legislation falling within the direct remit of the Department of Finance and Personnel. As outlined by the Minister, the new measures will amend or repeal articles in the Rates (NI) Order 1977, known as the 1977 order. I do not intend to go over the purpose of those provisions. The Committee sought further information, including where any particular difficulties were posed by the absence of the new power to require an effective date of occupation and the estimated costs of extending the discount for early repayment of rates to unoccupied dwellings. Members were, however, generally content with the explanation.

The Committee was subsequently informed of another two repeals to the 1977 order: one would remove the reference to the frequency of collection of rent from consideration of whether a landlord is liable for rates on properties up to £150,000; the other would remove liability of the occupier for rates, should an owner default and remove the provision for rates to be recovered from tenants. Despite DFP officials' assurance during a recent departmental consultation that the Landlords' Association and the Housing Rights Service supported those removals, the Committee did not have the time to gauge stakeholder views.

In January, after the Committee had completed Committee Stage, members were informed of one further amendment concerning a broadening of an existing power in rates legislation to provide the small business rate relief scheme. Officials explained to the Committee that that will ensure maximum flexibility in addressing the outcomes of the forthcoming policy evaluation of the scheme, which is due to begin in the spring.

Officials further pointed out that the current power is found in article 31C of the 1977 Order and allows only for percentage reductions in rates. DFP considers that to be too limiting and that an amendment to that power would allow reductions to be given as specified amounts as opposed to percentages. The amendment is listed before us today as amendment No 5.

12.00 noon

Again, the Committee did not have the opportunity to report on that as the evidence gathering on the Bill had already been completed. Therefore, no agreed Committee position can be reflected here today. The Minister, in his concluding remarks, might wish to elaborate on the specific circumstances in which the specified amounts approach might be taken in future.

I would like to take this opportunity, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, to thank the other Committees for providing input to the scrutiny of the Bill and the officials, who were responsive to the requests of the Finance Committee and other Committees who requested clarification on issues raised by their respective members.

Although I welcome the early notification from the Department of some of the amendments being debated today, I will conclude by highlighting the Committee report's recommendation that DFP take steps to ensure that future financial provisions Bills are as fully developed as possible before their introduction to the Assembly.

Mr Girvan: I, too, support the progress of the Bill. In doing so, I want to comment on the common-sense approach taken to some of the amendments moved today. The one that probably stands out most allows the discount to be extended to those who pay rates on vacant properties. I appreciate that, if someone pays rates on a vacant property, whether it is occupied or not, they should be able to avail themselves of the discount, and this goes some way towards trying to address that.

Another very good amendment relates to the small business rate relief scheme introduced by the previous Finance Minister. As the Chair stated, the amendment includes a change to allow for a specified amount or a percentage. There was a bit of discussion in Committee on that matter and how it had been brought forward. It gives flexibility back to the Department to make some of those points. I look forward to getting clarification on the matter raised by the Chair.

Another vital point is that amendment No 7 brings under the same financial controls whatever is dealt with through the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust. I think that that has to be brought under the same controls as DFP has.

A lot of the amendments are of a technical nature, and, consequently, one leads on to the next. Amendment Nos 1 and 2 relate to landlords and tenants. I appreciate that the Minister has clarified that the Landlords' Association and tenants' rights groups are in favour of the approach. Although very few landlords receive payments less than quarterly — I would say that most like to receive payment more frequently — it will affect a small number

of individuals. Therefore, it is important that we put that measure in place.

I am happy to support all the Minister's amendments in order to allow the Bill to progress to its next stage. The Bill has addressed a number of areas in previous years. This is a way of aligning it with some of the changes made in previous years, so that they and issues associated with the rates review can be included. It is not a move, as some might have thought at one stage, to remove the small business rate relief scheme; it is an opportunity for us to extend it and then look at it under the outcome of that review, which will take place within the next year.

Mr Cree: At this stage in the debate, there is not an awful lot more to say. I was surprised to hear Mr Girvan refer to common sense. That is a novel approach to things.

The Bill as it stands contains nine clauses, which, in common with such Bills, cover a wide range of issues for several Departments. Most of them are fairly technical in nature and were really designed to bring legislation up to scratch. We now have 10 amendments tabled to the Bill by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

Amendment No 1 proposes a change to an article in the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 on the rating of owners instead of occupiers in certain cases.

Amendment No 2 is intended to repeal articles 23 and 24 of the 1977 order. Amendment No 3 will insert a further new clause, which will give the Department of Finance and Personnel the power to require information.

Amendment No 4 deals with a discount on rates on dwellings and will insert new clause 2D. That is "D" for "donkey". Amendment No 5 seeks to insert new clause 2E, which deals with a temporary reduction of rates for specific — I love this old-fashioned word — hereditaments.

As the Minister said, the remaining five amendments are mainly technical and complete his list of 10 amendments on rates and miscellaneous matters.

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I have no difficulty supporting all the amendments.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the amendments. Much of the detail has already been covered by the Minister and other Members, so I will keep my comments brief. However, I wish to highlight a few points about the changes, specifically those to rating policy.

First, I welcome any changes that will provide greater clarity on rating legislation. I have had numerous queries from constituents in recent times, and proposed new clause 2A is a small step in the right direction. I assume that the amendment tabled by the Minister will be based on his priority of ensuring that rates can be collected in as seamless a manner as possible. However, I approach the amendment with the concerns of tenants at the forefront. Although I welcome the change, which will make all rented property with a capital value of less than £150,000 subject to compulsory landlord liability no matter at what intervals tenants' rent is collected, I argue that it potentially does not go far enough.

Letting agents are not currently regulated in Northern Ireland. I have seen many occasions on which a tenant has signed a lease that states that the rental payment is inclusive of rates, only to discover at the end of the tenancy that the landlord has not made the rate payments for the property. The tenant is then left with a liability because the property has a capital value of more than £150,000. Unfortunately, it is too late for the tenant to realise that the lease is not worth the paper that it is written on and that the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 trumps the tenancy agreement. That is of great concern, given that many tenants in the private rental market will have sourced their property via a letting agent who will have provided what they assumed was a lease that looked after their interests.

Even if the letting agent is also a regulated estate agent, the Estate Agents Act 1979 does not extend to letting functions. Therefore, tenants of properties with a capital value of more than £150,000 are left to rely on the good nature of their landlord to pay the rates to LPS if their tenancy agreement states that the rental amount includes rates. I hope to address that through a private Member's Bill, which is in its preliminary stages. However, I ask the Minister to consider making the whole process simpler in future by making landlords liable for rates, regardless of the property's capital value.

Amendment No 2 seeks to repeal articles 23 and 24 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order, which, we have been advised, have never been used since their introduction in 1977. I therefore have no problem supporting the amendment.

Amendment No 3, which will introduce new clause 2C, is technical in nature. We should support the amendment if it assists LPS in accurately establishing the period of rates liability.

Amendment No 4, which will introduce new clause 2D, will extend the early payment discount to the rating of empty homes. When the rating of empty homes policy was introduced in 2011, it was decided that the owners of such properties would not be able to avail themselves of the early payment discount. I am interested to know whether that original decision was as a result of the assumption that many of the owners were wealthy developers who should have been well able to pay the full rateable amount. However, we all know how slow the market has been in recent times, although there are signs that it is picking up. People who own properties would in fact like to sell them, instead of holding on to them to make money as the market rises. That small change to allow the early payment discount to be applicable to empty homes should, therefore, be welcomed.

Finally, where amendment No 5 is concerned, a range of measures is in place to support our small businesses. One of those is the small business rate relief scheme. An evaluation of the scheme is due to be undertaken this year to assess its effectiveness and to consider the need for longer-term support measures to continue after the non-domestic revaluation in 2015. New clause 2A will allow reductions for small businesses to be given as specified monetary amounts as well as percentages. That has the potential to do two things. First, it may help to budget for the cost of the scheme more accurately, and, secondly, it will ensure maximum flexibility in tailoring longer-term alternatives that are based on the outcomes of the evaluation of the scheme in the context of future economic conditions.

I support all the amendments that have been tabled today.

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that Members will agree that the amendments were dealt with fairly efficiently. I am also sure that the Second Stage of the Budget Bill later today will be equally uneventful.

I thank the Chair, the Committee and its staff for the work that they put in to the scrutiny of the Bill and for their support of the amendments. I appreciate their flexibility and their understanding as additional amendments came to them, even beyond their formal scrutiny of the Bill. The Chair, Mr McKay, raised issues on amendment No 5. I assure him that this is an enabling power for small business rate relief. He asked me to predict circumstances for when it may be deployed. However, it is hard to predict such circumstances exactly. I do not want to pre-empt the review of the small business rate relief scheme, which will be carried out later this year. However, it is fair to consider that that evaluation might reveal moving a better scheme forward, which could be to have a set amount of a reduction as opposed to a percentage reduction. The Chair of the Committee and Members will be aware that the small business rate relief scheme was an intervention specifically for the recession. Like England and Wales, we here are due to end it in 2014-15. So, the review is being carried out now to see whether there is still a need for that or a revised scheme. Rather than going through a full legislative process later, I think that it is only prudent and sensible to have this maximum flexibility in place now and to be sensible well in advance.

Mr Girvan supported amendment No 4, which is on empty homes. I think that it is only right that the discount of 4% in rates for early payment is extended to empty homes, similar to the situation for occupied homes. To address Mrs Cochrane's point, although undoubtedly not having the discount in place will affect all sorts of people, for me, it is more an issue of fairness to extend it so that everyone benefits from the discount.

Mrs Cochrane also spoke about increasing simplicity in the rating system. I am very keen to see that happen. When you consider our rating system in Northern Ireland, particularly with all the various reliefs and allowances that we have added to it, you see that we have an incredibly complicated system. It is difficult for all of us in the House who legislate on it to understand it, never mind the people out there who have to deal with it day in and day out.

I already said that, after the current revaluation that is ongoing and the outcome of the small business rate relief scheme review, I will be keen to look at the totality of non-domestic rates, particularly with a view to trying to simplify the system. When you look at the whole suite of reliefs and allowances that we have, you can see that they are not easily understandable. I think that the simpler and more easily understood the system is, the better it is for all of us.

The Member will know that regulation of letting agents is an issue, first and foremost, for the Department for Social Development. Although I think that the issues that she raised are very relevant — they are certainly relevant to me for rates — she will appreciate that I hope that this is a technical Bill and not a piece of legislation to address those issues. However, I look forward to addressing them, either myself or through her Private Member's Bill that she mentioned.

In conclusion, I again thank all Members and particularly the Committee for their support. I commend the amendments to the House.

12.15 pm

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 2 made: After clause 2 insert

> ***"Repeal of Articles 23 and 24 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977***
>
> ***2B**.Articles 23 (liability of occupier for rates unpaid by owner) and 24 (recovery of rates from tenants and lodgers) of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 are repealed.".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 3 made: After clause 2 insert

> ***"Power of Department of Finance and Personnel to require information***
>
> ***2C**.—(1) Article 26 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (power of Department to require information as to ownership, etc.) is amended as follows.*
>
> *(2) In paragraph (1)—*
>
> *(a) at the end of sub-paragraph (a) insert "and the date on which he acquired that interest";*
>
> *(b) after sub-paragraph (c) insert—*
>
> *"(cc) the date on which he began to occupy the hereditament;".*
>
> *(3) After paragraph (1) insert—*
>
> *"(1A) The Department may, for the purposes of this Order, serve a notice on the owner of any hereditament requiring him to state to the Department in writing, within a period and in the manner specified in the notice—*
>
> *(a) the date on which he acquired ownership of the hereditament; and*
>
> *(b) the date, if any, on which he began to occupy the hereditament.".*
>
> *(4) In paragraph (2B)(a) after "(1)" insert ", (1A)".".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 4 made: After clause 2 insert

> ***"Discount on rates on dwellings***
>
> ***2D**.—(1) Article 30 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (discount on rates on dwellings) is amended as follows.*
>
> *(2) After paragraph (2) insert—*

"(2ZA) An allowance shall be granted in accordance with paragraph (2ZC) to any person entitled to possession of a hereditament to which paragraph (2ZB) applies who pays the net amount due on account of a rate in respect of that hereditament in a single sum before such date as the Department may notify to him.

(2ZB) This paragraph applies to a hereditament in the capital value list in respect of which rates are chargeable under Article 25A where the hereditament is a hereditament which—

(a) is not in use; and

(b) is a hereditament which the Department considers will, when next in use, be a dwelling-house or, though not a dwelling-house, will be used partly for the purposes of a private dwelling; and

(c) is not the subject of an agreement under Article 21.

(2ZC) The allowance shall be by way of a discount of 4% on the amount payable on account of the rate as is computed by reference to the rateable capital value of the hereditament.".

(3) In paragraph (2A) after "(2)" insert "or (2ZC)."."— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New Clause

Amendment No 5 made: After clause 2 insert

"Temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments

***2E**.In Article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments)—*

(a) in paragraph (1) after "percentage" insert "or a specified amount";

(b) in sub-paragraph (a) of that paragraph for "exceed a" substitute "exceed such other"."— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 (Provision as to payment of interest on funds in court)

Amendment No 6 made: In page 2, line 13, leave out "make provision as" and insert "give directions in relation".— *[Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 4 and 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 (Expenditure on bodies providing services for the police, etc.)

Amendment No 7 made: In page 3, line 6, after "regulations" insert "subject to negative resolution".— *[Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

Clause 6, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 8 (Commencement)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 8 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment Nos 1 to 5. Amendment No 8 made: In page 3, line 21, leave out "Section 5 comes" and insert "Sections 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D and 5 come".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Clause 8, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedule (Repeals)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 9 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment No 2. Amendment No 9 made: In page 4, line 15, at end insert

"The Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 Articles 23 and 24.".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Schedule, as amended, agreed to.

Long Title

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 10 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment Nos 1 to 5. Amendment No 10 made:

In the long title, after "authorities;" insert

"to amend the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977".— [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

> *That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 32/11-15] be agreed.*

Accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly is needed in order to ensure Royal Assent as early as possible in March, and, therefore, legal authority for Departments and other public bodies to draw down and spend the cash and use the resources in the Bill in 2013-14 and to ensure a smooth continuation of public services into 2014-15.

As the House is by now well aware, the preparation of the detailed Estimates and the related Budget Bill under consideration today is a difficult undertaking given the tight timetable involved. The Bill and the Estimates must reflect the latest financial monitoring position announced to the Assembly on 21 January, yet the Bill requires Royal Assent prior to the end of the financial year. It is no easy task, I am sure you will agree, to bring the Bill to the Assembly in that small window of opportunity. I am, therefore, grateful that the Committee for Finance and Personnel has confirmed, in line with Standing Order 42, that it is satisfied that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill and is content that the Bill may proceed by accelerated passage. I welcome and appreciate the assistance of the Committee in the matter.

I shall now briefly outline the purpose of the legislation before us today and draw attention to the main provisions of the Bill. The debate follows the Bill's First Stage yesterday, which, in turn, followed the debate and approval of the Supply Resolutions for the 2013-14 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2014-15 Vote on Account.

The purpose of the Bill is to give legislative effect to the 2013-14 spring Supplementary Estimates and to the 2014 Vote on Account, which have been laid before the Assembly. Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum have been made available to Members today. I do not intend to repeat the detail that I gave to Members yesterday. Indeed, in accordance with Standing Order 32, the debate, as you know, should concern itself with the content of the Bill, a point that I am hopeful other Members will have taken note of in preparation of their speeches. For the benefit of Members, and in accordance with Standing Order 32, I wish to summarise briefly the main features of the Bill.

The purpose of the Bill is to authorise the issue of £15,530,883,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in 2013-14. This is an additional £123,052,000 since the Main Estimates were presented last year. The cash is drawn down on a daily basis as needed from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund, which is managed by my Department on behalf of the Executive. The Bill author also authorises the use of resources totalling £16,606,564,000 by Departments and certain other bodies, which is some £406,569,000 more than approved in the Main Estimates last June.

These amounts are detailed in part 2 of each spring Supplementary Estimate for 2013-14. In addition, the Bill revises for 2013-14 the limit on the amount of accruing resources that may be directed by my Department to be used for the purposes in column 1 of schedule 2. The limit includes operating and non-operating accruing resources, or, in other words, current and capital receipts and amounts to £2,366,007,000.

Under section 8 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001, a direction on the actual use of the accruing resources will be provided by way of a DFP minute, which will be laid before the Assembly in March following Royal Assent of the Bill. Therefore, not only does the Bill authorise the use of resources, it authorises accruing resources, bringing the resources for use by Departments and other public bodies to almost £19 billion.

The sums to be issued from the Consolidated Fund are to be appropriated by each Department or public body for services as listed in column 1 of schedule 1 to the Bill while the resources, including the accruing resources, are to be used for the purposes specified in column 1 of schedule 2. The amounts now requested for 2013-14 supersede the Vote on Account in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2013, which was passed this time last year, and the Main Estimates provision in the Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013, which was passed by the Assembly in June 2013. The Bill also authorises a Vote on Account for 2014-15 of cash of £7,062,352,000 and resources of £7,545,788,000 to allow the flow of cash and resources to continue to public services in the early months of 2014-15 until the Main Estimates and the related Budget Bill are approved in June this year. The cash and the resources are to be appropriated and used for the services and the purposes set out in column 1 of schedules 3 and 4 respectively.

Finally, clause 5 authorises temporary borrowing by the Department of Finance and Personnel at a ceiling of £3,531,176,000 for 2014-15. That is approximately half the sum authorised in clause 4(1) for issue out of the Consolidated Fund for 2014-15 and is a normal safeguard for any temporary deficiency arising in the fund. I must stress to the House that clause 5 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power, but it does enable my Department to run a very efficient cash management regime.

There is little more that I can usefully add on the detail of the Budget Bill, but I will be more than happy to deal with any points of principle or detail that Members want to raise.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As we heard, the Budget Bill provides statutory authority for expenditure as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows Departments to incur expenditure and use resources in the early part of the next financial year, 2014-15, until the Main Estimates are voted on by the Assembly in June.

Standing Order 42(2) states that accelerated passage may be granted for a Budget Bill provided the Committee for Finance and Personnel is satisfied that it has been appropriately consulted on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill. At its meeting on 5 February, departmental officials briefed the Committee and took questions on the Budget Bill, including on issues relating

to a range of Departments. In addition to that evidence, the Committee has scrutinised each of the monitoring rounds during the current financial year, including the overall outcome across Departments and the position for DFP as a Department. In view of that evidence-gathering exercise throughout the year, the Committee was content to grant accelerated passage to the Bill, and I, therefore, wrote to the Speaker to inform him of the Committee's decision.

As I pointed out in yesterday's Supply resolution debate, the scale of the cumulative changes resulting from the normal reallocations through monitoring rounds combined with the in-year technical changes will, in some cases, have resulted in significant differences between the opening and closing resource and capital allocations of Departments. The Committee welcomes the engagement with the Department on those issues and during the quarterly monitoring rounds, and members will continue to prioritise that aspect of their work. I encourage the other Statutory Committees to continue to monitor closely the financial forecasting and expenditure of their respective Departments for the remainder of this year and during the next year to ensure that underspend is minimised and that Departments maximise the impact from available resources. In the meantime, for today, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after 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 debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Ambulance Service: Designation

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the Ambulance Service is designated as an essential service rather than an emergency service. *(AQO 5512/11-15)*

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I have been advised that there is no legal definition of what constitutes an "essential" as opposed to an "emergency" service. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is the emergency service of Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care (HSC). As such, it is considered to be an emergency service alongside the police and the fire service. While the police and the fire service are stand-alone services, our Ambulance Service is an integral part of HSC. I strongly believe that it should remain so. NIAS is more than just an emergency service. It provides essential clinical services and plays an important role in the wider urgent and emergency care system.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he consider re-evaluating the classification to bring it into line with services such as the fire service and the PSNI?

Mr Poots: I do not see what difference it will make at this point. Perhaps people can argue that it will make an essential difference. The Ambulance Service is different from the Police Service and the fire service because it is a key element of our health and social care sector. For example, we have a medical director in the Ambulance Service. We have doctors in 999 rooms to take calls and assist people who fall ill. It is a different kind of service from what is offered by the police and the fire service. It is certainly something that we can give consideration to, but the arguments would need to be very well made that significant benefit will come from it.

Mr Craig: Will the Minister commend the Ambulance Service staff on their efforts at the Odyssey incident last week, particularly their use of front line doctor services at the scene, which saved a lot of congestion in the A&E services?

Mr Poots: The Ambulance Service, which was the first responder, provided an excellent service at the Odyssey. It dealt with a lot of people on site without bringing them to hospital. It was able to provide them with the support and care they needed. Indeed, it initiated a major incident, which was absolutely necessary and the right thing to do, given the scale of the event that was occurring and the possibility that it could have got considerably worse. It ensured that the hospitals were well prepared and well placed to deal with the numbers that came in. We were greatly assisted by the work of the Ambulance Service on the ground, which ensured that large numbers were dealt with without having to come to hospital. I cannot commend

the Ambulance Service highly enough on its response in that instance.

Mr P Ramsey: Following through from the original question, I ask the Minister about the new car-style ambulances that are seen across Northern Ireland. Are they compliant with the specification of emergency vehicles?

Mr Poots: The cars can get to the site quicker, so you have a paramedic who can get to the individuals quicker. Over 70% of people in Northern Ireland are responded to by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service within eight minutes of making that call, which is quite remarkable given the geography of Northern Ireland. A lot of that is done by the cars. You have a paramedic there, who will very often get all the testing equipment and so forth and do the first response. If people need to be taken to hospital, the ambulances are very often quickly on the scene as well. It enables us, as first responders, to engage even more quickly with the needs of people.

Health Promotion: Belfast

2. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he is taking to promote better health in inner city Belfast. *(AQO 5513/11-15)*

Mr Poots: Partnership working is vital if we are to effectively promote better health and tackle health inequalities. That includes working with communities, which are best placed to know their local resources, assets, issues and challenges. That intimate knowledge is vital in tailoring services and initiatives to address local needs and in finding solutions to those challenges. The Public Health Agency (PHA) works at a strategic city-wide level with Belfast City Council, and with other organisations through the Belfast Strategic Partnership for Health and Wellbeing, to coordinate actions for health improvement across the city. Members of local community organisations and area-based partnerships are key members of that partnership.

In addition, the agency is supporting actions at a more local community level through the investment of some £6 million, which is largely being channelled through the community and voluntary sector. One example is the east Belfast health framework that I launched recently. That will provide community-driven front line action and practical support for individuals in need and their families.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his comments. He mentioned the strategy that he announced. Will he be specific about the issues that he is addressing in the east of the city?

Mr Poots: The Public Health Agency funds five community-based posts in the East Belfast Community Development Agency and the East Belfast Partnership at a cost of almost £200,000 per annum. Work is being taken forward to ensure that the contracts that the PHA have are aligned with the five themes of the east Belfast health framework, and an action plan will be developed for 2014-15.

During 2012-13, the PHA funded work with the East Belfast Independent Advice Centre, which resulted in support for 236 people with mental health issues from disadvantaged areas. The support allowed them to access benefits that they were entitled to and generated an income for them of some £310,000. A number of organisations are being funded through Protect Life, and there has been recent additional investment to enhance bereavement support in the area. A local drugs and alcohol action plan for east Belfast was developed in November 2013 and specifies a range of actions to be taken forward in 2013-14.

Flu Vaccinations: Children

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on influenza vaccinations for children. *(AQO 5514/11-15)*

Mr Poots: Last October saw the introduction of the first phase of the children's flu vaccination programme across Northern Ireland, with a live attenuated influenza vaccine Fluenz, which has been shown to provide greater projection for children than inactivated influenza vaccine, being offered to all children aged two or three years old and pupils in primary year 6. This vaccine was also offered to children in an at-risk group who are aged between two and less than 18 years of age.

Provisional data for the period up to the end of December shows that Northern Ireland has achieved the best uptake rates across the UK. For two- and three-year-olds, it was 54·3%; for children in P6, it was 80·7%. I express my appreciation to all who worked hard to achieve those uptake rates. I recognise the considerable effort required by GPs and school nursing teams to complete the seasonal flu vaccination programme within a very short timescale.

From the coming autumn, in addition to the routine flu programme, the children's flu vaccination programme will be extended to all preschool children aged two and over and all primary-school children. In the autumn of 2015, it is intended that the flu vaccination programme will be extended to include all children of secondary school age.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. How important does he feel that the flu vaccination is for young people?

Mr Poots: Flu vaccination is a very important policy. Through it, we believe that we can avoid people needing to attend our emergency departments or being admitted to hospital as a consequence of the more serious symptoms of flu.

The provisional data for the flu vaccination programme for the period up to the end of December showed that Northern Ireland has achieved excellent uptake rates compared with the rest of the UK: 72·6% for over-65s, 72·3% for under-65s at risk and 51·4% for pregnant women. That demonstrates that people in Northern Ireland are getting the message very clearly that flu can be quite a serious illness and that they can do something to avoid it. Many people take that option. We are keen that more and more children take that option and ensure that they do not suffer the effects of flu.

Mrs Cochrane: A response to a recent question that I tabled to the Education Minister indicated that almost 15,000 working days were lost among the teaching profession last year as a result of flu-related illnesses. Therefore, will the Minister consider working with the Education Minister to extend the flu vaccination programme to teachers?

Mr Poots: That seems a perfectly reasonable suggestion and is something that I am happy to talk to the Education Minister about. We are targeting schoolchildren because flu is so common and so easily spread in that environment. We want teachers to be teaching and not sitting at home sick, and I am sure that they want to be teaching and not sitting at home sick, so if that is something that the Education Minister wishes to take up with me, I will be happy to liaise with him.

Mrs McKevitt: Will the Minister outline the stock levels of vaccinations and say whether they are subject to sell-by dates?

Mr Poots: This year, Northern Ireland procured 546,500 doses of seasonal flu vaccine, so stock levels for the target groups have been reasonably good and have not proven to be an issue for us this year.

Cancer Drugs

4. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current availability of cancer drugs compared with England. *(AQO 5515/11-15)*

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has responsibility for commissioning all cancer drugs available in Northern Ireland. The HSCB and the NHS commissioning bodies in England are guided by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) in determining which cancer drugs should be routinely available. All NICE-approved cancer drugs that are routinely available in England are recurrently funded or available via a cost-per-case mechanism in Northern Ireland. The HSCB has a clear process by which unapproved cancer drugs can be made available to patients by means of an individual funding request setting out the clinical circumstances that support the request.

Mr McKinney: I thank the Minister. The cancer drugs fund in England takes a different approach for non-routinely available drugs and has granted NHS access to up to 38 drugs that are not available here. Will the Minister consider having a cancer drugs fund model here or approaching his Westminster counterpart to address the inequality?

Mr Poots: I certainly will consider it. If the Executive and Assembly were to support me in doing that, I would do it very quickly. That would be done through charging something for prescriptions once again, as that would allow us to establish a specialist drugs fund for not just cancer drugs but other specialist drugs that are not regularly available.

That is the right thing to do. Any good socialist should want to do it, because those of us who can afford to pay for drugs would be ensuring that people who really need them but cannot afford them have the opportunity to receive them, and we would be saving lives. However, if people want to cling to another policy, that is entirely a matter for them.

Mr Kinahan: When it comes to the funding of those who need to go across the water for special treatment for cancer or other illnesses, will the Minister look at reviewing the process so that it is quicker, allowing people to get money and get over for the treatment as quickly as possible?

Mr Poots: The process is carried out through the Health and Social Care Board. If the Member has identified particular problems and wishes to raise them directly with the chief executive of the board or me, we will pursue the matter. If it is an issue that Members in general have identified, I am happy to look at it.

Mr G Robinson: What work is going on with the managed entry of new drugs?

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board is refining and further developing the processes for managing the entry of new medicines to ensure that they are more effective and more clearly understood by patients, their representatives and clinicians. Guidance should be issued shortly.

Access to effective treatments for the population of Northern Ireland, including access to cancer drugs and other specialist medicines, is an important priority for me and the Department. I am determined to explore every avenue open to me to deliver increased access to specialist medicines and other interventions.

If a lot of research and work has gone into developing new procedures and drugs, the public want Northern Ireland to be at the forefront of delivering on that. We are somewhat constrained in so doing, and I suggested to the House earlier that we have a means of getting around that. I ask Members to think very clearly about what we are suggesting to them. There is a real possibility of making a difference to people's lives and of saving many lives as a consequence.

2.15 pm

Addiction Treatment Units

5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his plans for the future of the addiction treatment units in Omagh and Armagh. *(AQO 5516/11-15)*

Mr Poots: A public consultation by the Health and Social Care Board on the future model for tier-4 addiction services closed on 24 January 2014. The board is considering all responses received and is finalising proposals on the appropriate model of service provision, which will take account of the wider need of the overall Northern Ireland population and seek to improve outcomes for clients. The board hopes to complete that work by the end of April 2014. Therefore, no decision has been taken at this stage on the future model or on the location of any service.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. In light of his answer, can he advise whether the addictions unit that was planned for the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh could be jeopardised as a result of any proposed changes to addiction services that may be centralised across the region?

Mr Poots: Again, I am less interested in buildings and locations than I am in outcomes. The course of work that we are looking at would see many more people being treated in the community. Therefore, the locations of the buildings are less of an issue for us. However, we are engaged in a consultation process, and we are drawing feedback from that and collating it to identify the way forward. So, we are not at a point of making decisions. Members can lobby and seek to influence at this point,

but there is a course of work that needs to be carried out before we arrive at a decision.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers. My specific interest is in the future of the addiction treatment unit (ATU) in Omagh. Does the Minister accept that it is not feasible, given the rurality of counties Tyrone and Fermanagh, to expect people to travel outside those counties for addiction treatment services? What is needed is a new configuration that divides the North into three regions as opposed to two.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question?

Mr McElduff: Yes. The question is this: does the Minister accept that it is not feasible for people who live in rural areas in Tyrone and Fermanagh to travel beyond that subregion to access these essential services?

Mr Poots: That is something that I will pay attention to, unlike previous Ministers, who decided that they did not need a hospital in Omagh and chose to close it. Mr McElduff did not seem to have that great of an influence with Minister de Brún, his own Sinn Féin Minister, on that occasion. He did not deliver for the people of Omagh on that occasion. Thankfully, since the DUP came in, a new hospital has been proposed for the town of Omagh and has started to be developed. We will look at all these things very seriously in seeking to ensure that Omagh gets fairer treatment under the DUP than it got under Sinn Féin.

RVH/Mater: Serious Incidents

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many serious incident forms, detailing incidents when patient safety is compromised, have been submitted by staff in the accident and emergency department and the acute medical unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital and the Mater Hospital in the past 12 weeks. *(AQO 5517/11-15)*

Mr Poots: Health and social care organisations are required to routinely report serious adverse incidents (SAIs) to the Health and Social Care Board. There are specific criteria that determine whether an adverse incident constitutes an SAI. Any adverse incident that meets one or more of the criteria should be reported as an SAI to the Health and Social Care Board within 72 hours of being discovered.

Fewer than five serious adverse incident forms detailing incidents where patient safety has been compromised have been submitted by staff in the emergency departments or the acute medical wards of the Royal Victoria Hospital or the Mater Hospital in the past 12 weeks. In line with departmental policy, information on specific numbers is not routinely published if the number is fewer than five. That approach is taken to maintain patient confidentiality.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for that answer. Given the ongoing difficulties, particularly in the Royal, would the Minister not express some concern or even surprise that only five serious adverse incident forms have been received?

Mr Poots: I said fewer than five, so it could be considerably fewer than that. This morning, we all learned, including me, of five serious adverse incidents that have been reported over the past 12 months, from December 2012 to November 2013. In those instances, it has been indicated that the medical response could have been better had more doctors been available. Those are serious questions that we will all be seeking answers to in the time ahead. It will probably be difficult to reveal all the answers because we are dealing with a relatively small number of people and patient confidentiality issues will arise. There may be issues that the coroner will have to take a look at to identify and ensure that matters were dealt with appropriately.

Mr Beggs: Extended waiting times at our A&Es can contribute to serious incidents there, as we have learned. Does the Minister accept that, with significant numbers of patients having to wait more than four hours, there is a risk that their health could have deteriorated from when they were initially assessed by the triage nurse? When will waiting times in Northern Ireland match those in the rest of the United Kingdom in order to reduce this risk?

Mr Poots: I think that the waiting times that we have set are appropriate and that is why I have rigidly stuck to them. Over the past couple of months, and I know that a lot of politicians here like to run with the trade unions, we have had trade union representatives saying that those times are not reasonable and that they should be extended. I think that the evidence that we have seen over the past few days would indicate that the waiting times are not unreasonable and that they are a reasonable expectation for us to seek of our hospitals.

Throughout the course of this, we have sought to ensure that waiting times are reduced. I am glad that 12-hour waiting times, for example, have reduced to a third of what they were in the previous year, for example in December 2013. Considerable work has been done on that. We can do more and that is why I made the statement that I made yesterday. We must ensure that we adopt best practice wherever best practice is being applied and use the expertise that has delivered that to assist us in delivering better waiting times in Northern Ireland.

Ulster Hospital: A&E Waiting Times

7. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on accident and emergency department waiting times at the Ulster Hospital. *(AQO 5518/11-15)*

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Trust has made significant progress in reducing the number of patients waiting for longer than 12 hours in the Ulster Hospital's emergency department. In December 2013, 21 patients waited for more than 12 hours, which is unacceptable to me, but that compares with 286 patients in December 2012. In December 2013, 70·7% of patients were treated and discharged home or admitted to a ward within four hours compared with 68·8% in December 2012. I look to the Health and Social Care Board to continue working with the trust to make further progress on meeting my targets for emergency care.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister is aware of pressures on the Ulster and, indeed, on the Royal Victoria. We touched yesterday on the question of Antrim. Minister, bearing in mind the pressures that are on the Ulster Hospital, do you not consider it prudent to have a review there?

Mr Poots: Should we have very strong recommendations flowing from a course of work with the Royal Victoria Hospital, we will want to look at the other emergency departments to ensure that they are operating as efficiently as they should be. Whether that would involve the full-scale reporting that we are currently seeking in the Royal remains to be seen. However, we will want to see that our hospitals across Northern Ireland are responding well. If actions are taken in the Royal that dramatically improve performance, we will want to see that dramatic improvement elsewhere. If that involves asking the team to do a course of work elsewhere, that is something that we will give consideration to.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answers today. Bearing in mind the significance of the Ulster Hospital in the South Eastern Trust, what measures has the Minister put in place to deal with ongoing winter pressures?

Mr Poots: Over the winter period, we made an additional £600,000 available to recruit extra staff and implement initiatives to manage the extra activity. We created 10 extra medical beds on the Ulster Hospital site and improved the flow and discharge of patients at the hospital. We are making greater utilisation of Ards and Bangor community hospitals as medical step-down facilities. We have 10 additional intermediate care beds in an independent sector facility; additional care package provision including physiotherapy and social work support; additional pharmacy support at the weekends; a rapid-response nursing service that will provide additional interventions such as intravenous antibiotics in clinic and domiciliary settings in the community; additional therapy provision for the community rehabilitation team; and additional allied health professionals and social work resources in Ards and Bangor community hospitals.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I notice that the Minister did not mention that he also closed the Downe A&E at weekends and in the evenings to help the Ulster. The Minister will be aware that 41% of patients seen at the Ulster Hospital are not from the South Eastern Trust area but are from the Belfast Trust area. What sort of pressure does that put on the Ulster Hospital?

Mr Poots: The Member well knows that I did not close the Downe A&E at weekends, but he seeks to cause some sort of deflection. He knows that it was a decision by the trust. It was an operational decision based on safety, because they did not have the adequate number of doctors to provide the care and cover at the weekends. We all need to ask ourselves this question: why do we have such problems recruiting doctors to work in emergency departments? I have given people the answers, and sometimes they do not like those answers. Nonetheless, that is where we are.

As regards the fact that 41% of people who attend the Ulster Hospital do not come from the South Eastern Trust, it is important to remember that a large number of attendances at the Royal Victoria Hospital are by people from the South Eastern Trust. It is a bit of swings and roundabouts. Many people who live in the Colin area, for example, will not travel to the Ulster Hospital as the Royal Victoria Hospital is much more accessible; that is wholly understandable.

Many people in the Lisburn area will travel to the Royal Victoria Hospital before they will travel to the Ulster Hospital. Indeed, many ambulances take people to the Royal Victoria first because they are not going to drive past an acute hospital with a seriously ill person if that hospital is available to them. It is clearly not a case of the South Eastern Trust having to absorb a lot of people from Belfast and Belfast not absorbing anybody from the South Eastern Trust.

Occupational Therapy: Fermanagh Waiting Times

8. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's strategy to reduce the high waiting times for community occupational therapy services in County Fermanagh. *(AQO 5519/11-15)*

Mr Poots: There is a nine-week access standard for all allied health professions, including occupational therapy. The waiting time has been improved progressively, moving from 26 weeks a few years ago to 13 weeks and then to the current nine-week target. Improving waiting times for occupational therapy services is a priority for my Department, the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency.

In 2013-14, the Health and Social Care Board allocated an additional £165,000 non-recurrently to support the Western Health and Social Care Trust to reduce occupational therapy waiting times. Despite the additional funding, waiting times have increased during 2013-14. The Health and Social Care Board and Public Health Agency are currently working closely with the Western Trust to address the issue. Work is ongoing to establish the level of demand for occupational therapy services and the capacity necessary to meet such demand in line with my challenging nine-week access standard.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sorry that there is not time for a supplementary question as we have to move on. That ends the period of questions for oral answer. We now move on to topical questions.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Patient Deaths

1. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he will respond to the shocking news of the death of five patients at the Royal due to delays and waiting times. *(AQT 701/11-15)*

2.30 pm

Mr Poots: I had initiated reporting procedures prior to being aware of the deaths of those five people. I should make it clear that those five people died because they were seriously unwell. They attended the Royal Victoria Hospital. A serious adverse incident report was compiled that identifies that there is a possibility that more could have been done and a possibility that not all five people would have died. However, we do not know that and we do not have the evidence to say whether it is or is not the case at this stage.

There are always deaths in emergency departments. The avoidance of preventable deaths is a challenge for all health services, and the speed of delivery of appropriate medical care is a factor. That includes ambulance response times, triage, diagnostic testing and the provision

of clinical care, which are all essential in ensuring the best outcome for an individual.

I previously expressed concerns about the Royal Victoria Hospital. I am aware of the five cases that Mr Ó hOisín mentioned, and, although I do not have the specific details, I have asked my officials to ascertain whether the systems in place for learning are fully functional and to identify issues of concern.

It is important to reassure the public about the overall safety of these services. We know that, overall, mortality figures for Northern Ireland hospitals, including those in the Belfast Trust area, compare favourably with the rest of the UK. In fact, the average mortality rate in England is higher than those in any of our trusts across Northern Ireland. Let us be very clear about that: the public need to know that mortality is lower in hospitals in Northern Ireland than it is in England.

The serious adverse incident is a learning system, and it is important to note that not every case that is referred to as an SAI indicates that there has been any problem with the care that has been provided or with the patient or client. There are certain categories of death, for example, that must automatically be reported as an SAI. Members will understand —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I presume that the Minister has asked for extra time.

Mr Poots: I have not, no.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Are you asking for it?

Mr Poots: If I can have just half a minute, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would appreciate that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Please continue.

Mr Poots: Members will understand that great care needs to be taken in discussing individual cases and clients to protect their confidentiality. However, I want to assure Members that I have sought assurances from officials that all appropriate steps and processes were taken. It would be wrong to conclude, at this stage, that the outcomes in these cases were directly related to waiting times. Although we recognise that healthcare can never be 100% safe, we must also recognise that these were very sick patients with very complex cases and that they may have passed away in any case. It would also be appropriate for the House to express its sympathies to the families of those five people for their deaths.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister concedes that there is a possibility that more could have been done. Will he now apologise to those families? What can he do to instil public confidence?

Mr Poots: I would certainly express my sympathies to the families, and I have done so in these circumstances. For all individuals, their case is the most important case, and we must never get away from the fact that healthcare is about serving the needs of individuals. We need to look into these cases further and identify whether failings on the part of the health and social care system were a factor in the deaths. That needs to be identified and avoided in other instances.

Patient Deaths: Royal Victoria Hospital

2. **Mr McKinney** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to contrast the sad news of the deaths at the Royal with his comments in early January that the pressure situation at that hospital's A&E was a one-off. *(AQT 702/11-15)*

I would also like to extend our sincere sympathies to those families who learned today that their loved ones may have died as a result of accident and emergency pressures at the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Mr Poots: The discussion that we had in January was about what happened on three days. The issue that we are discussing now is about five incidents that occurred over a year. We need to be very careful and very sensitive about how we handle these things. I do not intend to engage in some sort of ping-pong about people's deaths.

Mr McKinney: I assure the House that neither will I, but it is our view that it is the sustained political and media focus that has led to these revelations, which might not otherwise have come to the fore. We conclude that the Minister either did not know or did know about the longer-term pressures when he was making his earlier remarks. Will he therefore agree with me that the public might be right to suspect that there was at least a disguising of the situation or, at worst, a cover-up?

Mr Poots: This has been said in the House quite a number of times, and people can ignore it, but it is factual: I attended the Royal Victoria Hospital on the morning after the major incident was declared, and I spoke to staff, and I took my actions on the basis of speaking to staff — nothing else, nothing more and nothing less.

Andrew Quigley

3. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, on a very emotive and sensitive subject, to outline any discussions he has had with DRD, which is responsible for bridges, or the Public Health Agency in its role in bringing forward deterrents to young people who are considering self-harm, given the situation with Andrew Quigley, a young man from Derry who has been missing for four weeks after entering the River Foyle from one of the bridges, leaving Colette and his family heartbroken and devastated, and with the emergency services, North and South, along with Foyle Search and Rescue, trying to locate him. *(AQT 703/11-15)*

Mr Poots: My officials certainly have engaged with DRD officials on making the bridges more safe. I do not suppose that, if someone is determined to take their own life, it is possible to always have a means of preventing them from doing that, but I certainly think that there are people who may be thinking about it, and, if there are adequate deterrents in place, it may well stop them. There is learning that we can take from other places, for example San Francisco, which has the Golden Gate Bridge, and so forth. I am very keen that my departmental officials will continue to engage with people in the Foyle constituency, with DRD and others, and I recognise the huge distress that it causes, such as to the family that Mr Ramsey referred to. I support him in the sympathies that he has expressed for that family.

Mr P Ramsey: I will certainly pass on the Minister's comments to the family. Given his comments, would he be

mindful to convene with DRD in a multi-agency approach? Foyle Search and Rescue is one of the main bodies that acts to try to prevent loss of life, and it has said that small structural changes could absolutely act as a deterrent at that moment to prevent someone from either jumping in or trying to jump in.

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that I will make officials available. If he wishes to convene a meeting in the Foyle area, healthcare officials will not be found wanting in seeking to respond to the issues that he has raised.

Health Service: Staff

4. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the number of key staff working in our local health service has changed since 2011. *(AQT 704/11-15)*

Mr Poots: I have the most recent figures for full-time equivalents in September 2013 compared with March 2011. The number of consultants, medical and dental, is up by 160, or 12%. The number of middle-grade doctors is up by 69, or 20%. Nurses and midwives are up by 531, or 4%. Nursing and support staff are up by 147, or 4%. Paramedics and ambulance staff are up by12, or 2%. Qualified allied health professionals are up by 317, or 11%.

Mr Weir: The Minister has indicated that, across the board, in a range of functions, staff numbers are up in the health service. What factors has he identified that mean that our trusts are still finding it challenging to provide services in a timely manner?

Mr Poots: There are certain areas where it is harder to attract staff. Surgery, emergency medicine, obstetrics and gynaecology are all areas where we are finding it more difficult to recruit staff, and that needs to be made very clear. We also have particular problems in the Western Trust area, where it is more difficult to attract doctors than in the greater Belfast area. The smaller regional hospitals very often struggle to attract staff, as is the case, for example, in Lagan Valley, Downe and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the Causeway. That means that we become more reliant on locum doctors. However, the figures that I cited show that, in spite of the financial pressures over the past number of years, we have continued to drive up the number of those providing the front line services to better equip the health and social care sector to respond to the obvious needs of the public.

Downe Hospital: A&E Service

5. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he agrees with the South Eastern Trust that the preferred option for Downe Hospital is a minor injuries unit or is he committed to the full restoration of 24-hour A&E services in Downpatrick. *(AQT 705/11-15)*

Mr Poots: I have instructed the South Eastern Trust to make greater efforts to recruit emergency doctors in order to provide a more extensive service. I asked the South Eastern Trust to produce a plan for providing support to the people in the Downe and Lagan Valley area in the meantime. That plan, which has been submitted to the Health and Social Care Board, will ensure that the vast majority of needs in the Downe Hospital area will be met in that facility while the trust seeks to recruit emergency doctors.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. A connected issue is that people have no faith in the governance of the South Eastern Trust. Does the Minister have any plans to look at the governance structures of the South Eastern Trust to see whether they are fit for purpose?

Mr Poots: We all have a role, particularly me, in holding the South Eastern Trust to account. The House has a role in that, as, indeed, have local authorities. It is important that trusts respond to the needs of local communities. The first elements of the provision of health and social care are safety and quality. The trust will always want and have to ensure that they provide those. If it falls short, it will be a matter of real concern to all of us.

Antrim Area Hospital: Procurement Review

6. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the outstanding recommendations that were made following the procurement review at Antrim Area Hospital and a time frame for their completion. *(AQT 706/11-15)*

Mr Poots: We had asked for a course of work to be done. In the past few weeks, I made a statement to the House that indicated that there were procurement issues. Although there was no evidence of fraud, there were certainly weaknesses in procurement. We are looking to close off those weaknesses and have a much more robust procurement scheme in the Northern Trust area.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he give us an assurance that those recommendations will be implemented across the trusts and that procurement throughout the health service will be open and transparent?

Mr Poots: It is certainly the case that we want procurement to be open and transparent throughout the system. The Business Services Organisation will carry out much of that work for trusts. Where trusts are engaged in direct procurement, we want everything to be done in a way that ensures that they have public confidence and deliver best value for money for the public.

Environment

Planning: Job Losses

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the number of local jobs lost or deferred by delays to the planning process. *(AQO 5527/11-15)*

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Planning can make a very positive contribution to the development of our local economy. That is why my Department gives priority to proposals that have the potential to bring investment to the local economy and create jobs, and ensures that the applications are processed to a decision as quickly as possible.

2.45 pm

Performance across all categories of application has improved in recent years, and I know that strenuous efforts are being made to continue that improvement. However, I also acknowledge that more can be done, and that is why I announced in January a series of new actions to improve further our performance in planning. The actions include shortening and simplifying planning policy; continuing to implement key reforms such as initiating new development plan work; encouraging more pre-application discussions and pre-application community consultations; improving consultee performance, including in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in my Department; and improving customer service.

In May 2011, there were 60 live article 31 applications. Since then, 46 applications have been determined, five of which are awaiting the outcome of the appeals process, and one further application is scheduled for a public inquiry. Since May 2011, a further 11 new applications have been designated article 31, and five of those have been determined within the new PFG target of six months. That includes the application for the redevelopment of Windsor Park, where the applicant engaged with the Department and relevant stakeholders in a comprehensive pre-application process that included piloting pre-application community consultation and resulted in the submission of a quality application, a speedy process and a determination within 11 weeks.

I want to create a better environment and a stronger economy, and my aim is to create a planning system that works to achieve that.

Mr McNarry: I thank the Minister for his response. He has his own refreshing style of not answering the question about job losses, so I will have another go, if I may. I ask the Minister to detail any sensitive planning applications that he is discussing to transfer to OFMDFM or whether he is likely, or intends, to discuss such a matter with it soon?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr McNarry for the supplementary question. Any failure to answer it will not be a deliberate attempt on my part to avoid answering it. It will just be down to a complete lack of understanding of what he means. *[Laughter.]* I am the Minister of the Environment. My Department is responsible for making planning decisions. I am involved in no negotiations with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. I am fairly certain that my Department is not involved in any conversations with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister around the transfer of any particular application, sensitive or otherwise. However, if there is a particular application that Mr McNarry would like to discuss with me — or with OFMDFM — I am happy to meet him at a later stage.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Will the Minister assure the House that, following consultation on the draft strategic planning policy statement, job creation and economic growth will be key elements in the planning future? Will he also bring forward some policies that will lead to sustainable rural communities?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist nó as na ceisteanna sin. I thank the Member for the questions. Following consultation on the single strategic planning policy statement, yes, economic considerations will have a material weight in determining planning decisions. However, there is nothing new in that. Currently, considerable weight is attached to economic considerations when applications are being processed. However, that weight is not determining. Good planning is a balancing act between what is good for the economy and what is good for the environment. I do not believe that one should be compromised at the expense of the other.

Yes, sustainable rural communities is a very important issue. It is one that Mr Boylan and other Members have raised with me before. We spoke at length during a debate on rural housing earlier this month.

However, I know that rural businesses are also very important not just to Members but to the communities that they represent.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister have any plans to progress the Planning Bill, which he withdrew last year?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. I have answered similar questions in the Chamber before, and I will give the same answer that I gave to those questions. The answer is, quite simply, no. I made the decision not to move the Planning Bill. I made that announcement in the House on 22 October last year and cited sound reasons for doing so. Those reasons were procedural, evidential and legal. I must say that, anywhere that I have gone and any sector with which I have engaged in the aftermath of making that decision and announcement, the decision has been received well. There seems to be consensus outside the House — although maybe not inside it — that the Planning Bill, as amended, was not the way to go about improving our planning system.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí cuimsitheacha go nuige seo. I thank the Minister for his comprehensive answers to this point. I note with interest that, when talking about sharpening up the performance of planning, he made specific reference to the NIEA. It is with regret I say that that is one agency that keeps delaying the planning process through its performance and efficiency, as well as for no apparent reason. What specific measures will the Minister take to make that organisation much more efficient in its decision-making and in its liaison with Planning Service?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist sin. I thank the Member for that question. In the preamble or foreword to his question, the Member said that NIEA is "one agency". It is one agency. However, I am sure that, when dealing with NIEA, many Members think that it is a lot more than one agency. Weaknesses have been identified in the agency that fall back to the fact that it is constructed from so many different individual sectors, and there has been speculation and commentary to suggest that those sections work using a silo approach. That is something that was brought up again more recently in the Mills report on waste. When it comes to the processing of planning applications, that is something that causes great frustration to applicants, agents and developers, and indeed to objectors. It is something that I certainly intend to tackle. I have asked my permanent secretary, and, indeed, the chief executive of NIEA, to conduct a root-and-branch review of the agency with a view to improving its

structure and performance. I look forward to bringing those proposals back to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move on, I encourage Members please to be brief when asking questions. I also encourage other Members who are not asking questions to remain silent, please, so that I can at least hear the Minister.

Councils: Single Transferable Vote

2. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he plans to amend the Local Government Bill to allow the use of the single transferable vote system for the allocation of positions of responsibility. *(AQO 5528/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I am committed to ensuring that positions of responsibility on a council, and positions on external statutory bodies on which the council is represented, are shared across all the political parties and independents that are represented on the council. Schedule 3 to the Local Government Bill makes provision for a council to select from either the d'Hondt or Sainte-Laguë formula methods or the single transferable vote (STV) approach to achieve that objective. The inclusion of options in the Bill provides flexibility for the political parties that are represented on a council to agree a method for sharing positions of responsibility that they consider most appropriate for their particular circumstances. If the political parties cannot agree the method to be adopted, by a qualified majority, the d'Hondt method is specified as the default position.

In order to mitigate the potential favouring of political parties with larger levels of representation on a council, the selected method for allocating positions will be applied at the start of a council term, following a local government election, across all positions over the four-year term of the council. Each position would be held only for a single year, unless a longer term of office on an external body is specified by that body. This will provide the opportunity, in line with the democratic process, for parties with lower levels of representation or independents to hold positions of responsibility.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he not accept that, if the intention of the legislation is to ensure fairness in the distribution of areas of responsibility in local government, d'Hondt does not and can never deliver that and that it can be delivered only by the use of STV as the preferred means of sharing responsibility in local government? Although the Minister has given a menu of available options, surely the default situation should always be STV.

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Dickson for his question and supplementary. Indeed, I understand some of the concerns that he has raised. However, it is my belief, and I believe that it is one shared by others, that by running whatever method of selection that is chosen by a council at the start of a council term for every position over the four-year term at that stage, smaller parties and independents will get chances that they would not necessarily achieve or get even under STV should it be run annually, as is currently the set-up in most, if not all, councils. The reform of local government provides a tremendous opportunity to us all. It is vital that those parties and independents whom people vote for have the opportunities afforded to them that are available to members of larger parties. By running whatever formula a council decides on at the start of the term, those opportunities will be much more available than is currently the situation.

Mr Allister: The Minister's Bill anticipates that there may be control in a council by a cabinet system. Would that cabinet meet in secret? Has the Minister any concerns that, by reposing all power in such a small power bureau, the role of every other councillor would be vastly diminished and they would become mere spectators?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Allister for his question. The provision does indeed exist for a council to establish a committee-style form of governance. Last week, I attended the Environment Committee. The Local Government Bill is at Committee Stage. The Committee is diligently and thoroughly going through the legislation clause by clause. I found out to my expense just how thoroughly they were going through it when I appeared before them and they questioned me on many clauses and issues in the Bill, of which that was one.

It is certainly my vision that there will be no secret meetings unless there are details of a commercially or personally sensitive nature. All council business, where possible, should be open. That should extend to the cabinet of any council should it choose to go with the cabinet system. As it is, I am not sure how many councils will choose to do so. In response to Mr Dickson's question, I talked about selection of councillors for particular roles. I think that a cabinet, if a council were to go with one, would want a degree of continuity on that. I am not sure that what we have proposed on selecting councillors for positions would necessarily allow for that continuity.

There have also been questions about the membership of a cabinet, whether it would automatically include the chair and vice-chair, or mayor and deputy mayor, of a council and, if so, whether that would be an ex officio role. So, there are still quite a lot of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's two minutes are up.

Mr Durkan: There is quite a lot of stuff left to look at, and the Committee will keep at it. I look forward to working with it to find as robust a system as possible.

3.00 pm

Mr A Maginness: I know that the Minister is a man dedicated to fairness and proportionality in local government. Will he outline the level of consultation he has had with stakeholders about the system of governance? In addition, what level of consensus was reached on that?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Maginness for the question. The provision of the three alternative methods for ensuring that positions of responsibility were shared was agreed by representatives of the five main political parties on the policy development panel, which was charged with the development of policy proposals on the governance arrangements for the new councils. That position was subsequently endorsed by the political parties represented on the strategic leadership board. There was significant support for this approach in the responses to the public consultation on the local government reform policy proposals launched on 30 November 2010.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Although it will ultimately be up to individual areas to agree, largely by consensus, the way forward with the

methodology that they use, does the Minister acknowledge that, in circumstances where a large number of posts are to be appointed by a relatively small electorate — the number of councillors — the single transferable vote is not necessarily the best way of achieving that distribution of responsibilities?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Weir for his question. We intend to give councils a range of options so that they will be able to choose the system that will work for them. We should be not just empowering councils but entrusting them to make the correct decisions. However, should they not be able to make a decision on this, d'Hondt will be the default position, partially for some of the reasons outlined by Mr Weir.

Planning: Staffing Levels

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the effects the future transfer of planning powers to local councils will have on current staffing levels in the Planning Service southern area planning office. *(AQO 5529/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: My Department is working to establish accurately the professional planning and administrative staffing complement required to ensure that an effective, fit-for-purpose planning service is transferred to local councils. In preparation for the transfer of planning powers, the Department commissioned a workforce planning model to estimate the number of planning staff required in each local council area. It was developed in 2011 in partnership with Fujitsu in response to a recommendation from the Public Accounts Committee that planning needed a mechanism to help determine the resources to transfer under the review of public administration. The workforce model includes administrative staff, from administrative assistant to deputy principal grades, and staff on the professional and technical side, from professional and technical officer to senior professional and technical officer grades, working in development management and enforcement. The staffing requirements for development planning work were excluded as that is not quantified on the number of planning applications received.

The workforce model will be rerun in April or May when the data for the 2013-14 financial year is available. That will provide more up-to-date figures and help guide and inform staffing decisions with the statutory transition committees. All staff transferring from the Department to local councils will transfer on the basis of TUPE-type arrangements, providing certain protections for staff, including their terms and conditions of employment.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his reply. When planning powers pass to councils, is it possible that we could, in effect, see several different interpretations of planning policy in Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Irwin for his supplementary question. I think that I heard a voice from the Benches saying that we might already do so. Planning policy is open to interpretation, so it is inevitable that we will see, as we do on occasion, different interpretations of planning policy. However, if there is a genuine concern among the public and elected representatives that the transfer of planning powers will result in huge inconsistencies in the application of planning policy across councils, I reassure them that that will not be the case. It is vital that the planning service remains consistent, regardless of who the planning authority is. The Department will retain an oversight role, will carefully monitor the performance of each council and the decisions made and not made by councils and will be ready, willing and able to step in and assist, should councils have particular difficulties in their interpretation and application of policy.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá ceist áirithe agam ar an Aire. What training and familiarisation will be provided for staff transferring from the Planning Service to the new councils in line with the transfer of powers?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist shuimiúil sin. Thank you for that interesting and important question. I have been asked a lot of questions recently at various forums, including in the Chamber, about capacity building around the transfer of planning powers, and all the focus has been on training for the elected representatives and councillors who will take on planning powers. I congratulate Mr McElduff on being the first representative to ask about the training that will be required for the planning staff who will move to local government as their new employer, and I assure him that I am considering the matter. The money that had been acquired by my predecessor for capacity building applies not solely to elected representatives. Funding has been set aside and programmes set up for the training of our planning officers and staff before their move to local government.

Ms Lo: Currently, staff in the NIEA provide expertise and advice on environmental and built heritage issues to planners. What happens post RPA? Can those planners access services from the NIEA, or will councils have to pay fees?

Mr Durkan: I thank Ms Lo for that supplementary question. An earlier question suggested that planners cannot currently access those services easily. The Environment Agency will remain a statutory consultee on many planning applications. I outlined earlier my intention to review the Environment Agency, its structure and how it operates, and I fully anticipate that it will be easier for planning officers, applicants and agents to access the NIEA throughout the planning application process.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for his answers thus far. He talked about the training that would be available for staff. What assurance can he give me about the staff who transfer from the Planning Service to local government? More specifically, will he provide details of the protections that will be afforded to them?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Rogers for his question, which follows on from Mr McElduff's question. A transfer scheme is being developed by DFP for staff transferring to local government with their functions. That is from all Departments, and it obviously includes planning staff. It will be negotiated through the normal Civil Service management and trade union fora and will secure agreement from both sides. Within that transfer scheme, all staff will be afforded protections under TUPE, which provides protection for employees against changes to their terms and conditions of employment as a result of a transfer of undertaking. The Department is taking action to minimise the hardship and domestic disruption that may be experienced by individual staff who are transferred to councils. A staff preference scheme has been implemented, which identifies the locational preferences

of all staff in planning, and the Department is working to accommodate as many staff as possible in their preferred location at the date of transfer to councils.

Dereliction Funding: Craigavon

4. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of the Environment why Craigavon Borough Council's application for dereliction funding was refused. *(AQO 5530/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: The dereliction funding scheme was introduced in March 2012 to provide councils with funding to enhance and improve the cosmetic and aesthetic appearance of an area, whether it is a city, town, village or neighbourhood. Since its introduction, £4 million has been allocated to councils by the programme.

In August 2013, I asked all councils to submit proposals in preparation for the October monitoring round. Some 16 councils submitted bids, but, as I was unsuccessful in obtaining funding at that time, councils were asked to revise their bids in time for the January monitoring round. At that stage, three councils withdrew their bids. All bids were assessed, and Craigavon Borough Council's bid was placed joint sixth.

I was successful in obtaining £500,000 at January monitoring, to which I added £100,000 from my Department's funds. That allowed me to fund five of the 13 bids — one in full and four in part. This is a competitive process and, unfortunately, Craigavon Borough Council's bid was just below the cut-off point, as five bids were judged to have more merit on this occasion.

The dereliction intervention scheme has been extremely successful and will be a rolling programme that my Department will bid to maintain. I hope that Craigavon Borough Council will rebid for further funding when resources next become available.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. Can the Minister outline what plans he has to roll out further funding and when to areas like Craigavon, so that they too can enhance their environment, improve their economy and strengthen tourism?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Moutray for his supplementary. The dereliction fund, unfortunately, is dependent on how I fare at future monitoring rounds with my Executive colleagues. However, given the tremendous success and popularity of the scheme and the ever-growing demand for it, I have no doubt that Members will encourage their colleagues around the Executive table to support any future bid of mine for additional funding for the scheme.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. An dtig leis an Aire a chinntiú cé hiad na ceantair ar tugadh maoiniú dearóilithe dóibh agus cá mhéad? Can the Minister confirm what areas have been allocated dereliction funding and how much they have received?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat as an cheist agus má fhanann tú nóiméad tá sé anseo. On this occasion, the successful bidders, of whom there were five, were Belfast City Council, which was awarded £220,000; Ards Borough Council, which received £111,000; North Down Borough Council, which received £102,000; Newry and Mourne District Council, which received £80,000; Newtownabbey Borough Council, which received £53,000; and — oh, there were six — Larne Borough Council, which received £39,000.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for oral questions. We now move on to topical questions.

3.15 pm

Giro d'Italia: Election Posters

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he agrees with our colleagues Alex Attwood and Councillor Gerard Mallon that we should keep lamp posts and streets along the route of the Giro d'Italia free from election posters on 9, 10 and 11 May. *(AQT 711/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. This is a very positive suggestion. The Giro d'Italia has a global audience of 775 million in 165 countries worldwide, with 200 participants and up to an estimated 140,000 spectators. It presents a huge opportunity to showcase the excellent tourism product that Ireland has to offer, with key tourist sites, including Titanic Belfast, the north coast and Armagh, being especially profiled. I regret that the race is not coming to Derry, but I think that the hills might have put them off. One constituent remarked to me that we had better get used to the "giro" not coming if Nelson McCausland gets his way. *[Laughter.]* There is a responsibility on all of us to present the best possible picture of Northern Ireland, and a small step such as this by political parties would reap much greater collective benefits for all people here. Therefore, just today, I have written to all party leaders asking them for their views and cooperation on a voluntary political agreement that will ensure that, for the three days of the Giro d'Italia in May when Northern Ireland is on the global stage, there will be a poster-free route. I look forward to responses from the party leaders and am hopeful that a positive political agreement can and will be found.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for that lengthy answer. He can be assured of a positive response from me and the SDLP to his letter. Has the Minister given any consideration to reviewing the current legislation on the display of election posters, including the option of a ban?

Mr Durkan: Under the legislation as it stands, the DOE's Planning Service writes to all parties in advance of an election reminding them of their statutory obligations in displaying election posters, including positioning, road safety issues and removal within 14 days of a poll closing. Under planning law, no advertisement may be displayed without consent granted by the Department, but exemptions exist for election posters in advance of a pending election.

The display of election posters is a cause of annoyance for many members of the public, and political parties are reminded of that every time we have an election. They are also a headache for those of us who have to put them up and take them down, although I have been told that my days as a poster boy might be over.

I am very much aware of the issue and am willing to look at it. I have been considering a review of current legislation in advance of the media interest in this issue, and, as part of that review, I will examine a range of options, including a ban.

Alcohol Consumption: Public Service Vehicles

2. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the effectiveness of the current legislation for alcohol consumption on public service vehicles. *(AQT 712/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: That is a topical question indeed. Current law states that it is an offence for a passenger to consume alcohol on a public service vehicle. This is contained in the PSV regulations of 1985. The PSNI advise that PSV regulations offences are very difficult to enforce, as they need to collect evidence that certain individuals consume alcohol on board a vehicle. My officials therefore put forward options to address that in a consultation last July, including the introduction of a restriction on the bus operator's licence prohibiting operators from carrying alcohol in their vehicles; the creation of a road traffic offence for operators of carrying alcohol in a public service vehicle; or doing nothing.

Responses to the consultation were mixed, and genuine difficulties were raised with each of the options. Operators highlighted the difficulties that their drivers can have in stopping passengers bringing alcohol on board and consuming it. A number of respondents commented that the only effective solution would be a total ban on the carriage of alcohol on public service vehicles. The creation of such an offence would be a matter for the Department of Justice, and I have recently discussed it with Minister Ford. Other respondents called for a repeal of the current ban on consumption, citing the fact that passengers can consume alcohol on the Enterprise, on ferries and on planes.

As a result of the responses to the consultation, I proposed a four-pronged approach at this stage. The actions are to commission communication activities to highlight the fact that it is illegal to drink on buses, as well as the road safety and passenger risks that it poses; to introduce a new licensing condition for operators that requires them to highlight to hirers that they cannot consume alcohol; to engage with DOJ on the extension of the current ban on alcohol carriage to the whole bus sector in Northern Ireland; and to continue to engage with DHSSPS, which is responsible for the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, as problems with alcohol —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is well up.

Mr Durkan: — consumption on buses form just one facet of the wider societal problems of alcohol in Northern Ireland.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive answer. I welcome the fact that he has been engaging with the Department of Justice. What kind of response has he received from it?

Mr Durkan: Minister Ford has indicated that he understands the difficulties with enforcing the current offence and the risks to public and passenger safety that could result. He indicated that his Department had an extensive legislative programme under way and would consider this issue alongside that. I emphasise that the consultation highlighted what many of us know: there is no one solution to the problem. Indeed, the problem is not one of drinking on buses per se; rather, that is one element of general issues with alcohol in society, and there is little purpose in looking at the issue of drinking on buses without considering other elements, such as the price of alcohol in shops, the promotions on alcohol purchased in venues and the health risks associated with alcohol. All of us in the Chamber and any parents among us have a responsibility to work together to address those issues.

Alcohol Consumption: Buses

3. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment, without prejudging any investigations, whether he can update the House on the allegations of buses being used to ferry alcohol to the Odyssey, given the unfortunate and dangerous events at that venue last week and the fact that the Minister has been dealing with the availability of alcohol on buses. *(AQT 713/11-15)*

I was going to ask the Minister earlier whether he will assure Willie Frazer that the Giro d'Italia colours are an Italian tricolour.

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Maskey for his question. I have just answered Mr Eastwood's question and see this as very much a follow-on from that.

Yes, I am aware of alcohol consumption on many buses and coaches responsible for taking young people to an event in the Odyssey on Thursday night, and I said that we had to address that. As a Department, we have to engage with the proprietors and operators of those buses and ensure that they were taking every step possible to ensure that alcohol was not consumed on their buses, particularly by minors, which is another criminal offence. I have outlined the difficulty in enforcing the law, and the PSNI seems reluctant — I do not know whether that is the right word — to do so. It certainly is incapable of doing so. Apparently, if the police stop a vehicle and get on, they have to have evidence of an individual consuming drink on it. Generally, someone drops the can or bottle and denies all knowledge of it, and, without evidence, further action cannot be taken. That causes headaches and heartache for responsible bus operators who find themselves almost having to frisk passengers who get on.

I spoke of the potential — I had this conversation with the Minister of Justice — for an outright ban on the carriage of alcohol on buses, but that seems a bit draconian. It would result in someone not being able to get the bus home after buying a meal deal in Marks and Spencer with a bottle of wine. So, there is a lot of work to be done on this, but it is a wider societal issue than just —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's time is up again.

Mr Durkan: — drinking on buses.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for that response. I appreciate that it is a complex issue. It is one for wider society, but, nevertheless, there is legislation in place. Will the Minister assure the House that, with the PSNI and particularly with DOJ, he will consider what other measures may be taken? Of course, he must make sure that those measures are not disproportionate to the extent of the problem, but it may necessitate amending current legislation.

Mr Durkan: I am certainly happy to assure the Member and the House that I remain committed to focusing on this issue. I know that it is something that my predecessor was particularly vexed about, and it is something that I would also like to address. Thursday's unfortunate incident

brought it all to the fore. However, I re-emphasise that Thursday's events were, in many ways, a microcosm of what goes on in every town, village and city across the North every weekend, with young people drinking to excess. It is incumbent not just on my Department, DOJ and us, as elected representatives, but on parents and young people to assume responsibility.

Illegal Dumping: Mills Report

4. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department has taken to reduce waste crime and illegal dumping in Northern Ireland following the publication of the Mills report in December last year. *(AQT 714/11-15)*

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his question. My predecessor commissioned the Mills report following the discovery of waste crime on a scale previously unseen and, I dare say, undreamt of here in Northern Ireland. In fact, it was in my constituency. It has elicited a prompt and, I believe, robust response from my Department.

A number of actions were taken even before we received the Mills report. My predecessor secured £1·5 million in the June 2013 monitoring round. That has been used to employ 10 extra waste enforcement experts in NIEA's environmental crime unit; to clean up some of the waste at the Campsie illegal waste dump that posed the most immediate environmental risk; and to buy specialist investigation equipment. The funding has helped the NIEA to set up a major waste crackdown through what is known as Operation Toothfish. The operation is being led by the NIEA's environmental crime unit with the assistance of the PSNI. The operation currently involves 25 investigations covering 31 sites and 42 suspected companies and individuals across Northern Ireland. That is a worrying scale indeed. This is a comprehensive crackdown that is targeting a variety of potential types of waste crime, including illegal landfill, refuse-derived fuel, fuel laundering, end-of-life vehicles and waste tyres. The operation is the start of a programme of action over the next few years to reduce the creation of waste and to establish a fully compliant waste industry here in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Humphrey for a very quick supplementary.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can I ask him to provide assurances that his Department will liaise with the Department of Justice to ensure that the serious issue of waste crime in Northern Ireland, which he has acknowledged, will be addressed by the increased sentencing that applies across the United Kingdom?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for a very quick answer as well.

Mr Durkan: I also raised that issue at another recent meeting with DOJ. Officials of mine and in DOJ recently held a joint seminar on the very issue of waste crime. It is important that the severity of sentence reflects the seriousness of the crime.

As it stands, the sentences that we have — the punishments — are not sufficient deterrents, given the vast profits that are there to be made by opportunists and criminals

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

> *That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 32/11-15] be agreed. — [Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]*

Mr Girvan: At this Stage of a Budget Bill, anything that has to be said has been said. However, suffice it to say that a number of very good initiatives have been brought forward by the Executive that have been of benefit to the people of Northern Ireland.

One of the things that is causing us concern for the future is welfare reform and the effect that it could have on our block grant should we not move ahead and make a decision. I appreciate that it is already costing us money and that £15 million has been set aside for the first quarter of this year to address some of the ongoing costs that could be attributed to it, with the costs rising to £270 million if we do not move ahead with it.

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

I appreciate that the Vote on Account 2013-14 will allow spending to be made up to April and allow us to move ahead until we set the Estimates in June. Almost £16 billion will be spent, which will allow us to move ahead.

I appreciate that the Executive are looking at a couple of other areas, one of which is air passenger duty (APD). Some of the APD has been devolved to us to attract additional air links. One of the major problems in Northern Ireland is that we rely heavily on our air links: people cannot necessarily travel freely as we have no land links to other areas of the United Kingdom. APD has been devolved for long-haul flights, and it would be encouraging if we could attract additional long-haul flights into Northern Ireland. We know that most of the people who would use those flights would ultimately stay for some time and spend money in our local economy. That is a very important issue that needs to be addressed.

A number of things came through the Committee, and I appreciate that we have had the opportunity to look at what has come forward. I also appreciate that each Department has been involved in bringing forward its budget for the forthcoming year and explaining how it will break down its spend. I feel that the process has improved. Through the monitoring rounds in October, November and June, Departments have released money that they have not spent. That has been very good, but it is important that we get the money early enough so that it is all spent. I think that that is the case.

We do not want any money to go back to the Treasury; everyone always says that it is a big problem when you hand money back to the Treasury. We are making use of the money, but we must ensure that what we spend is not wasted. I appreciate that it is the responsibility of each Department to ensure that it spends the money that is allocated to it effectively. On some occasions, however, we are not so sure that we get that efficiency. We need

to ensure that that is being driven out and that all those efficiencies are there.

As I said, one of the big worries that we have is welfare reform and how it could affect what happens in the forthcoming year of the Budget. It is vital that we resolve that matter and move ahead.

So, with that, I support the Budget Bill as presented and just hope and pray that we definitely come within our spending limits in all areas. I know that the Executive keep a close eye on that. I believe that they have done a good job this year, and I do not think that it will be anything different next year.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am glad you have that confidence.

Mr Girvan: It is confidence.

Mr D Bradley: I could not possibly comment, but thank you very much anyway, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to participate in this debate.

As I mentioned in the debate yesterday on the Vote on Account and the spring Supplementary Estimates, for the SDLP, using other means of levering further expenditure to invest in the local economy and sectors that could improve the lives of our people here is the whole purpose of devolution. Outside of the block grant, we had a promise that additional revenue-raising proposals to the tune of £900 million would be incorporated into this Budget from 2011 to 2015. I do not know whether we are on target to meet that amount. I would be interested to hear an update from the Minister. I used to have a little bit of an obsession with the previous Finance Minister and questioned him quite often on that issue, so why break the habit of a lifetime.

Looking at this section of the Budget in isolation neglects the opportunity to be more holistic and strategic. A yearly Budget, as opposed to the current four-year Budget, would provide the opportunity for our economy to be more flexible, especially during these difficult times. There is no reason why we should not do what other Governments do, and what is done in Dáil Éireann and in Westminster, which is to produce a Budget annually.

In conjunction with an annual Budget, we should wish to emulate the Scottish Government, who, in establishing the Calman commission on extending devolution, highlighted the additional set of levers they could obtain that would provide more control and help to shape a bespoke economic future. Other forms of devolution could include tax-varying powers. We have mentioned them before: landfill tax, motor tax, corporation tax, enterprise zones and so on. Such devolved powers would enable us to move away from a process like today's Budget Bill, which is not much more than tinkering around the edges of what we are supplied with.

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned a number of tax-varying powers that we could devolve to the Assembly. Perhaps he would share with the Assembly the cost of devolving those powers.

Mr D Bradley: Of course. There is absolutely no difficulty about sharing the cost of those — we just ask the Minister of Finance here. As we know, when we ask for the cost of devolving powers, we get one figure from the Minister and another comes from the Treasury. It is all really quite confusing, so to get an accurate figure is very difficult indeed.

It would provide the opportunity for us to use our finances in a way that could boost the local economy and improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. I imagine that the Finance Minister would relish the opportunity for the Executive to develop greater financial control, to get to grips with tax-varying powers and to set, collect and invest those taxes back into the economy.

In response to Mr Ross's question, a commission such as the Calman commission would look at the possibilities from devolving tax-varying powers and might engage in the costing of those powers. So, we would know what is available to us and what the cost would be. Therefore, we could make decisions based on evidence, and I am certainly in favour of that.

Every time the subject is raised in the House, it provokes controversy and the type of question that Mr Ross asked. If he really wants his question answered, he should support me in calling for a Calman-type inquiry. Then, he will have the answers and I will have the answers, and we can then make up our minds about the future.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr D Bradley: No, not on this occasion. *[Interruption.]* I have been generous enough: I gave way to your colleague who I am sure you trust enough to convey the thoughts of your party to me. I have answered his question.

There is no doubt that these issues are complex, but that is not a reason to shy away from them. We should not be constantly reverting to the automatic default situation. We should seek to explore what is available to us on a cost-benefit basis.

Our long-term planning must involve seeking, to the greatest extent possible, to stand on our own feet economically. Our medium-term planning must involve becoming more flexible to the needs of our economy, and in the short term we must make budgetary changes to position ourselves so that we benefit from the global economic uplift.

During this debate, my other colleagues will be raising such opportunities, notably the opportunity to use investment in all-Ireland infrastructure projects, including improving the roads infrastructure to boost economic growth. They will also talk about investing in the green new deal initiatives and focus on sustainable job creation, which was all but ignored in this Budget. Such an investment would not only help tackle climate change but the measures proposed have the ability to help lift vulnerable people out of fuel poverty and, crucially, provide opportunities for very significant job creation.

Finally, instead of handing them back, DSD moneys should be reinvested in house building to boost the construction industry. As has been well rehearsed in this House, house building is labour intensive and consumes considerable quantities of locally-sourced material, so it offers a high economic-multiplier effect. It is essential that we properly consider such options while debating the Budget to provide a better way of life for all of our people. A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, gabhaim buíochas leat as ucht na deise cainte.

Mr Cree: Yesterday, we approved the spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account, and I appreciate that a new Bill needs to be in place before the end of the financial year. However, this year will complete the third year of Budget 2011-15, which means that we will shortly be entering the final year. It is crucial that we examine what targets have been achieved and what remains to be done.

We discussed, at some length, the savings delivery plans that Departments were required to meet. What is the situation on real savings that have been achieved? One Minister — the Minister of Education — refused to cooperate and opted out of the plan. This is the same Minister who blocked the financial review process and frustrated the clear will of the House. The Northern Ireland Assembly attracts a lot of criticism, some of it ill-advised, but how can we explain to our citizens that the Executive cannot even agree two non-political and non-contentious plans to improve the running of government in this place?

3.45 pm

I would like to revisit the use of consultants. A target of 10% year-on-year reductions was expected: what progress has been made there? I continue to be concerned about the way in which we handle financial transactions capital (FTC). This is a relatively new area of economic development and has considerable potential. Will the Minister tell me what formal plans have been put in place to maximise this investment opportunity, bearing in mind that a structured approach is necessary? It is also essential to have a close working relationship with the private sector, bearing in mind the lead time for capital projects.

Yesterday, the Minister drew attention, as another Member has done, to the £15 million being held that may have to be paid to the Treasury because of the delay in dealing with welfare reform. I understand that it is being held in the centre. What other moneys are there now, and what is his best estimate of what will be there at year end?

In the past, use has been made of overcommitment to prevent moneys being returned to the Treasury as a result of money not being spent as anticipated in the Budget. We also now have the provision of headroom to safeguard against late underspends. Will the Minister clarify the total provision available now and the estimated total for the year end? I am sure that he will agree that there is a danger of resources being spent on low-priority areas, should there be surplus funds towards year end.

Colleagues from my party will address other issues in the Bill during the debate. They will arrive shortly, I am quite sure.

Mr Dickson: The Budget gives us the opportunity to reflect on recent financial changes across various portfolios and the impact that budgetary decisions have on the services that the Assembly ultimately delivers. The financial stability of our Budget sends out a very strong signal. I am sure that the Finance Minister would agree that that signal goes out not only to our community and those who benefit from the Budget that we spend inside Northern Ireland but, most importantly, to investors and businesses wishing to contribute to Northern Ireland, perhaps from outside.

Financial stability is very important to any economy, and the stability of our Budget and how we budget is important. Therefore, perhaps one of the biggest issues presenting instability today is the difficulties that we are having with welfare reform. We have been told that we are facing a fine of some £5 million and that is just a short-term cost. In the long term, if we do not move on with this legislation, the costs could be astronomical, with the Finance Minister suggesting recently a figure of £1 billion. The figure may be in dispute, but the fact that there is and will continue to be a cost of doing nothing is indisputable.

I do not support every part of the welfare legislation, but the place to have opposed it was in Westminster. The room that we have in this House is for local determination, and I support that within the overall framework of the Bill. However, what there is not room for is a continued Mexican stand-off between parties. What we need is constructive dialogue on the Welfare Reform Bill, not a megaphone debate.

We must act in the interests of the whole of Northern Ireland by taking part in constructive negotiations among the political parties in order to discuss what possible key refinements can be made to the Bill as it is brought to the Assembly. It is essential that this is progressed now before wider cuts are needed to other services that also deliver alleviations to poverty, and we start to see a domino effect on some of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society.

I will turn now to local government reform, ongoing reform and the cost of local government. We will need to consider the significant cost of the merger of councils. Of course, this will save money in the long run, but these costs will be borne by the Department or by ratepayers. It is worth asking the Minister whether extra resources will be allocated from within DOE or whether more money will be allocated from the centre. This is, after all, a public administration review and not just a single-Department review, and so should be supported centrally. I am also interested in knowing how the Executive plan to ensure that the new shadow councils manage the mergers of debts and rate convergence for the benefit of ratepayers and business rate payers.

Health is perhaps the largest spending Department, so fluctuations in spend have significant knock-on effects, specifically because extra money has been allocated to tackle winter pressures this year. That has not solved the problems for this year or for future monitoring rounds. I would like to know how the Finance Minister has dealt with the Department of Health with regard to these allocations and how they will be adjusted to reflect likely increases in winter pressures, not only this year but into the future.

Given that Transforming Your Care is being implemented against a backdrop of falling resources and that it appears that it is being implemented poorly, does the Minister feel that the financial and human resources available for Transforming Your Care are adequate? Health resources will likely be in user strain for the foreseeable future. These two issues concern essential cross-departmental work. We need to ensure that they are managed, and managed properly.

In education, the Minister recently mentioned that he is considering putting extra money into his reform of school funding so that the vast majority of schools will no longer lose out. I do not think that that has been formalised, and it is not clear where the money is coming from. Schools, governors, teachers and principals need clarity on how this

is to ensue to ensure correct budgeting so that all of our children will benefit.

There are also wider points to consider that are not Department-specific. One example is the reallocation of capital funding which we have seen due to the failure of the A5 road scheme this year. Capital reallocation makes it clear that greater planning is needed to ensure that there are ready-to-run capital projects that are always able to go, so that underspends can be reallocated and capital budgets more effectively managed. This does not always require more money, but it perhaps requires better management across the Executive's funding. What actions is the Minister of Finance taking to ensure that his Executive colleagues are meeting their obligations on these matters?

On European money, the issue is better use of resource rather than need for more resource. The Maze peace centre is an exemplar of politics trumping investment. We need to ensure that every Department is doing its best to draw down the maximum sums of money from European funding. I also argue that competitiveness funds are key here. DFP should provide assistance to make sure that they are used by other Departments and agencies in an innovative manner.

Additionally, it would be worthwhile to call for a benchmarking project to see how our budgets shape up compared to other smaller regions. For example, we have talked in the past about spending more on economic growth and capital funding, although this obviously has to come from somewhere.

I have these direct questions for the Minister: when will the Executive agree an overarching approach for the allocation of the one-year 2015-16 Budget? Will the various Committees be given adequate time to engage with the relevant Departments in that process, given the extension of the Assembly mandate for one further year?

Finally, my party has highlighted in the past the high cost of division, as I am sure the House is well aware. Too many schools, too many riots and too many scared-off investors contribute to a massive problem for the Northern Ireland economy. These are obviously long-term problems. We should begin by undertaking an exercise to calculate them so that Ministers at least know how to go about tackling them in the future, if they have the desire to do so.

Mr Weir: I support the Bill. Quite naturally, a number of Members have bombarded the Minister with a list of questions that he will have to answer in his winding-up speech. I am sure that the Minister will be glad to hear that I will not go down that route. There is a slight danger of this being like an old episode of 'Record Breakers', with the Minister performing the role of Norris McWhirter in the chair. I am half expecting somebody to ask him what the fastest land animal is or what the largest tree in the world is. I will not tax his powers of knowledge on those issues. I will simply address some of the issues that are in front of us.

I welcome the Budget. Our Budget-setting process is a sensible one that is based on sound financial projections. Although there has been some criticism of the fact that this is part of a wider package of a Budget running over a comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, it is a sensible way of doing things.

If you go back far enough, not just in Northern Ireland but across the UK in other jurisdictions, to when Budget Bills and Budget statements were driven by the needs of one particular year, there was a criticism that Budgets were almost like an oscillating rollercoaster — a Chancellor would make an announcement depending on whether the Government wanted to have a year of austerity or a giveaway Budget in the run-up to an election. The end result was that no great certainty was produced in the economy or in Departments.

In recent years, while there has still been flexibility to make adjustments and deal with individual circumstances, the movement towards a much more strategic look at the Budget over a longer period, particularly in Northern Ireland as we are, in many ways, dependent on our block grant and CSR settlements, seems sensible.

This is a Budget based on firm figures. I was not particularly persuaded by the Member on the opposite Benches who had a long list of schemes that could be transferred. They were almost like get-rich-quick schemes. I wonder whether he was expecting the Department of Finance and Personnel to invest in a goldmine in South America as a way of generating additional money. When my colleague questioned him about the cost of a range of things, he said that he did not know and that we should try to find out. To my mind, that is very much like advocating a range of tax-varying powers without having a clue what it would cost. That is very much like approaching someone to buy a car, agreeing to buy the car, signing for the car —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will extend to the Member the same courtesy that he gave to me, so I will not give way. The Member had the opportunity to deal with this point when he was on his feet and refused to give way to me.

The SDLP's approach seems to be to buy the car and find out the cost later. To me, those seem to be the economics of the madhouse. We have something that is based much more on reality.

Mr D Bradley: Twice in one day. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Weir: Indeed. I look around the Chamber, and I will come to the other issue in a short while. There is no shortage of madhouses around here.

There are two or three issues that I want to touch on in the context of the Budget. First, in local taxation, there is variability on the broad issue of rate increases. I welcome the move made by my party and by many others in local government to try to keep rates to a minimum. In recent days, zero rate rises have been agreed at a local level in Dungannon, Craigavon and Belfast.

Mr G Robinson: And in Limavady.

Mr Weir: And in Limavady, according to information on my right.

Clearly, that is a good thing as we try to ease the burden on people in tough economic circumstances, but that is valuable only if the approach to minimising rates is also taken at a central level. I am glad that, for one of many years, rises have been kept to a maximum of the rate of inflation, which is sensible.

The end result is that our business rates and non-domestic rates compare extremely favourably with other parts of

the United Kingdom: for example, the average business rates bill for 2014-15 in Northern Ireland, excluding reliefs and exemptions — many generous reliefs and exemptions have been built in here — will be £10,819, which compares with an estimated figure of around £15,000 in England. When you consider that the average domestic ratepayer in Northern Ireland pays roughly half what is paid across the water, it shows that the Executive, and the Finance Minister in particular, are very cognisant of the difficult positions in which businesses and families have been put as a result of the recession and have tried to keep that burden to a minimum.

For example, increases to the regional rate have been frozen in real terms for the past seven years as a result of decisions taken by the Executive. Given that, under direct rule, we sometimes saw double-digit increases, that is something to be borne in mind. Set against that is the fact that, particularly for businesses, we have a range of reliefs in place. For example, on small business rate relief, the reliefs that apply to empty retail units and small business support mean that more than 50% of businesses receive some form of relief.

4.00 pm

Obviously, the issue of rates in the Budget will become particularly pertinent as we move towards rates convergence. On that basis, as indicated in the Budget, up to £30 million has been allocated over the next three years to try to smooth the passage for people as they move, in some cases, from areas of lower rates to areas of higher rates. I think that it is right that ratepayers be protected, and, indeed, a quarter of a million ratepayers will have an adjustment in connection with that. It will also help ease the burden for councils, because it is undoubtedly accepted that the initial costs of RPA will be largely focused on the early years. That will allow councils the opportunity to reduce their costs through convergence, but it is a challenge to them to do that. From that point of view, the same commitment that local councils have given in recent weeks to a zero or low-level rates increase has to be matched in the overall fiscal position as we move ahead.

As part of the Budget process on rates, revaluation for non-domestic properties is an issue that will be tackled. It is important to realise that there are expectations to be met. Sometimes, there is a failure to grasp how rates work. Some businesses make an assumption that, because their value has gone down or, indeed, because they are doing less trade than they were six years ago, revaluation will automatically lead to a reduction in their level of rates. The key thing to realise is that it is a comparative realignment, so, consequently, businesses will see a reduction in rates only if they have declined in rateable value at a swifter rate than the average. Therefore, it is an issue that the Assembly has to manage, as far as the challenges that are there are concerned.

As has been mentioned, it is important that the Budget look at delivering services for the best possible value. I remember one of the previous Finance Ministers, who is now the First Minister, highlighting the fact that one of the problems in making an assessment of public sector spend was that, at times, there was almost an assumption in Departments that 99% of what was spent last year would essentially go unchallenged and that the focus would be only on areas in which you were looking at either additionality or small cuts. Therefore, I support the current Finance Minister's commitment in the Budget process to the public sector reform division, to looking at the ways in which we can tackle public expenditure, and to looking at the ways in which Departments and business areas deliver public services. I say that from not only an economic point of view but a delivery point of view. It is a very important decision that the Minister has taken.

Undoubtedly, we have a sound Budget, and that is true as of this moment. However, it would be remiss of me to suggest that there is not an elephant in the room — one that is becoming bigger and bigger as time moves on — and it is the potential impact of dodging the bullet on welfare reform. As has been indicated, even for 2013-14, the Finance Minister has had to set aside £15 million, potentially for payback for that. The longer that this issue goes unresolved, the higher that figure will escalate. The estimates are that in 2014-15 it will reach £105 million, stretching forward to an annual drain on the Executive's resources of around about £363 million in 2018-19. The cumulative effect over those five years, calculated purely on what is being lost to the block grant, will be over £1 billion.

As I indicated, if we do not reach a swift resolution, the loss in 2014-15 will be £105 million, or, to put it in context, 2,500 teachers or over 2,000 nurses. That is the stark reality. It is not simply a question from a financial point of view of people in the House defending their ground. This will have a real impact on services on the ground, and we have to recognise that this is hitting all our constituents.

However, it also goes beyond that. Some 1,410 jobs are essentially dependent on the outsourced work that local workers do for DWP to provide a service for the whole of the United Kingdom. Quite frankly, if we decide simply to go down our own path or to keep on delaying welfare reform, that will have an impact on those people. There will not be work for them. Why on earth would DWP outsource work to an area that does not follow the remainder of welfare reform?

That will then have an impact on the Budget. If we have a situation where, instead of drawing money into this economy, we add to the numbers of unemployed, that will clearly have a dramatic impact. Similarly, we are facing a crunch with the withdrawal of DWP computer systems, which will mean that, from 2016 onwards, we will start seeing a situation where there is a very real threat to a range of benefits. That money will simply cease, because the computer systems will not be there to process the benefits. If we seek to fill the gap by providing our own computer systems, in each of those six different areas, the bill could be up to £300 million. That is a frightening and sobering prospect in the context of this Budget. Yesterday and today, the Minister was right to highlight that issue. Welfare reform is the elephant in the room, and there is a catastrophe potentially coming down the road for all our constituents if the issue is not grasped soon.

On that note, I welcome this Budget Bill. However, the Budget must come with a very severe health warning. If irresponsibility continues in welfare reform, as the year moves on, we will see further pressures and necessary cuts in public services, which will impact on everyone. The gap will grow greater and greater until it is unsustainable. With that warning, I urge Members to support the Budget Bill as it represents what I believe to be a sound Budget presented by the Finance Minister.

Mr McQuillan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill as a member of the Finance and Personnel Committee and as a Member for the constituency of East Londonderry.

The Bill is intended to have a very important outcome, which is Departments' ability to draw down funds for the remainder of this financial year and, from April 2014, for the beginning of the new year. We all know too well the importance of the Bill, as a failure to agree the vote on the budget in the USA late last year left it at a standstill. I therefore trust that we will not find ourselves in such a position.

The economy has come through many a storm in the past seven or so years, and there finally appears to be light at the end of the tunnel, with some evidence of economic growth and movement in the property market. Nevertheless, we need not breathe a sigh of relief just yet, as we continue to see job losses, such as those that were lost at Mivan in Antrim. We therefore need to continue to see investment in training so that we can see young people adopt much-needed trades and those who have lost their jobs or suffered setbacks retrained to re-engage in the economy and grow the private sector.

I also want to see investment in early years education. That is central to our economy on two fronts: it is the keystone of investment in our children; and it gives them the best start in life as they begin their education. Early years education has suffered cutbacks in recent years, and working parents have been unable to secure places for their children. The latter point is serious. If there are few or no spaces, the children suffer as well as the parents. I want to see more investment in early years for our children, their parents and our economy at present and in future.

I also call on the Education Minister to look at the way in which early years are funded. It is sometimes November before a school knows what funding it is to receive. The sooner that changes, the better for all concerned. A school needs to know much earlier in the year how much money it has for the year ahead.

Investment in our workforce is also needed. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel when police support staff, who formed the backbone of the Police Service of Northern Ireland, with many also forming the backbone of the RUC, will see the back pay that they are entitled to. That has been on the cards for some time, and I am as keen as they are to see what they are due being paid to them.

I also ask the Minister for an update on the non-domestic and domestic rate valuations. Valuations of domestic and non-domestic properties have not been carried out for some time. I am therefore keen to ensure that rates valuations are as reflective today as they were in previous years, given the changes in the property market. I know that the process of valuation has begun for non-domestic rates. Can the Minister therefore provide the House with an update on any progress made to date as well as an update on the domestic rates valuation?

The small business rate relief scheme has been extended and continued over the past number of financial years. I am therefore keen to see the scheme continue beyond 2015. That is a small way of helping our small business community in Northern Ireland, especially those on the high street, something that I am keen to preserve. An extension to the scheme as it stands would be welcomed by the small business community in recognition of the importance of small businesses to our economy. I thank Members for listening and commend all that I have said to the House. I support the Bill.

Mr P Ramsey: As SDLP spokesperson on employment and learning, I want to focus on some areas of concern to us. The SDLP opposed the 2011-15 Budget for a number of important reasons, many of which my colleagues highlighted yesterday and will continue to highlight today.

One major cause of concern that we flagged up regarding the Budget in 2011 was the fact that the Department for Employment and Learning was asked to make a resource saving totalling nearly £400 million across the four Budget years. When the Budget was set, we highlighted the danger that it failed to provide clarity on student finance, student fees and the educational maintenance allowance while proposing substantial cuts that would put additional pressure and stress on students, who already face an uphill struggle to gain further and higher education, and would limit their access to learning and training in their preferred field.

Yet in the years since the DUP and Sinn Féin passed the 2011 Budget, we have still not gained clarity on funding for further and higher education. The discussion regarding an increase in student fees is ongoing. That is, of course, close to my heart, as I know the benefit that a rise in the student cap would be to Derry and the north-west. A substantial university campus in Derry is the primary and key investment in the economic regeneration plan that would enable substantial economic and social growth in the entire north-west region of Northern Ireland.

The economic strategy of Northern Ireland, and of developed regions globally, is predicated on knowledge-based industries. Cities and regions with a strong university presence can achieve a sustainable advantage in those industries. However, rather than provide additional funding, it appears that the Executive are content with the continued export of our knowledge-based students.

Investment in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects — I know that a number of members of the Employment and Learning Committee see them as vital to the future — and promoting and progressing them consistently is essential for the development of a strong knowledge-based and skilled workforce. We see that continuously, and I am sure that other Members will make reference to it. Without such investment, our young people and students will be disadvantaged and our economic growth will be hindered, precisely when we should be preparing to take advantage of the beginnings of a potential global financial upturn. In that regard, a failure of the Minister to safeguard successful local delivery agents for Steps to Work so that they could deliver the new programme was a strange decision. Again, it is a matter that has caused concern in the Employment and Learning Committee.

4.15 pm

The Finance Minister may not be in a position to respond to that, but of the eight bidders who have secured preferred status, seven are UK-based companies. When we have models of success across Northern Ireland

through local companies in Steps to Work, it amazes and, frankly, shocks me that they have been excluded from the process. Building a new employment programme by putting those who sought to deliver it locally out of a job is not building any confidence or helping to deliver capacity across all regions in Northern Ireland. Therefore, although it is welcome that the employment Minister recently brought forward Enabling Success, a strategy to reduce economic inactivity, the SDLP will be sure to critically analyse that and respond to the consultation, as will the members of the Employment and Learning Committee.

Despite the major cuts to the DEL budget included in the 2011-15 Budget, which we will discuss today, I trust that adequate funding will be found to tackle the endemic problem of economic inactivity. We have not been given any figures in the strategy, a most welcome strategy from the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister with responsibility for economic development, Arlene. It will be interesting to see whether the Minister of Finance has any inkling of what sort of funding streams will be in place to progress that much-needed programme across a number of the regions where there are hotspots of economic inactivity much higher than the Northern Ireland average.

Given the problems that we have experienced around apprenticeships in the past, it is notable that they warrant only two references in the Enabling Success strategy. Questions must be asked about the massive saving, almost £130 million, to be made by DEL in 2014-15 and how that ties in with the priorities of stimulating the economy and creating opportunities. That is a higher saving in the period than in any other Department. The Executive need to ask themselves how seriously they take the functions of the Employment and Learning Department.

We require new thinking and funding for apprenticeships. Training centres of old were fit for purpose and, at that time, in that economy and in their area, provided good, traditional trades. We need to go back to that. We need to be more creative with companies across Northern Ireland as we come out of recession. However, new models must be adequately funded. A new programme is looking at senior, higher levels of apprenticeships, which is most welcome, but we cannot forget that traditional apprenticeships are the core of small companies and contractors across Northern Ireland.

Although the strategy is referenced in a commitment in the Programme for Government (PFG), it is not referenced in the Budget. That is because the Budget was set beforehand. Given that, over the past 30 years, our economic inactivity levels have never dropped below 25% of the working-age population, it is surprising that the issue was not in the Budget. However, now that the Ministers are set to produce a policy to tackle the issue, it is yet another example of how we cannot rely on a Budget that is clearly years out of date to best manage our finances, provide sound planning and allow for transparency and accountability. It is also an example of how Executive Ministers can work cross-departmentally on issues of importance to our economy. However, given that the Ministers were unable to appear jointly in front of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee to discuss the strategy, it is certainly not something that you would hold up as a shining example. Instead, I again request, on behalf of the SDLP, that we produce a new and better Budget that does much more to stimulate economic activity in Northern Ireland.

I want to reference U4D, the University for Derry campaign in the north-west. A new report, which was, coincidentally, launched today, highlights a number of key areas for students and student movement. U4D is calling for a substantial expansion to the University of Ulster's Magee campus to bring Northern Ireland's higher education provision up to the levels achieved in the rest of the UK. The chair of U4D makes it very clear that the report reveals that Northern Ireland requires an additional 14,400 places at its universities just to match the existing level across Britain and England. The provision in England is increasing by 30,000 places this year precisely because the British Government realise the connection between the skills generated by a university education and the long-term health of the economy. I am mindful of comments made by the Minister before he was in post. He was certainly very supportive of the university base and the importance it plays in the economy. The chairperson of U4D said:

> *"It is only by increasing the skill base of the labour market in Derry-Londonderry and the wider North West that we will combat our unacceptably high rate of unemployment. Only the substantial expansion of university provision will turn our economy round."*

My party has said consistently, as have all parties represented in the north-west that — and I say to the Finance Minister — the most important investment ever to take place in Derry will be the expansion of the Magee campus. We have had a limited increase in numbers over recent years. The One Plan for the city, which was accepted and adopted by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, had, for example, an increase of over 7,000 full-time students at Magee. We do not see that materialising. Perhaps, the Minister would like to comment on that.

Some of the report's key points are as follows. Northern Ireland provides the highest proportion of school leavers going to universities of any of the UK areas. It has the smallest university sector of any of the UK regions. Our increased rate of school leavers going to university has been achieved only by a growing proportion of them going to Britain — not coming to universities here because we do not have the capacity to meet the demands and needs of our young people going forward. The loss of Northern Ireland's students to Britain is seriously damaging our productivity and industry, wealth generation and ability to grow our own businesses and attract inward investment.

I will move on to some Regional Development issues and the impact that the Budget Bill will have on the DRD work programme. I note in the Bill the reallocation of £108 million as a result of the A5 delay. The A5 project is still a major priority for the SDLP, as it is for other parties in the Chamber, and will remain so. It should remain so for the Minister. Perhaps, he will give us some of his thoughts on the way forward. The A5 project is more than just a road that gets people from A to B faster and safer: there is the crucial element of a hub, which will address economic and social deprivation as well as traffic issues. It is an important part of a cross-border project that is designed to address the negative elements of partition. It must remain so.

However, if it transpires that money set aside for that project is in danger of going back to the Treasury, we believe it should be spent on the A6 project. That is of

direct benefit to the north-west, which has been starved of infrastructural money for decades. There is an acceptance from all political parties that that is the case. I recall in my earlier years, and the Principal Deputy Speaker will recall, that funding for infrastructural projects in the 1970s and 1980s was based on car ownership. When you had a city with high levels of unemployment and social deprivation such as Derry, that funding was never going to go there. It is interesting to reflect on that.

Most importantly, we want to see the Dungiven bypass going ahead even if that means decoupling it from the rest of the project. Separate it and let us get it done. Last week, I attended the Committee for Regional Development meeting to discuss my private Member's Bill on 25 mph restrictions in residential areas. I was asked about the issue and what I was going to do about concerns about pollution in Dungiven. It is for the House to address that issue. If Dungiven has the highest levels of pollution, we have a duty of care to its population. I know that Members John Dallat and Cathal Ó hOisín have been raising the issue for some time. It needs to be resolved.

Alongside the lack of investment in the Enterprise service and the failure to make progress on the A5, the political game playing on the Narrow Water Bridge project, which some of our other Members will speak to, is ensuring that yet another North/South infrastructural project, with obvious benefits to transport and tourism, is being frustrated for no benefit.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes.

Mr Wells: You can blame many people for the failure of the Narrow Water Bridge project, but I do not think that Mr Hamilton falls into that category. The reality is that the Narrow Water Bridge project failed because the tender price was grossly underestimated. When the first tender came in, it was 80% higher than the figure that was given to the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). The SEUPB was very quick to pull the offer of funding in December 2013, which did not give time for the shortfall to be made up. The Finance Minister's predecessor, Mr Wilson, provided money from the Northern Ireland block grant to make up our contribution for that. The Regional Development Minister approved the bridge order, and the planning Minister, who was, in fact, Mr Attwood, gave the planning approval and got it through as quickly as possible. So all the Executive Ministers in the Building played their part, but other issues outside the Assembly caused the loss of the project.

Mr P Ramsey: I take your point, but it is also the case that, with a bit of creativity and imagination and a wee bit more tolerance from the Finance Department, we might be in a better place now.

Likewise, it is imperative that Ministers in Dáil Éireann and the Northern Ireland Assembly recognise the need jointly to fund the operation of the Foyle ferry service to ensure its long-term viability. John Dallat, in particular, has been championing and advocating that service for some time. I know that he was in the Dáil recently, along with other Members, addressing the Committee there. It is important that that provision between Magilligan and Greencastle is protected. It greatly enhances the economic value on both sides, North and South, so it is important that we champion it as well. The SDLP is very clearly behind the Foyle ferry service to ensure that it is sustainable.

For so many of these issues, we require a Budget that provides for the reshaping of our transportation infrastructure in a way that is visionary and relative to a modern Europe, providing for our commercial needs, commuters, North/South linkages and tourism development.

Mrs Overend: As the Ulster Unionist spokesperson for enterprise, trade and investment, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. As was stated by the Minister and other Members, today's debate and vote give legislative effect to the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account approved yesterday. In many ways, the real debate on the Estimates will take place in the summer. Nevertheless, I will take this opportunity to raise some questions about the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's spending priorities at the end of this financial year and will look forward to 2014-15.

The Department's strapline and reason for existing is:

> *"to promote the growth of a competitive and export-led economy".*

In that regard, prudent government spending on economic development, principally via the agency of Invest Northern Ireland and the development of tourism through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, is vital. Significant sums continue to be committed to the development of tourism, with a headline figure of £870,000, and to the agencies of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, with sums of £17·441 million and £14·375 million respectively. What we do not know from the figures presented in the Estimates is the value that we are getting from that spend or, as some would say, what bang we are getting for our buck.

We had Londonderry as the UK City of Culture in 2013. We also hosted the World Police and Fire Games last summer. This year, we look forward to hosting the Giro d'Italia. I welcome the fact that the Tourist Board has committed £3 million to that and that DETI has committed a further half a million pounds to the Tourist Board to cover some Giro d'Italia-related activities. Again, those sorts of events help to put us on the global tourism map. However, as legislators, we should be careful that we get a return on the investment that we put in to developing our tourism product. With the public investment that has been put in even at a time of recession, we should expect results through increased visitor numbers, increased hotel bed occupancy numbers and increased spend by tourists in Northern Ireland.

On economic development, Invest Northern Ireland is receiving an uplift in its budget from just under £130 million to over £160 million.

An issue that has been discussed with Invest Northern Ireland on many occasions is the move to talking and producing figures for jobs created rather than jobs promoted. Add that to the need for improved assessment of the value of exports from Northern Ireland and I will be a happier MLA. However, I must give credit where credit is due; from information presented to the Committee during earlier monitoring rounds, the £17 million spent on the purchase of the Invest Northern Ireland headquarters,

which was previously leased under a PFI contract, should prove to be highly advantageous to the Northern Ireland taxpayer. The Northern Ireland taxpayer should always be in the forefront of our minds when we discuss budgets in the Chamber.

4.30 pm

Indeed, as we look forward to a better economic outlook for Northern Ireland, albeit somewhat slower than the rest of the UK, it is important that an ideal environment is created to enable businesses to access advice and support to grow exports, to innovate and to become world leaders in an increasing number of industries here in Northern Ireland.

As has been said before, access to Horizon 2020 funding for local large enterprises and, more importantly, for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), needs particular focus. In the previous time of framework 7, figures were produced that showed that one university in Dublin received more finance than the whole of Northern Ireland. Therefore, expert guidance by this Government is necessary.

Everyone in the House should know by now and recognise, as I do, the value of our agrifood sector in Northern Ireland and its potential for future growth for the Northern Ireland economy. Indeed, the agrifood strategy document 'Going for Growth' outlines that very potential. However, we have yet to see any real progress on that. In the January monitoring round, we saw £10 million capital being handed back to be reallocated to the 2014-15 financial year for the agrifood loan scheme. I hope that that scheme is available sooner rather than later.

Mr McQuillan mentioned the small business rate relief scheme. Indeed, this is something that SMEs have mentioned to me, and it should be extended beyond its current end date of 2015. I am heartened to guess that if the DUP called on the Finance Minister to extend it, maybe this one will be delivered.

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

As an Assembly Member for Mid Ulster, I could not leave the subject of finance without mentioning the community safety college planned for Desertcreat outside Cookstown. I should not need to inform the Minister of the need for the college, but my constituents cannot be blamed for being bitterly disappointed at the continual delays and the consequential increased cost to the taxpayer. I wonder whether the Minister can detail the effect that the movement of the timescale on the project will have on his budget.

Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to voice my concerns. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr McCallister: Yesterday's debate on the Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account and today's Budget Bill debate make up a significant proportion of the Executive's annual budget process. I do not think that anyone in the Chamber would disagree when I say that the budgetary process of the Executive is complex and largely process-driven. The Budget, which is set for four years, supposedly in line with the Programme for Government targets, and the process we engaged in today and yesterday and through monitoring rounds is largely a financial management process.

The link between the strategic direction of the Government and the budgetary process is limited, by comparison with other places. My colleague Basil McCrea and others touched on that point yesterday. I would like to go into it in slightly more depth today, because I feel that it is vital, especially as the Executive go forward in their attempt to devolve corporation tax.

Scotland, by comparison, holds an annual budget, which is something that I strongly advocate for Northern Ireland. That annual process comprises the publication of a draft budget for the following year in September or October, which sets the Government's detailed spending plans for the following year. The Scottish Parliament and the public are consulted on those plans, and they are debated in December by the Parliament. That is followed by a Budget Bill phase, which begins in January with the Bill setting out the Minister's spending plans for the following year. The Bill goes through full parliamentary and Committee scrutiny, with the Finance Committee taking on considerably more scrutiny responsibilities than the Committee on which I sit.

That phase is followed by a Budget strategy phase, which takes place in the spring prior to the next UK spending review and is intended to allow the Parliament to scrutinise the progress that the Scottish Government are making on delivering their targets. That is largely missing from this place: the Programme for Government is written after the formation of the Government and then largely ignored as a tool to hold this Government to account.

The Scottish Budget process is designed to encourage the participation of the people of Scotland in the debate about how the Budget is spent. If we compare that process with Northern Ireland's budgetary process, we see that the difference is considerable. One lends itself to openness and enhances accountability; the other is often devoid of any meaningful link to the Executive's priorities and the Programme for Government.

I note the Committee for Finance and Personnel's review of the financial process and the recommendations for improving the Budget process in this place. Many of its recommendations reflect the process in Scotland. May I point out that when some of that was happening, and when some of those recommendations were being made, the now Minister was possibly a member of the Finance Committee?

I note that, yesterday, the Finance Minister stated:

> *"I am as frustrated as everyone who raised the issue at the lack of progress on the review."*

He went on:

> *"I strongly agree that this is an area where we need to see reform of what are outdated processes." — [Official Report, This Bound Volume, p378, col 2.]*

He appeared to lay the blame for the lack of progress with the Minister of Education. I am afraid that that answer and that approach are simply not good enough, for a number of reasons. Improving the Budget process is important now. In fact, with the Executive's commitment to devolving corporation tax, it is vital. That is why the Minister's answer is inadequate.

In light of new fiscal powers contained in the Scotland Act 2012, there is a debate in Scotland, right now, on

how further to improve the budgetary process of the Government and the scrutiny powers of the Scottish Parliament, with particular emphasis on the role of a Finance Committee, which already has more extensive duties and powers than ours. The current Scottish Finance Committee scrutinises the financial memorandum of all legislation that the Scottish Government produce.

In the near future, Scotland will have to consider additional tax rates and allowances that will come under its control through the Scotland Act. Those powers might change again in the future, depending on the outworkings of the referendum. There is a complex procedure for the rate of income tax. It involves the consideration of issues and the accuracy of the forecast of tax revenues made by the Office for Budget Responsibility and, indeed, of regional economic data. This will add up to a much greater fiscal risk for Scotland because, if it chooses to vary income tax, its income may no longer be guaranteed.

As a supporter of devolving further powers, I welcome that risk. It is grown-up, accountable politics. It is also grown up and accountable that the Scottish are ahead of Northern Ireland in their financial scrutiny and are prepared to enhance that even further. When we compare that with the approach to financial scrutiny and the devolution of further tax-varying powers to Northern Ireland, the difference is, again, stark. Scotland held a far-reaching commission to examine the issues in their entirety and to make progress on financial scrutiny. However, despite the Executive's unanimous support for devolving corporation tax, what preparations for enhanced scrutiny have we made in the House and, indeed, in the Finance Committee?

The issues surrounding corporation tax are also significant. Of all the viable taxes that can be devolved, it is the most volatile, meaning that forecasts and tax returns vary considerably year on year. If used, that will increase fiscal risk, making it considerably more difficult to plan spending. On top of that, making the case for devolving corporation tax has proven that Northern Ireland has weak regionalised economic data. It is still unclear as to what the actual corporation tax take is for Northern Ireland. The data needs to improve significantly.

For many of those reasons, NI21 advocates looking at the issues of devolving fiscal powers in a broader manner, examining all the potential taxes and looking at which are best for incentivising economic development, while minimising and limiting the fiscal risk.

The debate surrounding the devolution of corporation tax has not examined the implications for our budgetary process and scrutiny. I believe that that is a major oversight on the part of the Executive, especially the previous Finance Minister, who may not have been just as enthusiastic about devolving corporation tax as the current Minister is.

I note that Sinn Féin raised the issue of devolving more fiscal powers at its ard fheis at the weekend. I must warn that few will take that seriously when one of its Ministers is holding up reform of the budgetary process in Northern Ireland, which I have described previously as being vital to the successful implementation of devolving fiscal powers. Therefore, it is not grown-up politics if you ignore the scrutiny and do not take the tough decisions. We have to get to the stage of having grown-up politics that welcomes scrutiny of a Budget process, that will take the tough decisions and that will explain to our electorate why those tough decisions are having to be taken. At present, Sinn Féin is in government and comfortable in government, but it has the skill for ignoring uncomfortable issues and pretending that they are nothing to do with the party.

I ask the Finance Minister whether he believes the current Budget process and scrutiny provisions to be fit for corporation tax to be devolved into. Indeed, if they are not, will that be an additional stumbling block that he will face? If the Minister says that they are not fit, will Treasury agree with that analysis? Will Treasury even consider devolving the powers to this place if the scrutiny provisions are not fit? The Minister needs to have those discussions with Treasury. I assume that he has had discussions with Treasury on corporation tax.

The House will be aware that I am in favour of reforming these institutions and that I support the introduction of an opposition. Just as the Finance Minister has stated that he does not want to reform public service delivery on a personal whim, I do not want to introduce an opposition and reform the ability of the House to scrutinise the Government because of personal impulses. The introduction of an opposition would be good for democracy and public engagement, and, ultimately, good for public service delivery and our economy.

Mr Ross: We are used to debating and discussing Budgets in fairly gloomy economic periods, and I suppose that what we are dealing with in Northern Ireland at the moment is a hangover from the tough economic times of recent years.

I listened to the contribution from Mr Pat Ramsey earlier, and he talked about many of the difficulties that young people in Northern Ireland are facing, which are issues that we are dealing with on the Committee for Employment and Learning. Many young people find themselves out of work or not in any sort of formal education or training, and that is a real issue that is affecting so many people. We both had the opportunity to go to the European employment conference in Brussels at the end of last year, and it, in many ways, put into context the difficulties that we are facing in Northern Ireland.

We still have far too high a youth unemployment rate; of that there is no doubt. However, when we compare that with the 60% rate of youth unemployment in places such as Greece, the 57% in Spain and the rates in Italy, Portugal and even south of the border, we see that some places face much worse difficulties than Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it is absolutely right that, in the Budget, public spending is targeted towards schemes that will help young people to get into work.

Mr Ramsey talked about apprentices, and we know that the Minister for Employment and Learning is working on a new approach to apprenticeships. It is important that those are well funded. There is also the potential that we may need to give some financial assistance to some employers to take on some of those apprentices. However, again, I think that this Budget will cover and identify that.

4.45 pm

I listened to Mr Ramsey say that one of the greatest challenges that we face in our local economy is young people going across to GB and not coming back. The way in which we can encourage those young people to come back to Northern Ireland and to contribute to our economy

is by ensuring that we have the jobs in place to attract them back. We should keep that in mind when we are discussing economic matters today.

I said that we are used to discussing gloomy economic periods. Perhaps the Finance Minister will be glad that he came into post when he did, because there are definitely positive signs of growth in the economy. Unemployment has fallen for 11 consecutive months in Northern Ireland. We have seen in the region of 1·2% growth in the local economy. That does not sound massive, but, compared with where we have been in the past number of years, it is definitely an encouraging sign.

Many of us who speak to construction companies in our constituencies or across Northern Ireland will know that they are much more positive about the future. I always think that, if the construction sector is more confident, it is a good sign that the economy is heading in the right direction.

Forecasts from Danske Bank's report on consumer confidence show that it is at the highest level in four years, and the Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index again reported an increase in business activity during December, which is the sixth consecutive month that that has happened. So, there is definitely positive news.

There is always a point during Budget debates when Members have to discuss what is going on in their constituencies. In recent weeks, there have been two positive developments in my constituency, East Antrim. First, the Caterpillar plant in Larne has received £5·4 million investment to permanently source axles. Last week, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment were at the Ryobi plant in Carrickfergus to announce a £32 million investment that will create 100 new jobs and bring the workforce to 385.

Those are examples locally where we are starting to see more encouraging signs in the economy. I think that the Budget process should take note of how we have used public money to help to support some of that job creation. I pay tribute to the Ministers and to Invest Northern Ireland for the work that they have done in going overseas on trade missions and meeting companies, as well as for the work that they have done locally in attracting companies to come and invest in Northern Ireland.

I think that it is important to say that, even during the difficult global times, Northern Ireland has performed reasonably well in attracting inward investment. It has been said many times before, but it is important that we reiterate today that, outside London, Northern Ireland is the most successful part of the United Kingdom in drawing in inward investment. I think that that is a hugely significant statement, and it is particularly encouraging.

I had the opportunity to speak at a Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) conference a fortnight ago that was on how young people today are finding life very difficult in more disadvantageous circumstances than those that previous generations experienced. Although I do not necessarily agree with that sentiment, young people are undoubtedly facing difficulties. However, there are also far more opportunities in Northern Ireland today than there have been for young people before.

I noticed a slide from the economist Richard Ramsey that pointed to many of the firms that are now situated in Northern Ireland and are offering graduates jobs for young people. Those include, to name just a few, the New York Stock Exchange, Liberty, Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Allstate, Oracle, Allen and Overy, and Capita. Of course, we also have HBO situated at the Titanic Quarter, and it is producing the 'Game of Thrones' TV show, which is a massive hit right across the world. Today, I noticed reports in the media about there potentially being a huge contract for Bombardier to build wings and fuselages in Belfast, and that will have a positive knock-on effect.

All that work is the result of Ministers' activities and the work of Invest Northern Ireland in ensuring that we provide support to some companies to create jobs in Northern Ireland. Recent announcements include: 993 jobs in Stream, 650 in Allstate, 416 in Terumo, 263 in Terex, 229 in Almac, 179 in Linden Foods, and 177 in Deloitte. Those are positive announcements that have been made over the past six to 12 months, and they have provided quality employment for people here.

Moreover, 75% of companies that invest in Northern Ireland reinvest here. That is hugely important. It is a tribute to our workforce and to the skills that we are developing among our young people. It is also a tribute to the support that the Government are giving to companies to ensure that they come here, invest and come back again. That positive result has meant that Northern Ireland is the number-one location in the world for financial technology investment. That is hugely significant, and it should be celebrated right across the Chamber. Of course, as Mr Ramsey said earlier, we need to keep developing the skills of young people and investing financial resources in them to ensure that they have the skills that will help us to attract larger companies to Northern Ireland.

I spoke at the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) in recent weeks. It pointed to the fact that it was able to tailor courses to the requirements of companies. Allen and Overy, which is a huge legal firm that came to Northern Ireland, required a particular set of skills from young people to provide employment. The further education colleges were able to adapt their courses to provide the skills that employers need. That is hugely important. We need a joined-up approach between government and our colleges and universities to ensure that we give young people the skills that will find them employment.

Another important point is that we need to continue to fund the work of Invest Northern Ireland. If we are convinced that the economy is starting to recover, there will be more opportunities to attract major companies to Northern Ireland. It is important that we continue to have that level of funding available to attract jobs as the economy picks up.

We would make a mistake if we think that, because there are positive economic times ahead, there will be more public money to throw at various pet projects. Anybody who believes that should take note of recent comments by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who said that we are yet to get halfway along the road of austerity. That means that, even if the economy is picking up, there will be further restrictions on public funding in years to come. It is important that we deal with that issue maturely and that we recognise that there will be further challenges in the Budget period ahead as we work to pay off the national debt. We still have not made an impact on the national

debt. The deficit has been reduced, but the debt is still growing. We need to make sure that we pay attention to that.

We need to bear in mind four main things during this Budget period: we need to target the spending in the Budget carefully; we need to reduce the wasting of public money; we need to reform in order to be more efficient; and we need to target fiscal powers carefully. Those issues have been raised by other Members. Potentially, they are the four most important issues that we deal with.

I listened to the comments of Mrs Overend earlier. She is absolutely right: we want to spend money where we get the most bang for our buck and where we get a return on the investment. As I said, when the economy is picking up, we have the opportunity to spend and target public money to attract the sort of jobs that we want to see here. We do not want to miss out on any opportunities, which we might do so if the budget is not in place for Invest Northern Ireland to do its work across the world in attracting such jobs.

It is not the Government that create jobs; we set the right environment for companies to invest and entrepreneurs to flourish. That also means that there will be challenges not only in having the right Budget but in reforming our employment law to make sure that we are more attractive as a region to investors and companies, that we have the right support in place, and that we continue to work on skills. We want Northern Ireland to be the most business-friendly environment anywhere in Europe.

I outlined some of the recent successes in the form of jobs announcements. I perhaps omitted to announce that the economy Minister is in Singapore and was able to announce another success yesterday, with HeartSine Technologies winning a major contract to supply automated external defibrillators to the Singapore Ministry of Defence. That is another positive outcome of the sort of work that our Ministers are involved in.

A Member mentioned the importance of exports and supporting companies to export. That is another example of how we can use public money to give support to local companies, particularly SMEs, in taking the first step in exporting. If we are to grow and transform our economy, we need to encourage more companies to take the risk and export for the first time.

Last week, I was at a dinner in this Building for the NI-NL trade organisation, which is concerned with building links between Northern Ireland and the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a perfect place for companies to export to for the first time because of the cultural similarities, its location in Europe and its size. Public money has been used to provide support to companies to go there for the first time through the Going Dutch programme, and that has been hugely successful.

Mrs Overend talked about the importance of tourism events and ensuring that there is money in the Budget to support some of the major events that we have tried to attract to Northern Ireland in recent years. We have had the MTV Awards, the Irish Open, the City of Culture, the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race, the World Police and Fire Games and the G8, and, later this year, the Giro d'Italia will come to Northern Ireland. Those are all significant events. Mrs Overend is right that the primary purpose of having those tourism-type events is to attract people to Northern Ireland to spend money and time. However, they also have the benefit of changing global perceptions of what Northern Ireland is all about. It is important that money is made available in the Budget to the Tourist Board to continue its work in attracting major events to Northern Ireland and change global perceptions of what this place is capable of doing.

We are working on further events for future years. The Rugby World Cup has been mentioned as an event that we could benefit from, and it is important that that is financed well. We also had the recent announcement of the extension of the Belfast Waterfront. That will allow us to attract large conferences to Northern Ireland and will bring to Belfast many thousands of people who will spend money. That is the type of project where public money is used to the benefit of the Northern Ireland economy, and it is a prime example of how we can get more bang for our buck, as Mrs Overend talked about.

One of the other areas that we have to talk about is reducing waste. If we accept that we will face tighter fiscal circumstances in the years to come, we have to reduce waste. I will not go over the issue of welfare reform again, but I think that my colleague Mr Weir highlighted some of the real difficulties and challenges that we face economically in Northern Ireland if we do not step up the plate and deal with welfare reform.

He mentioned the costs, and we know that some £15 million was set aside in the January monitoring round. We heard figures on the media last night — more frightening figures, perhaps — about the loss to the block grant and to our spending power if we refuse to take somewhat difficult decisions on welfare reform. We also heard about some of the job losses that could be incurred. However, as I said, I will not rehearse the argument; I heard Mr Weir explain it pretty well to the Assembly.

One of the other areas that we need to look at is the reform of the public sector. Again, if we face tighter fiscal circumstances, we need to ensure that we do not stand still. We need to ensure that our public sector is up to the task and is as efficient as possible. Many times, we hear Members talk about the need and requirement for innovation and collaboration in the business community and the private sector. If it is important to do that in the private sector, it is also important to do it in the public sector. Given the size of Northern Ireland, we should be small enough and flexible enough to ensure that our public sector is as innovative as possible in how it delivers services to our constituents.

5.00 pm

Last week, I spoke at the Centre for Competitiveness's quality awards, an event that recognised outstanding work in the public, private and voluntary sectors by those who are striving towards improving business performance. There were representatives present from many public sector organisations that have embraced that change and have looked to change how they do their work so that they can become more efficient. It is important that we continue to do that. Since taking office, the Minister has spoken many times about the importance of reform in the public sector. Perhaps, he will update the House on where we are with some of that reform and what it may look like. Of course, there are benefits to be had from closer collaboration between the public and private sectors, which we would all welcome.

The final point I want to raise is on the issue of fiscal powers for the Assembly. Dominic Bradley said that it was a pretty complicated area, and he is right. We are dealing with many different calculations, and, if we were to devolve all fiscal powers, we would have more uncertain Budgets, which would bring its own challenges. Devolving fiscal powers also comes at huge cost, so we have to be very careful about how we do it.

We need to continue to identify where devolving more fiscal powers would be an advantage to Northern Ireland. An example was the air passenger duty issue. Devolving that fiscal power was to our advantage, because we were at an economic disadvantage compared with the Republic of Ireland. By getting power over APD devolved to the Assembly, we were able to save our continental flight to New York, which is important for our business links with north America. Devolving that power was money well spent, as it had real economic benefit for Northern Ireland. As my colleague Mr Girvan mentioned, we have to use that power to try to attract further connectivity between Northern Ireland and other key markets across Europe and north America.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I largely agree with his comments about the challenges we face in devolving tax-varying powers. Does he agree that the Executive would have been better taking the approach taken by Scotland or Wales and looking at all taxes in the mix instead of focusing on one or another? That is the point that I have been trying to make. I would value his comments on that.

Mr Ross: I listened to the Member's comments very closely. I was worried at one stage that he was going to move to Scotland because he thought that they were doing something so much better than we were.

The difficulty comes when we deal with the cost. There is broad agreement across the House on devolving corporation tax powers. We know that that will come at huge cost, and perhaps some of the parties that are very enthusiastic about it at the moment will recoil a little bit when it comes to identifying where we are going to reduce public spending. I believe that it would be worthwhile. I read the report from independent groups who estimate that we could get in the region of 58,000 new jobs if we could lower corporation tax. However, to have a mature argument about this, we first need to hear from the Member and his party about what he would do with those taxes if he got them devolved. Is he saying that we should devolve the full portfolio of fiscal powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly in order to reduce the tax take from individuals? If so, he has to explain where he would cut public spending. If he is saying that we should get devolved powers to raise taxes, he will have a lot of explaining to do to hard-pressed families. One of the things that we can be proud of is being a low-tax economy with the lowest household bills in the UK.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Yes.

Mr McCallister: First, it is important to nail the myth that we are a low-tax economy. We have very little responsibility for the taxes we raise. There is very little correlation between those taxes and the levels of spending. So, it is not right to give ourselves the accolade of being a low-tax economy when we are not really facing up to some of the challenges.

I will take on the points that the Member raises. We have said that we should set up a commission, like Scotland and Wales did, to look at how you might devolve the powers. The Member has rightly pointed out that many people have said that they are in favour of lowering corporation tax but no one, including the Member and his party, has said exactly what the cost would be and where they would cut public spending. He has thrown the challenge over to the SDLP and Sinn Féin to say where they would find the money if they were to cut corporation tax, but the Member has not identified where he would find it. The point about varying taxes is that you can do small things around the margins that have a big impact on small businesses. That is the key. Corporation tax is volatile and difficult to predict. The Minister, with the best will in the world, does not have adequate economic data at the moment to predict some of those things.

Mr Ross: I am not any clearer about the position of Northern Ireland 21 on devolving fiscal powers to the Assembly. The Member talks about volatility but also says that we should look at bringing all the range of taxes to Northern Ireland. One issue that has to be addressed is the volatility that would come from all the fiscal responsibilities coming to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the difficulty that that would pose for planning. That is one advantage of the current Budget settlement.

Let me address the issue of the challenge to the SDLP. The entire Executive are in agreement on the devolution of corporation tax. Therefore, the responsibility to find the savings within public spending is an Executive priority that they will address collectively. When SDLP Members ask for additional taxes to be devolved to the Assembly, it is their responsibility to say where they would see further public spending reduced. The one fact that we cannot get away from is that, in Northern Ireland, we have more public money to spend than we collect. That is one of the benefits of the Union, and I am sure that the Member would agree with me on that.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will give way in one second. However, we are dealing with a huge subvention — it is in the region of £10·5 billion — to Northern Ireland. To get all the tax take coming from Northern Ireland, we would have to find all that additional money somewhere. You can raise taxes, which makes life more difficult for families who are already struggling, or you can reduce taxes for families. If you do that, you have to say expressly where you would find those savings.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I remind the Member that I did not say that we should transfer tax-raising powers willy-nilly. I said that we should do what has been done in Scotland. We should initiate a review that looks at a broad range of taxes and assesses them and the advantages of transferring the taxes that would be most advantageous to us. However, we should do that on the basis of hard information. Surely the Member does not disagree with that.

Mr Ross: Hard information was distinctly lacking in the Member's earlier contribution. What we have been doing in the Assembly is targeting the areas where, we think, we can get an advantage, and we have been very successful

in that. The Member will know that we had a debate in the House not so long ago, and I think that his party talked about devolving fuel duty to the Assembly. Again, the costs of doing that were absolutely staggering. The Member has not outlined whether it is his intention to devolve fiscal powers and the range of taxes to the Assembly to reduce them or to make them higher. I have not heard that from the Member.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I did not quite catch the point he was making, but I said that it was worth looking at the range of tax-raising powers and deciding, on the basis of evidence, which of those would be advantageous for us to transfer. I will correct the Member: this party did not bring any motion to the Assembly on fuel duties.

Mr Ross: I apologise if that was the case. I distinctly remember the SDLP arguing to support that case, so perhaps we are splitting hairs.

I still did not hear the Member say whether he would seek to make taxes lower or higher for people in Northern Ireland. Parties cannot run away from that point.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Yes.

Mr McCallister: The Member has failed to say where he would get the money to cut corporation tax. I think that the DUP position is to put it even lower than 12·5%. Where would he take the money from? Which Departments would he cut?

Mr Ross: I outlined that it would be a collective decision by the Executive and therefore the Executive will collectively come to that decision. What we are already seeing — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ross: — under way from this and the previous Finance Minister is an attempt to find greater efficiencies in public spending to cut out waste. We also need more imaginative ways to deliver services to constituents. That does not always have to be done in the way that it has been done before. There are greater opportunities there to reduce public spending or look at delivering services differently, but that will be a decision taken collectively by the Executive.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I was just going to be helpful by pointing to an area where some costs to this Executive could be reduced. Perhaps his colleague the Finance Minister might refrain from taking his partner the Sinn Féin Agriculture Minister to court and therefore save some legal fees. Also, perhaps the Minister of Health could prevent himself being dragged into the courts because of the other equality measures that he has failed to implement and judgements that have been found in Westminster. A reduction in legal fees strikes me as a very quick, easy and less painful way for the Executive to save money for the Northern Ireland public.

Mr Ross: I have found in my time in the Assembly that Mrs Kelly always tries to be helpful in her contributions. Of course, one thing that I would point out is that the action taken by the Finance Minister was found in his favour, so the courts decided that he was right in what he did. Therefore, the action he took was absolutely justified. Many people in the farming and rural communities will be very grateful for the action that the Finance Minister took. Perhaps she could explain to people in her constituency why she opposed that.

This is a well-balanced Budget, and its priorities are right. I look forward to hearing more from the Finance Minister on the work on reforming the public sector in Northern Ireland. I look forward to hearing from him on the difficulties that we will face if we refuse to stand up to the welfare reform issue, and I look forward to a more positive economic outlook in Northern Ireland in years to come.

Mr I McCrea: Possibly one of the worst things about being further down the list of DUP Members to speak is that everybody has pretty much already said everything. Mind you, that has never stopped me before, and it will not today. I do not often follow how the Chair of the Committee does things, but in this case, I will be brief, as he was. I think that, had other Members followed suit, this debate could have been over quite a while ago. However, given the Members who are left to speak, I am sure that we will be here for a period of time yet.

There are many issues that we could deal with, whether about rates and more so the issue of the RPA and whatnot, but as other Members have dealt with those, I will be parochial and deal with issues in my constituency and try my best to get as much of the over £15 billion that the Finance Minister mentioned as I can. I will not ask him to rewrite the Budget, but, if he could do something to reallocate it, the generosity that I know he has will hopefully make that a reality for my constituents in Mid Ulster.

My constituency colleague Sandra Overend referred to the community training college at Desertcreat. While that is an issue for us as a constituency, it will benefit the wider community across Northern Ireland. Although there has been delay after delay and some question over whether it would go ahead or not, I can hopefully take comfort from the fact that we now have a starting date of May or June of this year. Hopefully, there will be no further delays, because there is no doubt that the local economy and many of the businesspeople and constituents who have previously worked in the construction industry are waiting to see whether they can get something out of that. It is important that that happens. Wider industry in mid-Ulster has been severely hit, whether it be construction, engineering or manufacturing, but it is good to see that unemployment figures are going down and people are starting to see some movement.

I want to refer to the Magherafelt bypass.

The Finance Minister's predecessor announced the allocation of money for that. He found some extra money for the scheme. The fact that the £40 million construction project will create around 200 construction jobs is welcome. However, we should not end there. Before I left Cookstown District Council, we had a meeting with the Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy, about the Cookstown bypass, which is a very important scheme for the Cookstown area. I urge the Minister to enter into discussions with the Minister for Regional Development to ensure that money is found for it.

I hope that Members will support the Bill and allow money to be spent in the mid-Ulster area. I recommend it to the House.

5.15 pm

Mr Kinahan: I am very pleased to speak today. In my role as education spokesperson, that is what I will focus on. Much has been covered, but I hope that I will make different points in a different way. I would like to start by making sure that we remember that, when we talk about education, it is our children's education that we are discussing. That is what the Budget is relevant to. We should always remember the staff, the teachers and all those in the education system. I start by giving them a big thank you for all the work that they do.

When we get the Budget papers, I sometimes wonder whether we really achieve anything in these debates or whether it is a bit pointless. At times, the process does not seem fit for purpose in that too little detail is given. Most of us talk about our areas of responsibility but have very little to go on. I hope that the Northern Ireland Audit Office will look at a way of getting better value for money from it.

Yesterday, we heard Mervyn Storey — I think that we heard this last year, too — describe the document as "difficult to navigate." It is like having a map with just the names of the towns on it but no buildings, no roads, no rivers, no contours — just some general direction. That is what I would like to change. I would like a document that we can all understand and scrutinise in great detail.

Look at what is written under education in the Vote on Account. It says that we should be:

> *"Ensuring that all young people, through participation at school, reach the highest possible standards of educational achievement, that will give them a secure foundation for lifelong learning and employment; and develop the values and attitudes appropriate to citizenship in an inclusive society."*

Fantastic. Those are all the right noises, seemingly all in the right order, if I can borrow from Morecambe and Wise. However, there is little sign of it actually working in that way. There seems to be much being done in education but in the wrong order. Hopefully, through today's Budget and the comments that everyone makes, we will get it back into the right order.

The first line refers to "participation at school", but look at the number of schools that have a non-attendance rate of over 20% for 85% of the time. That is a shame. In this Budget, there should be money that allows us to help schools to help themselves to make sure that we can educate all pupils, especially truants and others who do not attend.

There should be more money for the schools themselves. You have heard the statistic before. We want something similar to England, where 81% of funding goes to schools, as opposed to here, where 59% goes to schools. Nothing in today's figures shows that there is any intention of doing that.

In the Committee this week, we will see more on the common funding formula and the appalling idea that we should rob one school to pay another — or, as we put it, rob Peter to pay Paul — as threatened last summer. If you had gone into that in detail, you would have seen — all the answers that I got from schools indicated this — that cuts in 80% of schools would mean a loss of classroom assistants, a loss of special needs assistants, a loss of teachers and more strains on remaining teachers. We really did not want that. It also seemed to be a war on rural schools. Again, we see nothing of it in this Budget.

We would like something in the Budget that encourages schools to work with their communities, local authorities and councils. We would like something that helps Departments to work together, particularly on early years, on which we seem to have been extremely quiet in the two years that I have been on the Committee. There is no sign of this in the Budget.

The Vote on Account talks about "highest possible standards" and focusing on the right things, yet, at the same time, we do not seem to be putting money in the right place. We have seen £16·5 million wasted on the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), which will go on until ESA is stopped or a proper ESA is presented to the House.

However, £60 million more has been allocated in the Budget to the education and library boards, and that is what we want to see. At the moment, the boards are struggling to support all the schools. They need more money, and the more that can happen in that line, the better, until we get a decent ESA on which we can all agree.

Think of all the money that has been wasted on the area planning process in education as we set our schools into the wrong form of segregation. We need to have a proper Budget in which we can see where the money is being spent, and it should plan for the building of schools. Look at all the schools that are screaming out for repairs, maintenance and new classrooms. There are many such schools in my constituency. Parkhall is waiting for its newbuild, while others are waiting for mobile classrooms. There is no money in the Budget that we can see being planned for schools. There is no detail.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. He will recall my party colleague Patsy McGlone's contribution, in which he mentioned the Education Minister's announcement last year of some £180 million of capital spend, which failed to materialise. I understand that that was in part because of the vacancy control measures in place in the boards that do not allow some jobs to be filled. That means that business cases cannot be examined. There is a backlog of business cases, because of that logjam and the arguments around the establishment of ESA.

Mr Kinahan: I entirely agree, but there is so much that we cannot see in the education budget. We know that the funds are there, but we do not know all the reasons behind everything being held back. The issue that Mrs Kelly has raised is very poignant.

I will return to where I was. I wanted to make the point that we do not seem to have a shovel-ready system for schools. We had all the schools waiting for mobile classrooms and for change, yet, at the end of the year, the Education Minister and the Department were not ready to make use of the savings that had been made in other Departments. We need a system put in place and, as I said it before, much more detail in the Budget.

The Vote on Account also talks about a "foundation for lifelong learning". We have this huge curriculum, yet the funding was taken away from the entitlement framework, and we see nothing of it in the Budget. We want to see our pupils leaving school with life skills. We want them to know how to manage money, create a business, and, most

importantly, how to get a job and create more jobs. We do not see any of that in here.

At the excellent DEL and DE shared event last week called STEM is Cool, we saw how excellent Northern Ireland could be and is in the Generation Innovation video. I recommend that everyone watch it. If it does not lift you and show you how good Northern Ireland is and what the future is for our children, I do not know what will.

We need to see more money for primary schools and STEM subjects. Again, we do not see it in the Budget. We need money for training teachers. If you gave more money to Sentinus, it could double the numbers that are interested in the sciences. There is so much that we need to see through the Budget.

To go back to the point about a foundation for lifelong learning, we also need to train our teachers. We know that they have a number of training days, but we are throwing so much at them that they are not getting the time to think or learn, yet they are the absolute stars in our system. We have to find some way of giving more finance to schools so that they can not only teach better but have the freedom to train themselves.

The Vote on Account goes on to say that we should:

> *"develop the values and attitudes appropriate to citizenship in an inclusive society."*

That has to be done through shared education, yet we see little evidence of that, and little of it in the Budget. We have seen it pushed by President Obama and by Westminster, with their £250 million borrowing limits. Everyone else wants us to do it, but do we? Do we want shared education, and do we want to see things getting better here? If you look at the costs of the flag protests and everything else, you will see that we must look to that shared future.

Have the shared campuses started yet? Where is this Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) that OFMDFM is meant to be producing? The Minister of Education has made a start on shared education, and I congratulate him on that. As we have seen in the documents this week, he intends to set up funding for a shared education future. However, we all need to be there, and we all need to be pushing for it.

We had the excellent North Eastern Education and Library Board and Atlantic Philanthropies primary integrating/enriching education project (PIEE) initiative, but the funding for that has just stopped. We need to see that being carried through, whether it is in the area learning communities, through the community relations, equality and diversity (CRED) programme or in other places. We look forward to seeing it there.

If you look at today's Budget figures, you will see that youth services get £1·6 million in small increases, yet only £263,000 goes to the Youth Council itself. We seem to be giving more money to the bodies that are running it and less to the actual youth themselves. Have we got it the right way round? Also, there is nothing in the Budget about what is happening over Westminster and the free school meals. That should have led to more money coming here to Northern Ireland or to a change in the free school meals system.

Last year, in the Education Committee, the auditors told us that the Education Department was the worst Department at producing budget efficiencies. Yet, at the same time, they said that none of our Departments was good at budget efficiencies. Is the Minister going to put something in place that makes all the Departments better at budget efficiencies?

I will go back to the point that I made at the beginning, which asked whether we will see a document and a system here that lets us really see what is going on and whether something is an efficiency or just a cut. All of us need to be part of that. I will go back to my point, which is: we need to see more detailed figures in a way that means that we can properly scrutinise them. However, the Ulster Unionist Party supports the Budget.

Mrs McKevitt: The SDLP has consistently argued against the way in which the current financial arrangements are being managed. I welcome any opportunity to assess the ways in which we can utilise our culture, arts and leisure sectors to enhance and grow the local economy.

There is significant underspend in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. DCAL has the smallest budget of all Departments, at less than 1% of the overall Budget, yet it has such an important role to play in the provision of and access to our arts, culture, leisure and sports. That underspend is not so much about financial good management but more about bad administration in government.

The most pertinent example of that is the failure to deliver on the Narrow Water bridge. Due to the dithering and downright resistance over the Narrow Water bridge project, the SEUPB withdrew crucial EU funding in November. That withdrawal was directly attributable to the failure of the Northern Ireland Executive, as well as of the Irish Government, to indicate how a shortfall in moneys could be met. The project represented a golden opportunity to unlock the tourism potential of the area and to boost the island's economic prospects. Once completed, the project will boost the construction sector and provide a vital gateway to the Mournes. We have a unique tourism product that has worldwide appeal. To let this important symbol of how far our society has come fall away would be hugely disappointing.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure underspend is particularly disappointing, given the lack of capital funding for the arts in the Newry area, which is falling behind the rest of the region. My colleague Dominic Bradley and I have highlighted with the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure the need for a high-quality arts base in Newry, and we hope that funding for that project can be identified when the Minister raises it with the Finance Department. I am flagging that up to you, Minister, so that you know that there is something coming to you in the future. I am marking your card that the people of Newry would really like your support on it.

5.30 pm

A more positive aspect to last year was the hugely successful World Police and Fire Games, which certainly represented value for money. The games featured almost 7,000 retired and current competitors across 56 sports and 41 venues, with thousands of volunteers ensuring that they were described as the friendliest games ever. I received

news just today that the East Border Region is to further invest £500,000 in Rostrevor's Kilbroney Park. That shows that the games' legacy is good and still growing.

The games have also left a valuable legacy, in that 45 schools across Northern Ireland benefit from mobile defibrillators that were used during the games. Those defibs have the potential to save a child's life. Given that the health service requires an additional £30 million towards key healthcare pressures in the January monitoring round, the defibs are of great assistance.

I welcome the success of the Small Size, Big Festival, which ended in Newry this week. It certainly put Newry on the map internationally and is something that the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure invested in. I also welcome the recognition given to C S Lewis at the end of last year, with the unveiling of a statue in east Belfast and an inaugural C S Lewis festival, which took place in November and was funded by Belfast City Council. The exhibition at the Linen Hall Library was also a huge success.

I have consistently spoken about the need for the Department to fight cutbacks in access to libraries. The threats posed by cuts in hours and possible closures have galvanised many communities and led people to re-evaluate the crucial role played by libraries and, more important, the roles that they could play if properly resourced. Books are very important, but libraries are about much more. They are the real cultural hubs of small communities. Their role cannot be measured crudely by counting borrowings and visits. Kilkeel now has an opportunity with its new library to be a showcase for the new roles that libraries can play when they have the public backing that has been demonstrated over the past year.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Budget Bill. I have a number of queries, and I will be interested in the Minister's response to them. I would like to hear from other Ministers in due course about some of those issues when they are raised in Committee.

The first issue has been about for a wee while: the equal pay situation for those employed in the PSNI and the Department of Justice. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the money that was earmarked for it is still available and is ring-fenced only for that particular pay settlement. It is a very disturbing situation. I wrote to the Minister of Finance when he first came to office to ask him to hold a review. In fairness, he has looked at it, although I do not think that he has come to any conclusion — unless we hear a big announcement today, which I would welcome. Maybe he will resolve the matter as quickly as possible. The issue has support from all sides of the House and all parties. It would be helpful to resolve the issue in as short a period as possible. It would relieve many of those who believe that they are entitled to that equal pay settlement. I believe that they are so entitled, so I look forward to a positive outcome to that.

In the Department of Justice there is also the voluntary or early exit scheme for prison officers, which allows new recruits to be brought into the Prison Service and prison officers and prison staff to exit their employment. That has hit some financial hold-ups. I am keen that there are opportunities for new recruits to be brought in. I understand that there is a considerable waiting list for new recruits, and we want to deal with that as effectively and efficiently as possible.

The third issue in the Department of Justice is the PSNI budget itself. I know that it is broadly handled by the Policing Board, but, by and large, it comes back to the Department of Justice in the end. I have concerns that people have been making noises over recent months about the cost of policing the flags dispute and public disorder in relation to parades that were stopped. Those people have not told us the actual costs over many years of policing the many sectarian attacks and terrorist attacks that continue in the Province. We need to put it in some balance. I am concerned that they are using some of those statements to indicate that they need more money for the Police Service. If they need more money for the Police Service, they should be open and upfront and say why they need it. Are there reasonable efficiencies within the service, and is the money that is there being properly utilised? Considerable questions in that respect remain.

I come on to the Department of the Environment. An issue that I continue to raise is the cost of the review of public administration and local government. We have not heard any update on the £118 million costs proposed in the PwC report of a couple of years ago. I have consistently asked if there is any update, but I do not seem to be able to get any figures to tell me and other Members if there are revised figures for that, what the real cost of the review of public administration and local government will be and, indeed, where those efficiencies will come from. We are short on detail on how that money will be recouped. We have heard the suggestion that there will be considerable savings over a 25-year period, but I and many in the House are still to be convinced.

There are two other aspects of a local nature that I want to raise. One is around the development of the Erne Hospital site in Enniskillen in County Fermanagh. There has been an ongoing business case being developed for some time about the purchase of that site from the Department of Health or the Western Health and Social Care Trust. I know that the South West College's Enniskillen campus is keen to relocate to that site. It would be helpful if the Minister of Finance could use his influence to persuade OFMDFM to make progress on that. It is a huge potential development for County Fermanagh, and it would be welcome. It is not just the South West College campus that has an interest in it; other public service agencies have an interest, and we could certainly have a public service hub at that location.

The final issue is around the review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. There is huge potential to create more efficiencies in the tourist sector to provide finance in areas where it can be better utilised, in my opinion. I think of the regional tourist organisations. Fermanagh Lakeland Tourism, for example, could provide a much better marketing strategy and use that money more efficiently in its marketing and tourist advertising than currently happens.

Those are just some of the aspects that I have concerns about.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Why is this such a dreary debate? Why is it that this process is so utterly boring and uninteresting to the public and, indeed, to our colleagues, who are mostly absent?

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Tom is still sitting here. *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: Minister, if you would just listen to me, you might hear something about your good self in relation to the issue that I raise. It is because the Budget process is, as Mr McCallister, who is now absent, said, a financial management process. It is not a Budget at all. It is not a Budget in the sense that we have at Westminster or in Scotland, where it is an annual process and, as Mr McCallister rightly said, you have the people participating in the process, because it is a meaningful, imaginative, robust process where ideas are tossed about and some imagination is put into the public sphere of discussion about how we develop our economy and how we use the moneys that we get from Westminster etc. The whole point of devolution is that we do our own thing. However, every time we tried to do so, at least in the SDLP or indeed the Ulster Unionist Party, the previous Minister of Finance said, "You can't do that. You must follow Westminster. You can't be imaginative". So, it comes down to what is, as Mr McCallister said, a financial management process. It is a bookkeeping process.

The new Minister of Finance — a new broom — has an opportunity to abandon being a bookkeeper and become an economic innovator. That is the challenge for him and, indeed, the Executive. The previous occupant, Mr Wilson, whom I like and am very friendly with, was, unfortunately, a bookkeeper and a rather Scrooge-like bookkeeper from time to time. Perhaps that is a bit unkind; nonetheless, he showed no imagination. There were a few flashes here and there, but, by and large, he showed no imagination. That is the problem with our process. We have got to get away from the idea that everything Westminster says is the right way of doing things.

My colleague Mr Bradley was criticised today for daring to say that we can do things differently and introduce a sort of Calman-type commission to probe, look at the way we do things and look at fiscal policy in particular. If you do not have some element of fiscal policy — we have a very restricted one here — you cannot do very much. We have to experiment a bit. We have to be a bit brave. We have to take risks. Risk is the fundamental element of being an entrepreneur. You take risks, you put your money into a business and you hope that somebody starts to buy your goods, come into your shop or trade with you. That is a risk. We, as politicians, have got to take risks on behalf of the people. They have got to be reasonable risks; they cannot be reckless. However, we have got to take risks, and we are not doing so. Risk is necessary in politics, as it is in business and industry; without it, we are doomed to be bookkeepers and processors. I do not think that that is what we should be. We should be better than that. That is the challenge for us.

When we in the SDLP put forward alternatives to the 2011-15 Budget, we were laughed at and derided. We were told that we were fools because we had alternative proposals. They might not have been the best alternative proposals — some were very imaginative and very good — but at least we challenged the orthodoxy of the Department of Finance and Personnel.

I listened carefully to Mr Alastair Ross. He has a reputation for being bright and sparky. He will do good things in the Assembly and, perhaps, in the Executive, when he is appointed Minister for something. However, all I heard from him was conservatism and complacency. I did not hear any sparkiness or imagination. I am sorry he is absent now. If you listened to him carefully, you would think, "Well, there's nothing else we can do". There are other things that we can do. We must look at regenerating or re-energising the Budget process and the Department of Finance and Personnel, because it is keeping us in this vice-like grip of conservatism. We have got to go forward.

In this Budget process, I appeal to the Minister to look more imaginatively at things in the future. He should be vigorous in trying to create a new fiscal context in which we operate. He should look for a Calman-style commission for Northern Ireland. We should learn from what the Scots have done. They are doing things very well and have developed a fine reputation. We should also look at what they are doing south of the border because there are some good initiatives there. Let us do that. Let us take risks. Let us not be conservative or complacent. Let us not simply "block grant" everything; just slice away at the block grant.

5.45 pm

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. I acknowledge and accept a number of the issues that he says are wrong and can perhaps be fixed. However, when he mentions the Republic of Ireland, does he also accept that, for a number of years, there was undoubtedly a very poor bookkeeper at the head of its policy unit who did not do a very good job at keeping those books? Maybe we have things to learn from what they got wrong.

Mr A Maginness: I accept that. I think that anybody who lives or works in the Republic would, if they were being responsible, say the same thing: "We got it wrong". However, they got in wrong in Britain and in lots of other countries. A huge international crisis overwhelmed everybody. Yes, they got it wrong. Yes, the regulators were soft, as we can see in certain instances now. However, we could not be accused of being in any way imaginative or reckless. The opposite is true: we are just so fundamentally conservative. We must be brave. I do not want to repeat the point.

Mr Weir talked about welfare reform, as he calls it, and referred to it as the elephant in the room. I would refer to it as the wolf in the room, the wolf that will impoverish and devour sections of our population. We have a duty to protect people. Northern Ireland suffers from greater deprivation than other parts of the UK, so we should protect our own people. What is presented to us as welfare reform should be seen as what it actually is: welfare cuts. I am in favour of welfare reform, as is my party, but we are not in favour of disguising welfare cuts as welfare reform. It is important that we defend the rights of ordinary citizens here, and we must take a reasonable approach to that. We have to tell Westminster that it does not fit in Northern Ireland.

We could talk about lots of things. Colleagues spoke about various aspects of government and the economy. What certainly annoys me about justice and security issues — I despair of this — is the way in which we throw money away on policing marches, flag-waving demonstrations and all the rest. It cost an additional £30 million over the summer and until the end of the year. In my constituency of North Belfast, it has cost £7 million to police the Twaddell camp. Ardoyne — Catholic and Protestant Ardoyne — is an area

of considerable deprivation. If you had used that £7 million to enhance living standards, to improve schools and youth clubs and to assist in the general environment, it would have made a huge difference to people's lives.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Obviously it is not just the real-term costs but the opportunity costs in catching criminals elsewhere who are engaged in various nefarious activities. The Member will be well acquainted with the residents of Harbour Hill. I think that there are some 53 families there, and there is not a single play area for the children of that area. They have to play on a concrete-covered car park. Is that not a travesty in this day and age?

Mr A Maginness: I can only accept what the Member says.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, we are straying a little bit in our conversations during the debate. I gently urge Members to come back towards the Budget Bill that is before us. Thank you.

Mr A Maginness: Certainly, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Again, there are aspects of the Justice budget that I find disturbing. If we take, for example, prison reform, which I fully support, and look at the cost of keeping prisoners here in Northern Ireland, we see that it works out at roughly £78,000 per prisoner per annum. In my view, we have a good programme of reform, but we are not bringing down the cost. In comparison, the costs in Scotland or England are about half that. So, there is work to be done there.

We know about the deafness claims by ex-members of the RUC and the way that those costs were dealt with by the Department of Justice. A total of £135 million was spent to settle claims by 8,000 former officers. Of that, £65 million was for legal fees and medical legal fees and £70 million was for the claims themselves. A plaintiff's solicitor indicated in the media that those costs could have been reduced by half, so we are throwing money away on that.

Again, if we look at legal aid, we see that, although some good work has been done there, one of the main pressures faced by the Department even now is due to legal aid expenditure. It is imperative that access to justice is protected, but value for money also has to be achieved. The cost of legal aid must be brought within the Department's budget. That has to happen, otherwise the impact on other spending areas will be unsustainable. What encouraged me at the last Justice Committee meeting was the indications from officials that there were ongoing discussions with the legal profession and that they were willing and prepared to compromise and to discuss reform of the legal aid system. That reform must be done in a fair and proportionate manner. I am deeply concerned that, if reform were implemented too hard and too fast, it would put many legal firms under intolerable pressure and reduce access to justice and reduce the quality of our justice system, as has happened in Britain. These are areas of reform that must be addressed. I hope and encourage the Department of Justice and the Department of Finance and Personnel to deal with that process, but it must be done in a fair and proportionate manner.

I end by saying that we need a new approach. I do not sense that we have that new approach. I give the new Minister the benefit of the doubt, and I hope that he rises to the occasion and brings us a new, bright and sparkling budgetary process that we can all cheer and jump up and down about.

Mr Copeland: I welcome the opportunity to make a number of uncharacteristically short remarks at this stage of the Budget Bill. I will focus my comments, as one would expect, on the expenditure of the Department for Social Development.

The Finance Minister will, no doubt, be very aware that the Social Development budget was one of the — dare I say it — more interesting ones over the previous 12 months. At over £66 million, the Department has had the highest resource easement from Main to Supplementary Estimates across any of the Departments. Almost £50 million came from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive alone — that is a lot of money. Much of that related to the non-release of money for planned maintenance contracts. I will not say much on that today, apart from noting that, although I am pleased that, seemingly, savings have been made, we should bear it in mind that, while the discussions were going on inside the Department, a large number of glazing firms were experiencing a very difficult time. After being led up the garden path, firms and jobs in those firms were, perhaps unavoidably, exposed to huge risk and uncertainty.

One thing that deeply frustrates me about how DSD spends its money is the attention that it gives to the provision of social housing. Despite endless warnings and reports that Northern Ireland is simply precipitating its social housing problems, the Department seemingly remains as ignorant and ambivalent about the problem as ever it was. I ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel this question: does he —

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way on his last point?

Mr Copeland: I fear that, if I sit down, I will not get back up, but I will try.

Mr A Maginness: The Member referred to the social housing programme. Can the Member indicate why there is such reluctance to be imaginative and robust in developing a programme that will meet the needs of the 40,000 people here who are homeless?

Mr Copeland: I think that the Member, in asking me to give an indication, is perhaps speaking to the Minister. However, you made a remark in your intervention that frequently irks me, and I impart no ill will towards you. It is not 40,000 people: it is 40,000 applications, which could be 150,000 people. Until we start seeing these problems as problems of people and stop seeing them as statistics, the problems will remain unaddressed.

I will get back to my plea to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, although I suspect that he already knows the answer. How can anybody who casually runs their eye over the number of newbuilds and sees how little impact it has on the growing housing lists not realise that we are simply not building enough new homes, as opposed to houses, of the right type in the right places? The co-ownership scheme has had another good year, but, with all due respect to it and the positive role that it plays, it runs the danger of being used by the Department and its Minister in pitiful attempts to underwrite their claim that they are doing enough. Indeed, the co-ownership scheme received another £15 million capital, and we must remember that this came in the year after it also received a big financial boost, this time from a — forgive the word — shameful £8 million underspend in the housing development

programme. That was not a Minister prioritising affordable housing; it was a Minister trying to cover his failures.

Of course, this year, the sheer insolence of the Department was no different. Were targets reviewed? No. Are we building enough houses of the right type? Again, no. Did the Department ever begin to think about changing future plans in order to build the right number of houses in the right places at the right time? Again, no.

6.00 pm

It is a case of a Department holding its hands over its eyes and then, inevitably, expressing its shock and horror when it finds itself in the midst of a housing crisis. For instance, what about the £8·1 million repayment from Helm Housing earlier this year? Why could there not have been an agreement that that capital money could go into the social housing development problem? Was it a mistake? Or was it perhaps a real lack of effort?

Of course, inevitably, that brings me on to welfare reform, referred to as "cuts" by my colleague across the way. The Finance Minister has been saying much on that lately, and, to be fair to him, I concur with much of what he says. However, it is deeply regrettable that we have now seen £15 million set aside to pay for penalties. That is wasted money. It was not £15 million that directly benefited the most vulnerable in society, nor was it £15 million spent wisely. It was £15 million spent while the parties engaged in an exhaustive process of negotiation around the issues.

It is not acceptable that the Welfare Reform Bill is still festering away in the corridors of Stormont Castle. Yes, the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform meets to discuss the issue, seemingly occasionally. We know, however, that the decision to proceed will be taken outside of that, and only when Sinn Féin and the DUP believe that they have clambered towards the necessary deal. My party and I have been pretty open from day one on where we stand. We tabled amendments to the Bill last April, and, I am pleased to see that, at long last, there has been some movement on those. It is the Minister for Social Development who, despite all his previous predictions about doom and gloom, has failed since October 2012 to bring the Bill back to the Assembly. The cause of that delay and subsequent financial penalties, which were mentioned yesterday in the January monitoring round debate, are the responsibility of the Minister, and him alone.

The latest comments from the Finance Minister appear to be erratic. Of course, although they may have made the headlines, the only lasting impact is the possibility that over 1,000 staff are a little more unsure about their jobs. The proposals will most dramatically affect not those in search of unemployment benefit but those low-paid working families — the very people whom we should be supporting. The figure of £1·8 billion is being quoted for a new computer system. Minister, seriously, we have had enough of sensationalist headlines, massaged figures and false warnings. Political maturity is needed if the Bill is to progress to the next stage.

The Estimates demonstrate that the Social Development Minister has, in my view, failed in his responsibilities thus far, but he does not have to carry on like that. I sincerely hope that I will not be standing here in 12 months' time making exactly the same point. The issues are clear to see, and just because they were not tackled in the past year does not mean that they cannot be tackled in the next.

Mr Attwood: I start where Mr Alban Maginness started, by relying on the words of Mr McCallister, when he said that this debate is not about a Budget but about financial management. He is right about that. That is what the character of this debate is.

As Mr Maginness indicated, we should go back to the practice in other jurisdictions of having a full annual Budget process. I have not checked this out recently, but my view is that there is a case, arguably in law, that we are in breach of, I think, the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in failing to have a full annual budgetary process, as is the case in other jurisdictions. I think that our financial planning and budgetary ambition would be better if we were to adopt that approach.

As the Minister returns to the Chamber, which he may live to regret, I acknowledge what Mr Maginness said.

The essential question that Mr Maginness asked of the Minister is a relevant question to ask today, given that this is a light-touch Budget and not a real Budget process. Furthermore, given that this is the Minister's first Budget Bill in his time in office — he will have a couple more before the end of this mandate — and that he is going to be involved in negotiations on all that, never mind on the comprehensive spending review, the question that the Minister has to decide in his own head in the context of this debate and of the direction in which he takes his Department forward is simply this: is he a Sammy, or is he a Swinney? That is the difference between a Minister who knows what it is to be in government and to be in power — John Swinney, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance in Scotland — and one who, although capable, is more about theatre than substance — his predecessor's legacy, in my view.

So, this Minister has to decide whether he is going to be a Sammy or a Swinney. The answer to that question will determine whether he ends up being a thoughtful Minister or a technocrat. What we need is a thoughtful budgetary approach; what we do not need is a technocratic one. If you were to analyse the Minister's speeches and contributions yesterday, you would veer towards the conclusion that the Minister is more technocratic than thoughtful. However, if you were to draw conclusions from the last monitoring returns and the statement that he made to the House on that occasion, you might veer towards the conclusion that he is more thoughtful than technocratic. The jury is out.

Mr Hamilton: Who is on the jury?

Mr Attwood: Pardon?

Mr Hamilton: Who is on the jury?

Mr Attwood: The jury, I hope, is the public. They are the only jury that ultimately count. Everybody else is a servant of the public will and the common good. That is what we all are here, that is what the staff in this Building are, that is what all the staff in government are: servants of the public interest. Therefore, the jury in this case has to, and always must, remain the public.

The question is this: is this Minister a Sammy or a Swinney? In that regard, I want to put to him a number of issues that, in my view, will determine whether he veers towards one or the other, subject to the Minister having

good health and good authority and, of course, Peter Robinson having the good fortune not to be challenged as leader of the DUP.

So, what are the strategic issues through which the Minister can demonstrate that he is more in the image of John Swinney, who is the best Minister on these islands? Even his predecessor indicated to me privately that he had significant admiration for John Swinney's work as Finance Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I urge the Member to come back to the detail of the Bill.

Mr Attwood: Yes, I am very much going to come back to the Budget now. The Minister will be aware that, arising from the St Andrews Agreement, a review of the North/South arrangements is going on. It covers a lot of areas of North/South implementation and cooperation and is meant to scope out where the North/South arrangements go in the future. That is essential to the financial planning on this island, to this Budget period, to future Budget periods and to Budgets North and South for decades to come. So, my first question to the Minister is this: when it comes to issues in this Budget and the future budgetary period, is he going to allow that to be stuck in the mud, as it clearly is at the moment, or is he going to try to shape that in a different way than is currently the case?

This week, it was announced and confirmed that, for the first time ever, economy Ministers from Dublin, Belfast and London are to go on a joint trade mission. So, my questions to the Minister are as follows: does that not give a green light to doing stuff on the island of Ireland when it comes to finance and budgets in Belfast and Dublin? Does that not give a green light that those issues can be managed differently in future? The Minister has to ask himself that question and answer it, I hope, in the affirmative when it comes to the work that he might do on budgets with Michael Noonan in the South and his own office in the North. What might that look like? Should the Minister, as a new Minister who wants, I trust, to aspire to the ambition and character of John Swinney, not now put in place a task force to look at issues of all-Ireland procurement to interrogate the finances and adjust budgets to ensure that, in future, procurement is done in a more joined-up and shared way?

His colleague Mr Ross, whom I will comment on shortly, spoke about the opportunities for shared services. The single biggest opportunity for shared services is on the island of Ireland, not least on health — 40% of the entire budget of the island of Ireland is spent on health. Should he not now set up a task force to interrogate the opportunities for procurement that are all over the Budget Bill and all over Budget Bills North and South into the future? Should he not establish a task force to interrogate what could be done to break free from how things have been done in the past?

Could I ask him this: will he agree to meet the Centre for Cross Border Studies, which, as he is aware, publishes reports every year? In a report that, I think, came out 18 months ago, there were submissions on where the opportunities for all-Ireland procurement might arise. In that way, he could demonstrate that he will not be a hostage to the failure of politics, especially on the Northern side, to shape up and move forward the North/South review that has been stuck in the mud since 2007. It has not been published, implemented or concluded, and, at the time of the last report to the Chamber following the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in November, it was still a matter for discussion between Ministers and their officials. Question number one is this: can the Minister answer in the affirmative whether he is prepared to work on that project to demonstrate that he is different in his approach from his predecessor?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could I ask Members to make sure that everyone links their comments to the Bill and the finance for next year?

Mr Attwood: I must have mentioned the Budget Bill more than anybody in the Chamber so far. I was trying to weave those comments into the debate on Budget legislation.

Mr Ross had a curious exchange with Mr Bradley when he asked him to explain whether, if more fiscal powers were to be devolved to the North, he would increase or reduce taxes and how things would get paid for. When Mr McCallister or Mr Maginness threw the question back to Mr Ross, which was the question that he had asked Mr Bradley, his answer was to hide behind whatever the Executive might decide.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second. That was the answer; that is what Hansard will record. It is not very good debating for a Member to ask another Member a question and then, in his reply, retreat to the cover of an Executive decision that has not yet been taken. I will give way.

Mr Ross: The two powers that I identified as positive things to devolve to the Assembly were corporation tax and APD. We were very clear that we want to reduce them because it would take away economic disadvantage. I asked Mr Bradley whether he envisages us reducing the additional fiscal powers that he wants — not that I want — and reducing the tax burden on people. It is a perfectly reasonable question.

Mr Attwood: That is different. That is an answer that you must have thought up in the past hour because that is not the answer that you gave an hour ago. However, if that is how you think now, I welcome the fact that your thinking is beginning to mature.

6.15 pm

I point out two things. Let us hear what Mr Ross has just said, which was that you would look for opportunities to reduce the tax burden. Let us note that that was what you said. Let us match that with the comments that the Minister of Finance and Personnel made in his contribution yesterday: he said that he saw more opportunities for cuts and cutbacks. I will come back to the words precisely later in my speech. Here we have the party on the far side slashing taxes on the one hand and having more cutbacks on the other. That is the message coming out about the wider politics of the DUP.

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second, absolutely.

To answer the question about what we would do, I refer you to various publications by the SDLP. They are as relevant today as they were three, four or five years ago. The curious thing about the —

Mr Hamilton: Are you going to give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We shall have one Member controlling the Floor at one time.

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second, but I am going to finish the point to your colleague before I deal with the point from you. This is the point: if you look at measures that have been adopted by the Executive or that are now being processed through the Budget review group process, you see that they are piggybacking on proposals that were first put on the table five years ago in 2009. Other things that are actually getting done in changing the profile of public spend in the North were proposed at that time by the SDLP. Let me give you examples.

Mr Hamilton: Will you give way?

Mr Attwood: Let me give you examples: selling selected DRD car parks as attractive investment opportunities was what we proposed in 2009. At a dinner that the Minister was at on Friday, I happened to run into somebody who has knowledge of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) and its work. They confirmed to me that the assets plan concerning potential disposals to maximise income without prejudicing public services has matured. I welcome that, five years after the SDLP said that we should sell selected DRD car parks as attractive investment opportunities, and so on and so forth.

A lot of the things that we proposed have not matured. Why have we not reduced the Executive's three economic policy units to one? We continue to have the bizarre situation in which DFP, DETI and OFMDFM have three economic policy units. You wonder why there is not good economic policy planning in the North when there are three fingers in the pie. As we know, when OFMDFM puts its finger in pies that it is best left out of, things do not work out very well. Look at the legacy so far of the social investment fund.

I give way to the Minister.

Mr Hamilton: The moment has almost passed. I want to take task with the Member; he said that I said yesterday that I wanted to cut. I ask him to look at the Hansard report carefully and point out exactly where I encouraged or suggested that there were opportunities — I think that that was his word — for cuts. When he fails to find me encouraging cuts in yesterday's debate, I hope that he retracts the comments that he has just made.

Mr Attwood: You are quite right to ask me. I will find the reference in my later comments. I confirm —

Mr Hamilton: I would appreciate it if you —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: I confirm that you said that there were a number of areas in which you thought that there were opportunities for further cuts.

Mr Hamilton: Find it precisely now.

Mr Attwood: I will give you the precise reference later in the contribution. If you have just a moment's patience, you will be read the words, and then you —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. All —

Mr Hamilton: You just throw these things out, but you have nothing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Attwood: You will be given the words, and you can eat your words at that time.

Mr Hamilton: We will see.

Mr Attwood: We will see what the record says —

Mr Hamilton: I know exactly what I said.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Attwood: — when I read it into the record shortly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, Members. We shall have one person on the Floor at one time. If a Member wishes to intervene, they should indicate, but it is up to the Member who has the Floor to decide whether they wish to allow that person to make a comment.

Mr Attwood: In that moment's intervention, I found the place. This is what you said, Mr Hamilton, at around 6.30 pm yesterday in the Chamber. You were talking about the Northern Ireland Budget and you said:

> *"There are some areas where there are obvious cuts and reductions that could be made."* — *[Official Report, This Bound Volume, p382, col 2.]*

That is what you said. You made that comment in response to what the SDLP has been warning about over the past two or three years, which is that London is far from finished with what they refer to as their austerity agenda. Indeed, the Chancellor of the Exchequer confirmed recently that he is not even halfway down the road of his austerity agenda.

In response to that issue and what the Chancellor said about another half a billion pounds worth of cuts, you said:

> *"The Barnett consequences of that for Northern Ireland will be around half a billion pounds."* — *[Official Report, This Bound Volume, p382, col 2.]*

The "that" is that we are not even halfway down the road to austerity. In the next paragraph, you said:

> *"There are some areas where there are obvious cuts and reductions that could be made."*

If you want to intervene now I would welcome it.

Mr Hamilton: Do you want to read on to the next sentence, in which I referred to the "ugly scaffolding"? Who used that phrase? Of course, it was the Member's colleague, the former leader of the SDLP. I stand over my view that there are obvious cuts to be made in that ugly scaffolding. However, the inference that the Member made and the way he tied it to Mr Ross's comments was that I thought that there were wholesale cuts to be made across health, education, housing and other areas. I ask him to qualify what he said to the House.

Mr Attwood: I did not try to imply anything. I said that you referred to cuts.

Mr Hamilton: You most certainly did.

Mr Attwood: I did not, and the Hansard report will show that I did not. Let the Hansard —

Mr Hamilton: You do not read all of the Hansard report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Could Members make all remarks through the Chair, please?

Mr Attwood: Let the Hansard record stand and the record stand as: — *[Interruption.]*

"obvious cuts and reductions that can be made."

You then gave one example. There must be other examples because you used the words "obvious cuts and reductions". You cannot undo what you said and, as a consequence, I suggest that you are eating your words.

Let us get back to the substance of the debate. I have put it to the Minister that, in respect of future budgetary proposals, there are opportunities with the stillborn North/South review that could be taken forward generally and particularly by his Department.

For my second question to the Minister on the Budget, I will piggyback on the comments made by my colleague Pat Ramsey about Derry. Given that we do not have a Budget process in the image of what they have in every other jurisdiction in these islands, I believe that it is very important that the new incoming Minister considers, in a strategic way, whether there are strategic opportunities to do things differently. That is the point of the questions that I am putting to him.

Mr Ramsey rightly mentioned the One Plan in Derry, which, if I recall rightly, suggested that there was an opportunity for 7,000 extra students at the University of Ulster site at Magee. I met the chamber of commerce in Derry a couple of weeks ago and its members made a point that is crystal clear, succinct and very relevant to the Budget Bill and the comments about the work of the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Committee for Employment and Learning. The point was that there are now indications coming from INI that it would endorse a subregional strategy.

As everybody knows, the current INI regional strategy means that most of the money goes into a corridor from Queen's University to the Titanic Quarter, and everybody else has to live with the outworkings of that policy. I trust that these were not more meaningless phrases and that there is a solid intention to have a subregional strategy, but when it comes to a subregional strategy for the north-west, the view of the chamber of commerce, which is advocating the expansion of the university site, is that the university is the subregional strategy. Out of the university — and they are talking about 9,200 extra places — you will grow the skills base and when you have the skills base in the north-west, the jobs will follow. The current situation is one in which, as people know, there is a skills deficit in some key sectors in the North.

That is the chamber of commerce's outworking of the One Plan strategy: it will be subregional, with the university at the heart of it, there will be skills because of the graduate pool and, consequently, jobs. For all the wonder of its heritage and year of culture, which will grow and sustain itself over the coming decades, the parallel strategy has to be subregional and based on the university and skills.

The Minister will now have conversations on the year-to-year Budgets that we have before us and will have over the next couple of years, but, arguably, he will also be the central figure in conversations with London on the comprehensive spending review and in preparation for the next mandate. If he is to put his fingerprints all over the budgetary processes, including the one that we are discussing, one measure has to be what Mr Ramsey outlined: the subregional, university and skills strategy of the University of Ulster at Magee in the north-west.

Given the amount of effort that was put into the One Plan, given that it was launched by OFMDFM, me and others and given that it seemed to have unanimous endorsement, will that endorsement now be translated into the Finance Minister recognising what INI may now say is a subregional strategy and its particular character in the north-west? Will he put his shoulder to the wheel and put money on the table to see what happens with the Magee development?

I do not want to put words into the Minister's mouth, and I am sure that he is tempted to jump up and throw the issue of ministerial responsibility at me. I think that he crossed the line with pillar 1 and pillar 2 and the judicial review a couple of weeks ago. However, if he is the Finance Minister who is going to be in the image of Swinney rather than Sammy, one test of that is for him to put his fingerprints, as best he can, on policy that is strategic and requires specific budget lines. So Derry, the One Plan and the development of Magee will be very important.

The Minister came to the Chamber during the monitoring rounds and confirmed that the loan that was being directed to the University of Ulster for the development at Yorkgate was being managed through the Strategic Investment Board. Will he also confirm whether the Government in Northern Ireland are underwriting the loan, as I understand it, that is being drawn down by the University of Ulster to co-fund the university site development at Yorkgate? There is speculation that the Government may be underwriting that wider borrowing from the European Investment Bank (EIB). It would be useful to know whether the Government are underwriting that beyond the channelling of the £25 million. If I am in error, I will withdraw that remark and stand corrected.

In passing, I say to the University of Ulster that it gets close to a breach of faith that it challenged my decision not to grant planning permission for a car park adjacent to the newbuild at Yorkgate. That is relevant, given what happened last week at the Planning Appeals Commission, which overturned that decision. Given my previous role, I am far from happy about the university's approach to that planning decision, although I fully endorse the wider decision about the university moving to the north of the city and the potential for that to be a catalyst in the development of the area and because of other opportunities at the Royal Exchange, the underpass and the Cathedral Quarter.

6.30 pm

My third question to the Minister is on welfare. I know the Minister and, while we may have had a bit of a disagreement earlier, I know that he is thoughtful, because if nothing else, and there is a lot else, he came to this Chamber on behalf of his party arguing for heritage-led development and delivered a heritage-led development fund for DOE. That is very welcome, but I have to say that I was disappointed by the character of his remarks yesterday in respect of the welfare issue. Given his financial responsibility, he has to give best advice to the Executive, to the Assembly and to the wider community

about what he believes the consequences of welfare reform will be. However, it lacks something, Mr Deputy Speaker.

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

In his contributions yesterday, and in other contributions from the DUP today, including that from Mr Weir, everything was about the cost consequences to the Budget if welfare reform is not done in the image of what London is imposing. Very little was said about the damage that will be caused to families, communities and individuals because of what London will impose. There is something lacking, in my view when, on one hand, we are warned if not threatened about the consequences of not doing welfare reform without fully, at the same time, acknowledging what the consequences are going to be for families and individuals.

Mr Weir said earlier that there was:

"a catastrophe ... coming down the road",

He was referring to the conduct of the Treasury. There is a catastrophe coming down the road. It is a catastrophe for those on incapacity benefit, those who will suffer the consequences of the bedroom tax, and so on and so forth.

This time I will not be able to find the reference, because I could not find it before the debate, but yesterday the Finance Minister complimented the Minister for Social Development on the Trojan work, or words to that effect, that he had done in negotiations with the Treasury —

Mr Hamilton: I did not use that word. It definitely was not that one.

Mr Attwood: You did not use that word, but they were words of that character. I will find them and give them to you later. Essentially, you acknowledged the very significant and great contribution — I think that the word might actually have been "great" — that was made by the Social Development Minister.

Now, I differ, because I do not think that there has been much of a negotiation with DWP for months and months. It is my view that DWP has long had the measure of DSD and the DUP when it comes to what they want to do with welfare. My sense is — I am not party to these conversations any more — that for months, and certainly since before the summer, DWP has given not an inch to DSD in what it might have been asked. There may have been some issues on the table beforehand that were useful and technical and that would have an impact on people managing their money, but my sense is that there has not been much coming from DWP for months.

One reason why I say that is that Lord Freud came here to meet the welfare reform subcommittee of the Executive before the summer, and, before the meeting began, he came to me in the corridor and said — these are his words, not mine:

"Alex, it's all over to you"

I asked what he meant by that and he did not give me much of an answer, but he said:

"It's all over to you, and you know what I mean"

as if I was somehow going to deliver the Executive on the welfare reform programme. That suggests to me that, by that stage, DWP was not looking very closely at DSD and the arguments that it was putting up around welfare reform.

I have a point that I would like to put to the Minister about the role that I think he can play in respect of welfare reform. Let us remember that the threats to the Budget in the North were confirmed yesterday by the Finance Minister. The Finance Ministers — this one and the previous one — have been messengers for Treasury when it comes to the threat of welfare.

Why do they not go back to London and say the following? "The IT that you used in the roll-out of universal credit in Britain is not working. You have slowed down the roll-out of universal credit, mostly to beyond the next election. The evidence is that the single biggest impact of the welfare reform piloted to date is on the poorest. While you wave to us this letter of threat about the impact on our Budget, you have moved the goalposts over in England in respect of your IT not working, the slowdown of the roll-out and the impact on the poorest. We want you to withdraw that letter because you have changed how you are delivering it in London, the south-east and other parts of Britain. Take the pressure off Northern Ireland."

Mr Copeland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will.

Mr Copeland: Will the Member join me in describing as astonishing reports that expenditure on the introduction of universal credit by DWP stands at £225,000 per claimant, that being the money invested divided by the number of claimants? Even more astonishing is that £10·5 million was spent by DSD preparing for the introduction of universal credit here in the absence of any legislation being passed in the Chamber.

Mr Attwood: I was not aware of that information, but I accept it at face value. I think that it confirms the point.

Rather than the Executive just saying, "We are going to take our medicine", the politics of this require the Executive to say to London, "Your medicine has not worked over there" — there is no surprise in that — so change the prescription and withdraw the threat."

There is something that I do not understand about the welfare reform negotiation. When it comes to corporation tax, it is the First and deputy First Minister, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Finance Minister who make the argument. When it came to the £275 million secured for the Presbyterian Mutual Society requirement, the argument was made by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister. When it came to the so-called pact that was outlined pre-G8, that was negotiated by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the First and deputy First Minister and the Finance Minister. Yet, when it comes to welfare reform, it is left to DSD.

My question to the Minister is this: if the arguments about corporation tax, the Presbyterian Mutual Society and the economic pact require the attention and work of four Ministers and others to try to get them over the line, is it not time that you did the same in trying to get the welfare reform argument over the line? If DWP has the measure of DSD, is it not time to change the rules of the game by

bringing into the game all the other voices of authority in the Executive rather than just casually saying, "That is the way it is going to be because that is what DWP has told Nelson McCausland"? I put it to the Minister that that is the strategy that should now be deployed. Escalate this around the Executive table rather than certain voices around that table going quiet.

To be fair to Lord Freud, he has forever said that he accepts that there are different circumstances in the North. He has an understanding of this place because he spent time here in other capacities before he became a Minister. He said that he understood that the segregated housing in this city and other parts of Northern Ireland meant that the bedroom tax issue was of a different character here than elsewhere. I do not want to put words into his mouth, but he accepted that the profile of incapacity here, with 120,000 people on incapacity benefit, and the legacy of the conflict in the form of physical and emotional disability made this place different.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. It is also helpful to be aware that, in a number of meetings that the Minister for Social Development and I had with David Freud, he was very clear — I do not have the precise words — that he accepted that the situation here was more grave than elsewhere but not to the extent that we were claiming. I want to make that very clear.

Subsequent to that, he has made precious little of the flexibility that he mentioned, as did Owen Paterson, the then British Secretary of State, when he made public statements that all the exceptions would be granted. They have done precious little of that.

Mr Attwood: The Chair of the Committee is absolutely right. The conclusion that I draw from that is that this is not getting sorted at DSD and DWP level. Anybody who thinks that, if you park it there, it will be sorted is — albeit not deliberately — misleading people and damaging the public interest and those who are on benefits.

I put it the Minister that Lord Freud, although he is wrong on much of his welfare reform, is a man of good intention but cannot deliver. He cannot deliver because Treasury blocks him and he has a dogmatic leader in Iain Duncan Smith. You have to go around them. If you can go around a London Government on corporation tax, the Presbyterian Mutual Society and the economic pact and you move the argument to somewhere else, why are we not doing that when it comes to welfare, other than because we have to roll over because £5 million a month — according to DUP speeches, it will become £1 billion — will be coming from us? The DUP does not even mention those who will be the real victims of welfare reform on the far side of what that party is now threatening? I do not understand any and all of that.

The third question that I want to put to the Minister is —

Mr Hamilton: It is your fourth question.

Mr Attwood: It is the fourth, is it? I got two maths O levels, but it does not show.

Mr Hamilton: That is why I am here.

Mr Attwood: Thank you. It suggests, as Mr Maginness suggested, that you are a bookkeeper rather than a Minister, but I will not draw conclusions. The jury is still out.

Mr A Maginness: The bean counter.

Mr Attwood: The bean counter.

In any case, my third or fourth point concerns Together: Building a United Community. A curious letter has come to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is curious because we actually got a letter from OFMDFM, given that there is all this backlog. The letter refers to T:BUC, so that is now OFMDFM's flagship programme for a shared future. Again, I will put it on the record that, when that was being voted through, a number of Executive Ministers said that it was a start and a moderate proposal with much to be moderate about but, nonetheless, it should be given a fair wind. I presume that the Minister is aware of the letter to the Committee. It talks about shared education opportunities and campuses — the 10 new shared education campuses, which is a great concept and one that is bigger than Lisanelly in Omagh. There are multiple opportunities, and it is arguably the biggest proposal to come out of T:BUC. If we can educate in a more shared way — that may not mean integration, but it does mean sharing — we can all live with the benefits. To live with the benefits, however, you have to have the funding. My question to the Minister is this: how would he respond to what has now been sent by OFMDFM on the shared education campuses?

The letter states:

> *"funding will be critical to delivery of many of our ambitious targets as set out in Together: Building a United Community. Funding will not be all new money. It will be made up of existing resources being targeted and spent differently and by additional funds being bid for in the usual way."*

It adds:

> *"The Department of Education and OFMDFM are considering how the development of campuses and associated funding would sit alongside ongoing/ proposed initiatives. All funding options will be considered."*

Several questions arise from all of that. What is the Minister's view of the statement that the funding will not be all new money? What is his view on resources being targeted and spent differently? What is his understanding of additional funds being bid for in the usual way? Is that just monitoring or is it more? What is his understanding of the statement that all funding options will be considered?

If T:BUC is meant to be the flagship programme, we need to know whether there will be funding to meet the ambition for 10 new shared education campuses, which is arguably the element of the programme with the biggest flagship potential. Is it moving funding away from traditional school models into shared campuses? Is the statement that all funding options will be considered a hint, which we should have the opportunity to interrogate, that some private initiatives are coming our way? Might there be a bit of top-up money from monitoring rounds every quarter going into a project, the scale of which is 10 shared education campuses?

6.45 pm

I am nearly finished now, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will put a couple of points from yesterday's debate to the Minister that he may want to think about. First, further to a question

that one of his colleagues raised about the Education Minister, the Minister said:

> *"I share the Member's frustration that the Education Minister failed to participate in the Executive's process to monitor savings ... plans. That takes away from the Executive's savings delivery plans monitoring process and forces me to present an incomplete picture to the Assembly."*

Then he added:

> *"Transparency in the Executive's finances is vital in engendering confidence among the electorate."*

He concluded:

> *"Non-cooperation in the provision of information, as demonstrated by the Education Minister, damages the Executive as a whole." — [Official Report, This Bound Volume, p380, col 1.]*

Although I think that the Education Minister has fought a very robust case on this, I can say that, when I was a Minister, I complied and agreed with the processes that were being introduced. However, my question is not about the Education Minister; it is this: does the Finance Minister live up to the standards that he articulated yesterday? Those standards mean that the Assembly is not placed in the position of having an incomplete picture, that transparency is vital and that non-cooperation in the provision of information damages the Executive. I ask that because I subsequently asked the Minister about how the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister was being treated. I have brought into the Chamber a list of matters that should be of real concern to the Minister. They are very much about financial issues on which OFMDFM has not shared relevant information with the Committee. In the week that is in it, it includes a request for a timeline on consideration of the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) report on the 2012 flooding, a request for a response to a research paper on EU competitive funding, a request for a timeline for the publication of a consultation on sexual orientation and information on the Department's EU priorities for 2014. All those are outstanding. So, how does the Minister then consider transparency and the flow of information?

Mr G Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Attwood: I will in a second.

How does he consider transparency, non-cooperation and having an incomplete picture? I ask that, given that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which has a lot of finance-related responsibilities, does not have transparency, cooperation and the complete picture. Yet, when the Minister replied to me yesterday, he said that he was not going to get involved in the matter. Now there is a difference. He is an Executive Minister, and he was talking about an Executive colleague. However, why would he not make comment on Executive colleagues who, using the standards against which he judges his fellow Minister, are, in my view, failing to cooperate and to give the complete picture to a Committee?

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Member for giving way. As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I assure the Member that those outstanding issues will be sorted out very shortly. We had meetings today, and I assure you that the matters will be sorted out very shortly.

Mr Attwood: I always welcome good news, if good news is coming, and I see that there has been some speeding up with the correspondence coming to the Committee in this week's papers. I was just asking the Minister to reconcile the standards that he applies to an Executive Minister when dealing with the Executive with his comments — his silence — about the same standards when they are applied to an Executive Minister dealing with the Committee. People should be protective of both Executive and Committee authority, and the Minister should apply the same principles to both rather than avoiding the question.

My questions to the Minister are as follows: are you Sammy, or are you Swinney? Will you be assertive on North/South and on the university in Derry? Will you change the argument on welfare? There are also the other issues that I raised.

Mrs Dobson: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this stage of the Budget Bill. There can be little doubt that some officials may begrudge the debates on the Estimates and the Budget Bill. All I will say is that, with the guarded, backhanded manner in which budgetary decisions are often taken by some Departments, every opportunity for at least some debate on the facts is welcome. Indeed, it is not as if the Assembly is overburdened with legislation. With few exceptions — DRD, for example, which has already introduced and completed a number of Bills — Ministers appear more interested in involving themselves in political games with one another over major Bills rather than legislating for the good of Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, in relation to the debate, I wish to make a number of points on the DARD Estimates and the Budget Bill. Unusually, I have to say that I pay some credit to the Department for appearing to have at least spent most of the money that it was given. That was reflected in the monitoring rounds during the year. How wisely it was spent is entirely another matter. Farmers may take an even harsher line on that issue, but I could not comment.

Too many Departments hand money back, sometimes as a result of mismanaging their budgets. In the June 2013 monitoring round, I was pleased to see the Executive recognise the need for a hardship scheme, which was allocated £4 million. It would be easy to look back at the fairly positive summer and autumn months, weatherwise and pricewise, and forget the horror that so many people in the agri sector were going through last spring. The heaviest snowfall in memory and the ensuing fodder crisis brought many to their knees, so the scheme was welcome news. I visited many farmers affected by the extreme weather conditions and know that for them and their families it was a time that brought many of them to their lowest point. We debated mental health in farming communities in the House last week. I know from my visits to farmers that the hardship scheme eased their financial pressures at that time. We can be in little doubt that the scheme also relieved mental pressures. Of course, like any proposal in DARD, the idea is always better than the actual administration. We all know that there are protocols to follow, but there were totally avoidable delays. I was also disappointed that the Department did not use its full allocation for the scheme as widely or as wisely as it could

have done. Indeed, charging farmers to have their dead animals lifted left a bitter taste in the mouths of many.

A further £3 million was allocated for the land parcel identification system in the same monitoring round. Considering that we are coming up to four years since the new mapping system was announced, it is disheartening that we are still picking up the tab for it. Around that time, the Executive also agreed that they would reallocate much of the capital funding, following the changes to major projects such as the A5 road scheme. DARD got another £19·9 million via that, much of which went to the rural development programme. It was surprising, however, that only £2 million was made available for the then recently announced Going for Growth action plan. I was disappointed at the time, but I did not expect DARD and DETI to go on as poorly as they had started. Both Departments and their Ministers point favourably to the potential for growth in the agrifood sector. However, when they have to put resources up front, they are nowhere to be seen. I call on them to put their money where their mouth is and, when you consider that supporting our economy is meant to be the Executive's number one priority, I fear for other areas of growth that might not be as obvious as our food sector. Until the strategy is supported, it will remain only words on a sheet of paper, nothing more. Is it any wonder that frustration has been growing across the industry over the lack of real commitment to it? I ask the Finance Minister to give his assessment of why DETI and DARD have adopted an apathetic approach to securing funds for it over the last year. It is not as if they bid but did not get any: they often just did not bid at all.

In the October round, DARD received a further £6·3 million resource. The bulk of that — £5 million — went towards TB compensation, and a further £1·6 million went towards the hardship scheme. On the issue of compensation, it deeply frustrates me that, for so long, respective Agriculture Ministers adopted a head-in-the-sand approach. They literally hoped that, by doing nothing, the problem would go away. Unfortunately, other areas of public service have had to pay for that ineptitude — for instance, £5 million in the round.

Of course, compensation only partially covers the cost of a positive TB reading. Farms are closed, businesses are affected and the quality of herds can often be hit, some even decimated. At last, the Department has begun, albeit slowly and rigidly, to consider measures to tackle the reservoir of TB in wildlife. Nevertheless, I am sure that I will be standing here in a year's time talking about the same issue in the reconciliation of the DARD Main Estimates of the 2013-14 spring Supplementary Estimates. Previous intransigence has ensured that the necessity for compensation will carry on.

Most recently, in the January monitoring round, there was a £3 million allocation of resources to DARD. We have been told that that is to address a pressure that arose as a result of the expenditure disallowed under the common agricultural policy. DARD also bid for and received £3·3 million capital for the Northern Ireland rural development programme (NIRDP). This is an opportune point to raise what the Finance Minister no doubt considers a real source of exasperation. I have absolutely no sympathy for him, though; he must recognise that he is jointly to blame.

I know that today and yesterday's debates should be strictly on the Vote on Account and what has been spent, rather than what will be spent in the Estimates. However, Minister, where do you think we will be in a few months' time when presenting the Main Estimates? I bring my remarks to a close by asking the Finance Minister if he believes that it is now inevitable that he will have to make available additional significant allocations to the next rural development programme. Maybe you could use tonight's debate to provide some clarity.

Mrs D Kelly: At this stage of the evening and after two days of debate, one wonders what one could add to the debate. Perhaps I can start on a happy note and wish David McIlveen a very happy birthday today. I am sure that this is not how he planned to spend it, but no doubt the Finance Minister will have a surprise in store for him later on. He might not be quite the Scrooge that others take him for.

As we all know, the Budget is tied to the Programme for Government, which set out to aspire to tackle deprivation and poverty and to build a more inclusive society. It is with regret that I note the failure of the Social Development Minister to build sufficient housing and the fact that he had to return such a large amount of money, as outlined by the Committee Chairman, Mr Maskey, in his contribution yesterday. I hope that the Finance Minister will not take that into account when looking at the resource allocation for social housing in the next financial year. The Social Development Minister tried to explain away his failure by referring to planning and land acquisition difficulties. I accept that they were contributory factors, but we all know that there are high waiting lists in Derry, Strabane, north Belfast and, indeed, my constituency, where land is available. Indeed, to the best of my knowledge, the Department owns 31 sites across rural Northern Ireland.

I am happy to report that, after much lobbying, I have a meeting tomorrow night on the building of six new houses on my patch at Derrymore.

7.00 pm

A business case was presented to the Finance Minister for £10 million for a buy-back scheme. That business case failed because they looked purely at the financial figures that would be lost from the private sector by way of the housing association's contribution to buy-back in areas of high demand. The Minister should acknowledge health inequalities and the association between poor housing and poor health outcomes and take that into consideration when making a judgement against a business case for housing. I think that the Minister will acknowledge that poor housing can indeed lead to poor outcomes for so many people.

I note that many Members acknowledged the recent fall in unemployment, which we are all very happy about. However, what some Members failed to acknowledge was that it represents only 25% of the jobs lost during the recession. So, we can be far from complacent about falling unemployment levels.

As the Minister well knows, many of the jobs that have been created are in the low-paid sector. Indeed, we are now hearing about jobs being offered under zero-hours contracts. These are worrying trends. The SDLP has always stood with the trade unions and acknowledges the work of many people over centuries in fighting for the rights of those who labour. We must be vigilant in seeking

to assert workers' rights and protect the rights that have been hard won over many years.

I trust that the Minister will acknowledge that we are a low-wage economy with a high cost of living. Therefore, when Members talk about welfare reform and put forward very real concerns on behalf of their constituents, they are not talking about those who the Tories in particular would seek to deride as scroungers. We can all acknowledge that many people do not have the opportunity to find employment. The Minister will know that many benefits actually go to the working poor. Those are the people we should protect. Unfortunately, because child benefit and working tax credits are non-devolved matters, some cuts are already kicking in, hitting hard-pressed families who are struggling and trying to do the right thing and be role models for their children and others by trying to pay their way in society.

As my colleague Mr Attwood pointed out, the Executive fought much more strenuously on behalf of the likes of the Presbyterian Mutual Society to seek funding to right a wrong. Surely, we should be trying to right the wrong that the proposed welfare cuts will have on the most vulnerable.

The Executive set themselves a challenge of delivering social change and tackling deprivation. It was with some relief and gratitude that I learned that £1·3 million was to be spent, in part in my constituency, through the social investment fund. Over 50% of that money is still to be spent. I do not think that we got an answer from the First Minister yesterday as to whether that four-year programme will be condensed into a two-year programme. Perhaps the Finance Minister might be better able to answer that question for us.

The unfortunate thing is that, when I sought out the projects that were successful, I discovered that none were in neighbourhood renewal areas, which represent the 10% most deprived wards across Northern Ireland. I will read out some of the projects that have been successful. If the Finance Minister is not able to answer the question, I ask him to challenge those in the Executive who made the decision about how these projects are going to address social deprivation and poverty. They are Gilford community centre; Brownstown campus, Portadown; Richmount Playgroup, Portadown; Happy Days Playgroup, Coalisland; Mount Zion energy project, Lurgan; the Underground project, Lurgan; Silverbridge track and car park; Clogher Orange hall; Corcrain Orange hall; Corcrain shops redevelopment; Banbridge Orange hall; Holy Trinity Church, Banbridge; Pearse Óg Gaelic Football Club's minor works, Armagh; and Dromore Orange hall.

I have to add to Mr Attwood's concerns about the failure of OFMDFM to respond. In a debate earlier today, Mr Bell made much play about the social investment fund being "ground up". Drumcree Community Trust was founded in 1991. One of my former party colleagues, the late Councillor Ignatius Fox, was indeed a founding member. It is a ground-based organisation that manages a community centre and the Mayfair Business Centre, which has several businesses, gives employment and encourages entrepreneurship in a neighbourhood renewal area. It wrote to OFMDFM when the criteria for the social investment fund were announced on 3 December 2012. The closing date for applications was 5 December. The criteria called on all applicants to have full planning applications and feasibility studies completed. However, there was no technical aid for those organisations to do that. For one application to be successful, it could cost around £20,000 to £30,000 — money that they just did not have. I think that pro bono work is all but gone in this recession.

The Drumcree Community Trust raised equality considerations and asked questions about the assessment and eligibility criteria. It got a reply, I believe, by email — a response to say that its letter was acknowledged — on 3 December 2012. It has not heard a word from OFMDFM since. I ask the Finance Minister whether that is the way in which the Executive should set their objectives in, as some people say, building an Ireland of equals and creating a fair society? The fundamental question is this: how have the Executive delivered on their vision to create a more fair and just society that tackles poverty and social deprivation? I think that many people are keeping their heads down because they cannot look me in the eye and say that they have delivered.

I suggest that the Finance Minister gets to grips with what the Budget and the Programme for Government sought to do two years ago. Let us see whether we will build a shared future rather than a shared-out future, which is what the social investment fund seems to have delivered to date.

Mr Hamilton: Unlike some Members, I do not intend to detain the House for long. I was asked what time I might be able to finish. I want to point out that Mr McIlveen and I have our table booked for dinner to celebrate his birthday at 10.00 pm, so I have until around 9.55 pm to detain you.

I thank Members who contributed to the Second Stage debate on the Budget Bill. I acknowledge the Chair's very brief comments at the start of the debate; if only others had followed his example. I place on record my thanks to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for ensuring accelerated passage so that the legislative timetable could be adhered to at this critical and time-bound point of the financial cycle.

Many issues were covered today. Some Members clearly heard my opening remarks about keeping their speeches focused on the Budget Bill. I think that it is safe to say that some Members may have strayed somewhat beyond the specifics of the Bill. I do, however, agree with those who said that it is vital that Members have the opportunity to debate this important legislation. I appreciate the time that Members have given to the Bill, and I will do my best to respond to as many of the issues raised as possible. This is perhaps the lot of the Finance Minister, and it is something that I have learnt very quickly, this being my first Budget process, but I seem to end up answering for everyone else's Department, and I am not asked at all about my Department. I think that it is worth noting that. I was asked latterly by Mr Attwood whether I am a Sammy or a Swinney. It would appear that I am, if nothing else, at least the agony aunt of many Members of the House, if the quantity of problems brought from other Departments are anything to go by.

Let me try in a chronological order — forgive me if I skip about a bit, but I will do my best to tie it together coherently — to address the points that Members raised.

Mr Girvan raised the issue of air passenger duty. I can report that my Department, along with the Department

of Enterprise, is currently undertaking an air connectivity study to consider what more can be done by the Executive to improve our air connectivity. That includes considering air passenger duty and, indeed, non-air-passenger-duty measures. The first stage of that work, which was a scoping study, is now complete. DETI has now procured specialist aviation consultancy support to assist in the completion of the work, and I look forward to seeing the outcome.

In considering any outcome, I think that we as an Assembly need to be mindful, first and foremost, of the cost. That does not preclude me or the Executive from considering the issue. I think that we should give it our careful consideration, and we have committed to doing that. However, we should be mindful of the cost, which was estimated at the outset to be £60 million and rose very quickly to £90 million. We have to balance expending that amount of money at a time when expenditure is under pressure, which is a point that I will come back to again, against the probability that it will not lower air fares and the decision about whether or not lower APD for other bands would include all flights. I think that I have made the point, perhaps to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, in another guise, that there are some flights that it would be nice to be able attract within bands A, B and C and that there are others that, although useful to have, are not as economically beneficial. Attracting a flight from Frankfurt is one thing, but attracting one from Fuerteventura is entirely different. Those are some issues that we will need to consider as we progress the matter.

Mr Bradley, who I am glad to see is still here, raised issues about revenue-raising in the Budget. He has raised that in every single Budget Bill debate since the start of this whole Budget process. The fact that he raises it perhaps means that he has not had a satisfactory answer — or, maybe it is better put, an answer to his satisfaction. To give him some, I hope, positive news, of the £370 million in revenue-raising measures that were built into the Budget for 2011-12 and 2012-13 — so, for years that have been completed to date — the Executive have realised some £369 million. So, we were £1 million shy of what we should have over that period. That is despite, I am sure you would agree, not yet realising value from Belfast port, which I mentioned yesterday, and which we are still trying to make progress on.

The Member should or must realise that the public expenditure environment has changed since the Budget was set in 2011. We have seen constrained resource departmental expenditure limit and increased capital departmental expenditure limit allocations, which we will see increase in the future. In the past, we might have earmarked capital assets for disposal, such as, for example, some of the car parks that Mr Attwood mentioned in his commentary, because that was seen as a good thing to do when we got a capital receipt and capital budgets were under pressure. However, now that that has flipped and changed to a situation where the resource budget is under pressure, it is actually good for the Department for Regional Development to have those revenue-raising assets at its disposal. Some of those car parks are a very good example of that. So, some of the assets that we had wanted to sell and explicitly earmarked to sell should now be retained, as they generate resource income.

Mr Bradley also mentioned, as did, I think, Mr Weir and some others, issues about budgeting, and I will come on to the issues about the process. Our Budget process is a four-yearly one. Certainly, the one that we are in the middle of is a four-yearly one rather than an annual one. Various merits and demerits were put forward for that. I will just point out that, in 2015-16, there will be a one-year Budget, because a one-year Budget and one-year spending round will be coming forward from Treasury. Perhaps we will judge the merits of a one-year Budget process after we have gone through that experience and know whether we want to repeat it annually. My view is that it will not be as easy an experience as Members might think.

7.15 pm

What we do is not massively different from the rest of Great Britain. They have the same CSR framework, but they choose a different process and, in some cases, go for an annual rather than a four-year process. I think that one of the merits of the four-year process is that it allows Departments to plan better, particularly their capital expenditure, and it allows them to see a longer-term picture of what they have at their disposal. Therefore, they can plan much better. Instead of having some uncertainty about whether money will come forward next year or whether there will be a hit to budgets, as there might be, as there will be, as there has been —

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. That would be fine and somewhat logical if we saw the outworking of that. However, over £180 million was not spent by the Education Minister and a further £50 million was not spent by the Social Development Minister. Taking those two Departments alone suggests that there are more reasons behind the underspend than simply allowing for four-year planning.

Mr Hamilton: The Member raised the DSD issue, as did other Members. Some people complain that we have such a rigid and inflexible Budget, which was set back in 2010-11 and takes us up to 2015, that it cannot change. Take the DSD example: the Minister identified reduced requirements and was able to relinquish them early on and have them redistributed to other Departments. That shows that we have a flexible Budget; it is not rigid and it can respond to reduced requirements and pressures.

Yesterday, most of us were in here gripped by the Supply resolutions debate. However, Ed Miliband — I nearly said David Miliband — made a speech yesterday about public sector reform. He made an interesting point when he said that he thought that there was an argument for moving to three- to five-year budgets for certain areas of public expenditure. He was not exactly talking about the overall picture that we are talking about, but it was an interesting commentary on giving people in health or education more certainty than they currently have with the one-year Budget processes that are the norm across the water, particularly in Scotland, which was much lauded by many during the debate. There are aspects of a one-year Budget process that may seem appealing, but on balance, being able to plan better over a four-year period is far better.

Mr Bradley also mentioned DSD's reduced requirements specifically, and I have addressed that. I am disappointed that the money was not spent where it had been earmarked for expenditure at the outset of the Budget, and, obviously, people suffer as a result of that — I accept

and acknowledge that, and it was a point that I made to my colleague the Social Development Minister. However, I would rather that the Minister got better value for money in the contracts, did not waste money and did not spend it unnecessarily so that we have more money to spend in the longer term on other projects that will help the needy and vulnerable and our economy.

There was a bit of toing and froing throughout the debate about the devolution of taxation. Mr Bradley indicated his desire — at least I think that he indicated his desire, but we qualified that a little later — for the devolution of various tax-raising powers to the Executive. However, he was silent on the cost of devolving such powers. It is an important question.

The Executive and I are open to considering the devolution of tax-varying powers where there is a clear economic benefit to Northern Ireland. The devolution of air passenger duty and the efforts to devolve corporation tax are clear examples of that. The economic pact tasked my Department to examine the issue and produce a paper. First and foremost, we remain committed to pursuing corporation tax. I think that it would be a strategic weakness if we were distracted from our number-one objective in tax devolution, which is corporation tax, by talking about other taxes, which, I am sure we would all agree, would have a less significant impact on the local economy.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much for giving way, Minister. During the debate, I said that it would be useful to have a Calman-type review and to look at the various tax-varying powers that are open to us, of which I mentioned a few. I also said that it would be useful to look at the evidence on a cost-benefit basis and then decide which powers we should devolve.

The Minister makes much of the devolution of air passenger duty. That was not a choice made by the Executive; it was forced on the Executive by the fact that an airline was going to stop its transatlantic flight from Belfast International Airport to Newark. Had that not been the case, the duty would not have been devolved.

Mr Hamilton: The Member is right: it was not that the Executive pursued the devolution of air passenger duty. The objective, as he is absolutely right to point out, was to retain that key and critical flight into Newark. The device by which we could retain that was the devolution of APD for long-haul flights. It was not an ideological pursuit of the devolution of that tax and that band of that tax but a measure to secure a wider economic objective. That is the point that I would like to stress.

I have a simple approach to this. I am open to the devolution of more taxes to the Assembly and the Executive but on two broad conditions: one, that they are affordable; and, two, that they bring economic benefit to Northern Ireland. In some cases, the hurdles to overcome will be fairly high, but I think that they are reasonable hurdles for us as an Executive. In the fiscal position that we are in, they are reasonable. I think that affordability and having economic benefit are reasonable tests for us to have.

Mr McKay: Thank you for giving way. Unfortunately, I think that the Minister has been open to APD, for example, for a long, long time. That is what some members of the Committee find particularly frustrating, because, at the moment — this has been publicised in the press — airports in the North are feeling the strain because of distortions in the market on the island. Dublin is clearly well ahead of both airports in Belfast, which are feeling the strain.

Does the Minister agree that we have to take into account issues other than cost? I thought there was a bit of political tennis going on, with the cost of corporation tax on one side and air passenger duty on the other. Of course, cost is a primary factor, but the fact of the matter is that many people in the business community — particularly the airports — want to see the Executive respond to market signals such as those that we see very strongly with APD.

Mr Hamilton: I hope that the Member will accept that significant work has been undertaken by my Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to scope out the issues surrounding the further devolution of APD. I mentioned issues around costs and other things at the minute. I accept that there are issues and that our airports feel that they are in a difficult position. However, I thought it interesting that, when the ROI Government announced their recent elimination of their equivalent of air passenger duty from around €3 to nothing, Belfast City Airport said in a statement that it did not think that that would result in a huge influx of passengers from Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and out of Dublin Airport. I tend to agree with that. I do not think that that reduction would bring about the impact that some people think it would.

Let us not think that the only actors in this play are the Government and, by extension, taxpayers and those who use the services that we provide. The airports are in a position to do things themselves to attract long-haul and short-haul flights. I argue that we have given them the perfect device to attract further long-haul flights by eliminating APD for such flights. That happened over a year ago, and we have yet to have a single additional long-haul route for an airline out of Belfast International Airport. There are questions for the airport to answer about what it has been doing to ensure that more flights are attracted. Of course, they have options, since they are a business. They have commercial things that they can do and levers that they can pull to attract in airlines. Therefore, I do not accept that it is entirely the responsibility of us in government to give away £60 million of taxpayers' money that could be spent on other public services or, indeed, other areas of transportation, when there are things that the airports could and should do as well.

Finally, I am open to further tax devolution, but it must be affordable and of economic benefit to Northern Ireland. I am open to looking at some of the areas that have been considered. One of the reasons why I do not think that we need a highfalutin commission to look at this is that we can benefit from some of the work that Calman, Silk and others have already done elsewhere. I do not think that the issues that they raised in Scotland or Wales would be massively different here or would require us to have our own commission that would report over a long time. I think that we can learn from them, and that is exactly what my Department intends to do with this.

I have raised this with officials and am seeking to address it, but one of the things that is missing is that we do not have the macroeconomic model in place to know what the overall effect will be on the whole Northern Ireland economy if we get this tax and reduce it or increase it. Previously, we were able to design a model for corporation

tax, but that was in isolation and on its own. We need to do likewise for all taxation so that we can see what happens with the economy if we go up and down in various taxes.

Leslie Cree spoke about the savings delivery plans, as, I think, did other Members. I recently provided to the Executive and the Committee for Finance and Personnel my update on the implementation of departmental savings delivery plans as at 30 September 2013. I am encouraged that the majority of Departments have indicated that they are on course to deliver on their savings commitment, with 98·2% of savings expected to be achieved this year and over 99% next year.

The Department of Justice has indicated potential difficulties in the delivery of its savings targets. Those difficulties are due mainly to higher than anticipated costs associated with the Prison Service staff exit scheme. However, I am assured that the scheme will deliver value for money over the longer term. I remain extremely disappointed that the Education Minister has decided not to participate in the savings delivery monitoring process.

Mr Cree also raised issues about the use of financial transactions capital and partnering more closely with the private sector. I very much support that. My statement on January monitoring updated the Assembly on the position on FTC, and the Executive have now allocated £40·9 million in this financial year, with a further allocation of £38 million for the next financial year. Schemes that have benefited to date include the University of Ulster's greater Belfast development scheme, housing schemes and the agrifood loan scheme, as well as loans to GPs and dentists to upgrade their facilities. I agree with the Member that, moving forward, the Executive need to work closely with the private sector to ensure that that funding is used to benefit our economy. I hope that the loan to the University of Ulster is our first major expenditure on FTC on a big capital project that will leverage in lots of other finance and point to the way ahead. I am actively pursuing other projects with Executive colleagues, including the Member's colleague the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Cree also raised issues about consultancy or, more pertinently, the cost of consultancy. I am sure that he will be pleased to hear that I recently cleared for publication the 2012-13 compliance report on external consultancy. It was published on my Department's website on 6 February. The expenditure on the use of external consultants by Departments, their non-departmental public bodies and other arm's-length bodies fell to £7·65 million in 2012-13, a decrease of 18% on the previous year. That represents an overall reduction of 77% since annual reporting was introduced in 2007-08.

Mr Dickson raised some queries about the 2015-16 Budget-setting process. I will shortly bring a paper outlining the 2015-16 process to the Executive for agreement. I am confident that Committees will have sufficient time to engage with Departments on the 2015-16 position. Indeed, I will call on Committees to begin that process as soon as the Executive agree the overall approach. Departments should now begin to identify the pressures and issues that 2015-16 will bring and should already be planning for a more constrained resource position. Early engagement with officials will facilitate Committees' effectiveness in assisting in that 2015-16 Budget process.

Mr Dickson raised other issues, including concerns about capital funding. He asked about better planning for capital funding, citing, I think, the A5 as an example. I agree with him. That is why I created a subgroup under the procurement board, which I chair, to look at that very issue. I think that there are valid criticisms about our management of major capital projects. I have asked it to look at a range of issues, including the scope for greater centralisation and, indeed, the prioritisation of projects. Mr Kinahan used the awful phrase "shovel-ready projects". I hope that it is the last time that I hear that phrase in the House; I might do something with a shovel if I hear it again. If I do not agree with the language that he used, at least I agree with the sentiment that we need a better pipeline of projects ready to go should schemes not move. One that affects his constituency and which we have warmed up, to use a phrase, is the part of the A6 project between Randalstown and Castledawson, which has been given £1 million to take it to various stages should money become available at a later point to let that go. That is an example of what we can do. It is not quite shovel-ready; "procurement-ready" is probably a better phrase. However, at least I understand where the Member was coming from.

7.30 pm

Mr Dickson also raised queries about local government reform, as did some other Members. In February 2013, the Executive agreed a funding package of £47·8 million for local government reform. Over the next two financial years, £13·8 million from the package is available to cover transition elements of the programme. The Executive have also committed up to £4 million to cover the cost of council borrowing in relation to ICT costs and systems convergence for the next two financial years. There is also a further commitment of £30 million for rates convergence following the creation of the 11 new councils in April 2015. Essentially, that will be used to protect ratepayers whose rates bills may have experienced a significant increase as a result of merging with councils with higher rates. I hope to update the House on that in more detail via a statement in the not too distant future. To be clear, I expect local councils to cover any remaining costs of local government because they are expected to make huge savings in the years ahead if they utilise the benefits that come from reorganisation.

Adrian McQuillan made some general points about the economy. He started off by mentioning the USA's Budget. He is right: for all the maligning of our Budget in Northern Ireland and even if our process is boring, which some criticised it for being, I have yet to see us get to the 59th minute of the 11th hour without agreement on spending money. Our Government have yet to close down in Northern Ireland. So when we are lectured by Americans about what we should do in this country, there is sometimes a message and a lesson for them as well. He made a number of key points about the economy. Members acknowledged — some more grudgingly than others — that the economy was moving in the right direction. Even today, we see yet another of our local companies winning contracts around the world in international markets, with HeartSine, which Mr Ross referenced, providing defibrillators to Singapore's defence Ministry. I want to see more local firms competing and winning business in the world market. There has been very positive news on unemployment. It is still too high in many

respects, and youth unemployment is still too high, but, in the past year, the claimant count has come down by more than half a per cent.

Mr McQuillan mentioned Mivan, which is an unfortunate recent victim of the downturn. Even though things are getting better, there will still be many victims, particularly in sectors that have struggled and continue to struggle. However, we welcome the news from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors that the construction sector is, in its view, exiting recession. The Northern Ireland composite economic index showed an increase from September 2012 to September 2013 of 1·2% in our economy. The Ulster Bank PMI yesterday confirmed that all sectors were continuing to grow and that the manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland was growing at a higher rate than anywhere else in the United Kingdom or, indeed, anywhere else that the RBS Group measured.

Mr McQuillan also mentioned rates and domestic and non-domestic revaluation in particular. He asked for an update on the potential for a domestic revaluation for the purpose of calculating rates bills. The Executive have no plans to carry out a domestic capital value revaluation during the current spending review period and the life of the current Assembly. Furthermore, carrying one out would be difficult at the moment, as the evidence required to establish the values is not sufficiently reliable, given the continued volatility in the housing market. However, a non-domestic revaluation, which I know the Member will be aware of, is planned for 2015, and, to reiterate the point that Mr Weir made, it will be as much about managing expectations. There will, of course, be winners and losers, and many will stay more or less the same.

Mr Weir talked extensively about rates. I am proud to have inherited the record on rates that I was bequeathed by my predecessors. We have the lowest household taxes in the United Kingdom. The Member is right to point out that the average household in Northern Ireland pays household taxes that are half the average in England. That good news on rates is not restricted to the domestic sector; it extends into the non-domestic sector. He was right to point out that we are in our seventh year of a freeze in real terms in business rates. I am proud that half of all business in Northern Ireland now get at least a 20% relief on their rates bills and that over £300 million through industrial derating has been kept in the pockets of local manufacturing businesses.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he join me in congratulating Craigavon Borough Council and other councils that have returned a zero-rate increase for the next financial year in their local authorities?

Mr Hamilton: I congratulate any council, particularly councils with large DUP representations — I understand that Craigavon has — that follow the example of other DUP-led councils across Northern Ireland and have done their best to keep the rate low. I hope that the message has finally got down to some in local government. In this place, I think, we all agreed — I cannot remember much dissent around the House — to having zero increases of our own here and then freezing it in real terms in the past number of years. Unfortunately, in many cases, that was not translated into similarly low increases or freezes at local government level. Some councils took advantage of the low level of increase that we had here. Then, of course, the ratepayer did not see any real benefit. I hope that the message has now gone right down to local government level and that we can all prudently and sensibly manage our budgets with the requirement for as low an increase in rates as possible while still, obviously, trying to provide the best services.

Mrs Overend mentioned the small business rate relief scheme and her desire to see it extended beyond its current period, which is due to run out next year. I have commissioned an evaluation of the policy. It was, as Members will recall, a measure that was brought in to specifically deal with the recession. Now that the recession is over, it is right, as we come to the end of the legislative cover for it, that we assess whether the project has worked and where it has or has not worked, whether there are any tweaks and changes that can be made to improve it and whether, in fact, we need it at all. The revaluation will obviously play into the requirement for such a scheme. I very much enter into the evaluation with an open mind about what we do in the future.

Mrs Overend mentioned the agrifood loan scheme.

Mr Attwood: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way on the agrifood loan scheme.

Mr Attwood: Given that the Minister has just said that he believes that the recession is over, does he still stand by his comments in yesterday's debate? He said:

> *"Just because the economy is booming — we will see the British economy ... starting to take off this year, with the Northern Ireland economy following that and doing equally well". — [Official Report, This Bound Volume, p382, col 2.]*

Are you saying that, later this year, to use your words, the Northern Ireland economy will be booming?

Mr Hamilton: It is not for me to say. I look at the facts and report them. Compare where the Northern Ireland economy is now with where it was. The most recent figures for the entirety of the Northern Ireland economy, which were published recently through the composite economic index, show that, from September 2012 to September 2013, which is almost six months ago, the economy in Northern Ireland grew by 1·2%. The estimates coming from others, including PricewaterhouseCoopers, show that, in this year, the economy will grow by close to 2% in Northern Ireland. For me, in comparison with where we were, that is booming. It will lag behind where the United Kingdom economy as a whole is, as is usually the case. However, given where we have been and given the need for sensible, manageable and sustainable growth over the long term, I will settle for close to 2% this year and in future years.

I thought that the Member was going to intervene with a specific question about the agrifood loan scheme, as I had moved onto it, but I thought that that might have been a push for an MLA from West Belfast.

As the Member will know, the scheme is a joint initiative between my Department, DETI, Invest Northern Ireland and a number of local banks. Our cooperation with the banks shows that we are listening to, and acting on, industry concerns and is an example of the Executive working together to support local businesses.

The detailed negotiations with the banks and their advisers on the legal agreements that formed part of the first phase of the scheme have drawn to a close. Although the legal agreements have taken slightly longer to conclude than originally expected, we have taken time to address a number of potential issues up front that may have arisen and delayed the application process. Ultimately, this may lead to a smoother application process for poultry producers than might otherwise have been the case.

Looking to the wider issue of utilising FTC, I hope that Invest Northern Ireland will be able to make greater use of this in its engagements with the private sector.

I now want to address Mr Ramsey's comments and will deal first with his comments about the University of Ulster's campus at Magee College. He and Mr Attwood raised the issue of increasing the number of university places in the north-west. This, of course, is primarily an issue for the Department for Employment and Learning. I understand that, in principle, it is supportive of the University of Ulster's aim to increase undergraduate numbers at Magee College by 1,000, but that must be set against its overall budget and the priorities in that budget.

In 2011, the Executive made funding available for the creation of 700 additional undergraduate places over the period of 2012-13 to 2014-15 and, as a result of their economy and jobs initiative, the Executive met a DEL bid for an additional 500 additional undergraduate places to be funded from 2013-14 to 2015-16. The University of Ulster has stated that all its 652 additional places will go to Magee College, against a target of an additional 1,000 full-time undergraduate places there by 2015.

Mr Ramsey also discussed the strategic framework to address economic inactivity. He asked whether I could enlighten him on any additional funding that could be made available to address economic inactivity, particularly in his area. As he is no doubt aware, the Executive agreed to consult on a draft strategic framework to address economic inactivity late last year and the public consultation process is under way. I understand that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will seek to bring a further draft strategy to the Executive after the period of public consultation ends, perhaps in May or June. At that point, I expect that we will hear whether there are any additional resourcing consequences and what they are.

Mr Ramsey also talked about colleges. I do not think that he was critical of our colleges, but I want to put it on record that I think that they are doing an increasingly exceptional job. Mr Ross mentioned his experience of the South Eastern Regional College, which covers my constituency, and its work with Allen and Overy — I think that that was the firm he cited — and its specific training needs. At probably a lower level, I know of a firm in my constituency that works in the waste management sector, and I was incredibly impressed by the way SERC was able to respond very rapidly to its needs and put a training package in place.

Mr Ramsey also mentioned that our Budget document is years out of date. Although that chimes with the theme that constantly came from that corner of the Chamber, I do not think that it is accurate. Our Budget and the Budget Bill before us reflect changes including additional Treasury allocations and the changes that we have made in the monitoring rounds.

During the debate, Members from the SDLP made repeated calls for more money ad infinitum. If this is an out of date document, then that was all that I heard. I heard calls for more money here and there, for the A5, the A6, the university in the north-west, Narrow Water Bridge, ferry services and so on and so forth. What I did not hear was any reference to any commensurate reductions. It is easy to call for more money. We are all very good at that. It is easy and instinctive, and is so instinctive that it is the sort of behaviour that my children engage in when it gets to Christmas time and they want this, that and the other thing. However, they do not tell Mummy or Daddy where they should get the money from to pay for it.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Mr Attwood: Almost on a point of order; I think that any reference to an adult as a child in the Chamber is inappropriate, and you may want to think about that. If you had not referred to children I would not have done so. *[Interruption.]* It is a relevant matter, because we do not use language like that about you. We may call you a technocrat but we do not call you a child, and you should not visit the same language on anybody else.

7.45 pm

In any case, you are wrong, you are wrong, you are wrong. And the reason that you are wrong is because the SDLP is alone among the parties in the Chamber to have published alternative Budgets. At the heart of those alternative Budgets are proposals to secure other sources of funding, reduce costs and protect services. I named some of them earlier and will not name the rest now, save to say that what we said in 2009 was adopted by your predecessor and the Budget review group, and you have taken it forward.

Mr Hamilton: Perhaps describing the Member as a child was inappropriate given his performance as a lecturing schoolteacher for the past minute or so. "We are looking for innovative proposals" was one of the cries from the SDLP corner today. Its alternative Budget document contained the innovative, revolutionary and, in fact, illegal proposal that we should sell City of Derry Airport, which, of course, we do not own. That was the wonderful piece of SDLP budgeting.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Is it a point of order, or do you want me to give way? I will give way.

Mr Attwood: That is a curious argument about City of Derry Airport. We do not own the harbour, yet part of your Budget strategy is to get money from the harbour.

Mr Hamilton: At least there is value in the harbour.

Mr Attwood: There is also value in the airport, but the point is — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: All remarks must be made through the Chair.

Mr Attwood: The Member's point is contradictory because he says that we cannot sell what we do not own, but we

can get money from what we do not own in the harbour. You and others are failing abysmally to deal with the problem that that presents in money coming back to the state.

Mr Hamilton: We are continuing to attempt to extract value from the port, as the Member knows from his experience on the Executive. I would be interested to know how we extract value from City of Derry Airport, which, to my knowledge — I stand to be corrected — has never posted a profit, unlike Belfast harbour, which continues to post a profit. Perhaps there are other ways in which we could get value from that site, but ultimately we do not own it to extract value in those ways.

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If I can just intervene again. We have had the debate, and the Minister is responding. At this time of the evening, I certainly have no intention of allowing the debate to be reopened. Members had their opportunity to make their points. If the Minister would continue to respond to the debate, it would help us all.

Mr Hamilton: Thank you. I will take your direction, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The Minister gave way, so I think that I am entitled to ask the question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will not take that as a challenge to the Speaker. I think that he did respond.

Mr Attwood: It is only a point. Are you not going to give way?

Mr Hamilton: I was given a direction by the Chair to move on, so I will respect him and not challenge him as others might.

Mr Ramsey put forward the A5 versus the A6 argument. I acknowledge that both are hugely important infrastructure schemes not just for the north-west but for the whole of Northern Ireland. However, they are also hugely expensive. As the Member, and indeed the House, will know, there is still a commitment to the A5, which means that we cannot commit fully to the A6.

Mrs McKevitt mentioned the Narrow Water bridge project and criticised me and my Department for not being creative enough and showing enough tolerance. Mr Wells, in an intervention, succinctly highlighted the problem with the Narrow Water bridge project, which was a huge cost overrun. My Department brought forward over £3 million in funding, which unlocked a huge amount of European funding, was creative and showed tolerance. The reference to tolerance was perhaps about the letter of offer being rescinded. As the Member knows, that is a matter for the SEUPB as the managing authority for that fund. Although regrettable, it rightly withdrew the letter of offer. Lots of people were talking, but there was no hard cash on the table. I think that it took the right decision to withdraw that letter of offer so that we might employ that money elsewhere. Indeed, I look forward to announcements in the not too distant future about other projects on which that money might be wisely spent.

Mr McCallister spoke extensively about the Budget process in Scotland, so much so that I thought that he was going to move there. I thought that he was going to leave. I am due in Scotland next week: perhaps he could stow away in my luggage and we could leave him there. I wonder how long it would be until he was missed. We will not go there.

The Member raised the issue of producing an annual Budget. I hope that I have addressed some of those points, in that I think that, while there may be an attraction to annual Budgets, some might say that there are other downsides, not least in the system that we have. Members who raised issues with that may have short memories.

When we set our Budget in 2011, we set it for four years, and we were lauded for that in other parts of these islands. Scotland was unable to agree a four-year Budget, even though, I think, there was an attempt to do so. It has an annual Budget simply because it could not deliver what this Executive delivered, which was a settled Budget position that provided certainty in the medium term. However, we have adjusted that Budget when necessary, and routinely update it three times a year through the monitoring rounds. I do not think that the Member or any other Members give us enough credit for that.

He went on to ask whether our Budget process was fit for purpose to accommodate corporation tax. We will have to deal with a lot of issues if and when the Prime Minister makes a — hopefully, positive — decision about corporation tax. However, I think that there is a failure to grasp the key issue here. The key point is that we need a mechanism to manage the volatility of corporation tax, and that is not anything to do with the general Budget process.

Before moving off that subject, while the Member lauds and applauds Scotland, it has one advantage over our Executive in that it is a one-party Government. I think that it would be immeasurably easier for me or whoever was Finance Minister to agree annual Budgets in a one-party Government than it is in our system of a five-party mandatory coalition.

Mr McCallister and others mentioned the review of the financial process. He raised concerns over the lack of progress on the review and unfortunately sought to place the blame with me rather than with the Education Minister. I assure the Member that my predecessor made every effort to progress these much-needed reforms but was met with significant resistance from the Education Minister. I am happy, as I mentioned yesterday, to engage again with the Education Minister in order to progress the review, but given the size of the Education budget and the need to get legislation to underpin the review, I need broader Executive agreement.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, and for his response and his recognition of the volatility around corporation tax. Accepting that he is in a five-party coalition, how does he expect to get some Ministers on this Executive to agree with him on devolving corporation tax while still blocking the necessary reforms to the scrutiny process that he and this Assembly would like to bring forward? Surely the Minister will not want that to be the one blockage that Treasury puts in place, while almost hoping for a successful decision on this?

Mr Hamilton: I do not think that that is a relevant issue. It is certainly not something that has ever been raised with me. I cannot speak for my predecessor, but I am sure that it was never raised with him as a reason not to devolve corporation tax. I suppose that, as far as Treasury is concerned, our Budget process is perfectly fine, given

that it is the process that direct rule Ministers operated for many years in Northern Ireland. It is content with our process as it is, and obviously if we change it, then everybody will have to buy into it because we will need legislation to underpin it.

I accept that dealing with the reductions in public spending that will come with devolving corporation tax will be a huge challenge, but I seek solace and hope about that difficult conversation that will happen around the Executive table in the fact that everyone around that table is supportive of devolving corporation tax. While they are, on the one hand, supportive of the many positives that would come from devolving corporation tax, not least attracting additional foreign direct investment, increasing jobs and encouraging indigenous firms to grow, they are also mindful that there is a price to pay and that that price will have to be taken from public spending.

Mrs Kelly raised the successful court action that I took against the Agriculture Minister over her decision not to consult the Executive on the transfer of funds from the single farm payment to the rural development programme. I would have preferred the Executive themselves to agree the Northern Ireland position on this important issue. Unfortunately, court action was the only method available, within the time frame, to set aside a decision that I believe should have been taken by the Executive. The court obviously agreed with me on that.

I am not surprised that the SDLP criticises that, given that it was as much a defence of the constitutional changes enshrined in the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act as anything else. I know that the SDLP was happy for Ministers to do whatever they wanted in their Department and treat it like a personal fiefdom. The DUP did not believe that that was right or should be the case. That is why we negotiated those changes in the St Andrews Agreement. I am glad that the court upheld the changes that were made in legislation.

Alastair Ross talked about the better economic picture, which is right. The facts show that there is a better economic picture. That is not to underplay the problems that still exist in the economy. We still have a long way to go, but we are starting to see our economy take off. After five or six years of nothing but doom and gloom, which I am sure satisfied some in the House, we are starting to see positive news about the Northern Ireland economy.

He was right to point out how good we are at attracting foreign direct investment. He mentioned some of the brand names — HBO, the New York Stock Exchange, the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, Citi, Fujitsu and others — which, a number of years ago, would not have entertained the notion of investing in Northern Ireland. He was right to point out that we often understate the good things that are done in the Northern Ireland economy. A number of weeks ago, I was in B/E Aerospace and I was impressed, not just by what it does and the customers that it serves but by the fact that it is producing around 30% of all of the world's aircraft seats in Kilkeel in County Down.

He was, however, also right to point out that, although our economy is moving in a positive direction, the world economy is growing and the UK economy as a whole is improving, that will not necessarily — in the short term, it absolutely will not — lead to any increase in public spending. That is why I have prioritised reform on my agenda as Minister.

The economic importance of reforming our public sector is sometimes misunderstood. However, I have noticed, and I think it worth exploring, that states with dynamic, innovative and export-orientated economies — the likes of Singapore, where our colleague the Minister of Enterprise is this week — also have dynamic and innovative Governments. It is no coincidence that reform-orientated Governments also have very dynamic and innovative economies.

He asked for an update on the work of the public sector reform division, the establishment of which was one of the first things that I announced in post. Work is ongoing, principally on creating what I describe as the architecture of reform, namely developing a strategy and a vision; reviewing what we do already on reform; and pointing out where improvements could be made. It is also about new innovations such as creating government policy laboratories, which are schemes that will involve staff producing and developing ideas. I am a great believer that front line staff probably have the best ideas about reforming our public sector and, as you might expect from a DFP perspective, in using funds and financial incentives to encourage and embed reform right across the public sector.

My colleague Ian McCrea raised the topic of the Magherafelt and Cookstown bypasses. He rightly acknowledged that, in an announcement, £15 million was allocated to the development of the Magherafelt bypass project to allow construction work to commence in 2014-15. He mentioned other projects including a Cookstown bypass.

Members will be aware of the slippage of the A5 project. I have said previously that we need to be careful not to commit contractually to other large road projects until we have certainty about the A5 situation. The Executive have an excellent track record of investment in our roads infrastructure, both in maintenance of the existing roads and new schemes. If the Minister for Regional Development has proposals for any other schemes, such as the Cookstown bypass that the Member mentioned, those can be considered as part of future monitoring rounds or Budget processes.

Karen McKevitt, as well as raising the issue of the Narrow Water bridge, which I have addressed, talked about arts and cultural space for Newry. She implored me to find the money to invest in that — another request for money.

I have to say that I am a big supporter of investing in arts and culture, not because of arts and culture per se but because of their economic impact. I am also a fan of the Newry area. I was in Newry a week and a half ago at a lunch organised by its chamber of commerce at which quite a few other priorities were put to me to finance. Mrs McKevitt mentioned libraries as well, and I am very open to discussions with Executive colleagues about their priorities for future capital investment, given the improving capital position.

8.00 pm

Mr Elliott raised several issues, one of which he described as "equal pay". I am slightly frustrated, in that I addressed this issue yesterday in the House. I appreciate that perhaps the Member was not present; indeed, he is not here now either. It is frustrating to deal with issues one day and then have to reopen them the next day as if they

are brand new. Mr Elliott asked whether the money for equal pay was ring-fenced. As far as I am concerned, as I pointed out yesterday and as I pointed out in response to a question from Mr Givan — I think that I have a question for oral answer about it next week — there is no equal pay issue. The matter was established in the courts, and those to whom Mr Elliott referred are not, to use his phrase, "duly entitled". However, I think that there is a moral argument for re-examining the issue, and that is why I took the step early in my tenure of doing that. The latest position, which I updated the House on yesterday, is that, following discussions with the Minister of Justice, his Department and mine are examining how the issue can be resolved and some recognition given. Of course, although the Minister of Justice and I might come to an agreement, we will definitely require Executive support and some finance.

Mr Elliott mentioned the Prison Service exit scheme. Although it has taken some time to get the full benefit from it and some outstanding cases remain, I am supportive of the scheme because it is a genuine reform-orientated bid for funds. Headroom has been built into the budget to allow for expenditure on the scheme, should money become available through reduced requirements between now and year end.

The Member mentioned the police budget, which, again, was something that I addressed yesterday in response to Mr Givan. Having listened to the Minister of Justice and the Chief Constable talk about the pressures that their budgets are under, I have agreed to meet them to discuss pressures that they may face in future years and opportunities that may exist to realise further efficiencies.

Mr Elliott also talked about RPA and his disbelief about the savings. I think that it stands to reason that savings will be made through RPA. Of course, it requires councils to seize the opportunities that reorganisation and reform present, and one such area is the use of shared services. I have extended an invitation to local government to discuss shared services, and my departmental officials have followed up on that. I hope that the expertise and experience that we have developed in the Department of Finance and Personnel in delivering an extensive and effective shared services programme can benefit local government in Northern Ireland and realise some of those savings.

Mr Maginness criticised the lack of excitement in the debate, and I am not sure whether my contribution has helped or hindered. I take on board several points that he raised and will try to address at least a few of them. I do not think that it is fair to say that we slavishly follow what happens in Westminster. While Mr Maginness was speaking, I noted down three examples in the Department of Finance and Personnel alone where we have not slavishly followed what has happened in Westminster. Rather, we have been innovative and creative and have used the benefits of devolution to do our own thing to suit the circumstances in Northern Ireland as and when they arise. I cannot speak for the other Ministers, but I am sure that, if they were here, they could think of two, three or, I hope, more examples in their Department of where they have stepped outside the norm and not taken the orthodox London view as the only way to move forward.

The first example of the three that I can think of is procurement. We are the first part of the United Kingdom to introduce project bank accounts to deal with the problem of money not going to subcontractors in large procurements. That is something on which we have innovated in Northern Ireland, with others looking on closely with a view to following. Therefore, we are actually leading and innovating. The second example is that, last week, I was with representatives of the electrical contracting industry in Northern Ireland who had devised a proposal for a licence-to-practise scheme called SparkSafe. I was very enthusiastic about that, and officials in CPD have engaged with representatives of the industry and have brought forward a pilot scheme, which has been in operation from the start of this month and will run for the next six months. I hope that it will be so successful that we will be able to embed it in Northern Ireland. That, again, is something that we are leading the way in. Nobody else has seen fit to embed those high standards in public sector contracts and use the public sector to raise standards overall in the construction industry. The final example is empty premises relief. I am sure that the Member will remember that, a few years ago, in response to increasing vacancies on our high streets and in our town centres, my colleague came forward with the policy of extending the 50% rates relief that there was for empty properties into the first year of occupation for new businesses. We have seen close to 200 businesses now open as a result of that, employing hundreds of people across Northern Ireland. Although I would never accept that a couple of hundred additional shops has solved the problems of vacancies in town centres and high streets, it has, at least, gone some way, and some areas have benefited substantially from it. That is a policy that, first, Wales and, then, Scotland copied, and then the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an identical scheme in the autumn statement back in December. So, there are three examples of where we do not slavishly follow what happens in Westminster but lead the way for the whole of the United Kingdom. We can be innovative and creative as well as anyone else can.

The Member talked extensively about taking risks, and he is absolutely right. I talk about reform and dealing with the problems of reducing public spending in the years ahead, and I think that there are lots of impediments to reform. One of them is the culture of not being innovative in the public sector, and we can correct that in part through creating an architecture. However, one thing that we cannot build around is that issue of risk. That will take all of us to have a change of our own culture and our own mindset. We have all done this to some extent — some of us more than others, I have to say. Some of the Member's party colleagues have been exceptionally guilty of not seeing that taking risks, as, he rightly said, we should do, means that, to an extent, we are permitting failure. I do not think that there is an understanding of that among some. I will not name Members, but there are Members who seem to think that "risk" is a bad word and that we should not take risks. They think that every single thing about a project should be locked down, that there should be no risk and that there should be no danger of anything going wrong. That just does not happen in real life. I know that a higher standard should be employed to the expenditure of the public pound than of any other pound, but risks are inherent in anything that we do. Things go wrong from time to time, and, if we get things seriously wrong and criticism is valid, we are right to criticise government, but, where we take risks in trying to do something innovative and creative that could perhaps have reaped a higher dividend than it did, I do not think that we should be criticised as roundly

as we sometimes are. I hope that, as we try to de-risk in the public sector, he will stand with me and encourage risk and innovation, not to the extent that we are frivolous or reckless, and permit some degree of failure in the public sector as well.

He and other Members encouraged me to look at others, and, since taking office, I have looked at the apparent Utopia that is Scotland. I have been in Wales and have examined things that they have done there. I have even been down South. Why do I say that I have "even been down South" to look at the Republic of Ireland? I have done that. I have gone to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in Paris. I have spoken to the European Commission, and I have been to Denmark and Estonia, looking at best practice around Europe. That makes me sound a bit like a Judith Chalmers-type character going around Europe, but I am happy to go anywhere and speak to anybody about doing things better because we do not have a monopoly on wisdom in this part of the world. One of the reasons why we can laud some of the things that Scotland is doing — apart from the fact that it has a one-party Government, which kind of helps — is that it has been at this for a lot longer than we have. I think that Scotland has a better grip and a better sense of what devolution is about than perhaps we have, and we have not entirely realised the full potential of devolution yet. I am more than happy to go to Scotland, and, in fact, I am scheduled to be there next Wednesday. I will go anywhere to learn from what others do.

Just as I am happy to learn, I am happy to share with others some of the things that we do well. As I said before, we have one of the best systems of shared services in this part of the world, if not indeed the whole world, and, when I talk to my counterparts south of the border, they are clear that they accept that they are not as advanced as we are. There are things that they can learn from us, every bit as much as we can learn from others. I am not closed to going anywhere or to talking to anybody about things that will improve the lives of citizens in Northern Ireland.

Mr Copeland talked about social housing. He was asked by Mr Maginness about imaginative solutions, and one such solution could be the proposed reform of the Housing Executive. It would, of course, result in a radical change in its structure to realise value from its £3 billion worth of assets. I hope that Mr Maginness is equally innovative and encouraging when the Minister comes forward with his proposals for reform of the Housing Executive.

Mr Copeland referred to Co-ownership and used words like "shameful" and "pitiful". Although those words were not used directly to describe the scheme itself, I do not think that they can be applied to Co-ownership. We have doubled the budget and put more than £25 million worth of funding annually into Co-ownership. We have seen 500 affordable homes bought by people who needed them and have saved those people, in the process, a significant amount of money in what they were paying for private rental. That is a good and positive thing that should be welcomed.

I turn to Mr Attwood's series of questions. I am sorry that I missed the start of Mr Attwood's speech. It was a big mistake by me; I should have missed it all. *[Laughter.]* However, when I was outside the Chamber — I unfortunately had to leave momentarily — one of Mr Attwood's colleagues accosted me in the corridor and asked whether I was running away before Alex's speech. I am not going to name and shame that Member, but it is worth noting that that Member has not returned to the Chamber to hear her party colleague speaking. *[Laughter.]* Mr Attwood asked me a series of questions. I am sure that, no matter what I say, my answers will not be exactly to his satisfaction, but I will do my best to address them. He asked me about North/South cooperation. I just briefly mentioned being open. I do not think that we should be narrow about North/South or even east-west cooperation. We should see Northern Ireland in its rightful place as a part of Europe and of the world and look to examples all around the world. I am happy to work with and learn from anyone to improve this place; that is what anybody in my position should do. I hope that I have been clear in the past and that I can be clear in the future that I take a practical approach to the issue of North/South cooperation. I welcome the joint trade mission that my colleague Arlene Foster is on this week. I hope that it brings benefits to our economy primarily, but I will not begrudge anyone else on the trip the benefits from the joint trade mission.

Probably the area where I, as a Minister with the responsibility that I have, can perhaps have best cooperation with the Irish Republic is on reform. At the risk of sounding like a stuck record, it is an area that I am passionate about and that Brendan Howlin, my counterpart in the South who has responsibility for this area, is equally passionate about. He and I have already had some very productive discussions — I hope to follow those up — about how we can learn from each other in respect of reform. There are many areas where we are further advanced than they are in reform. I think that some of the reforms that they have brought in are less about reforming government and more about dealing with the budget crisis that they have faced over the last number of years. So I think that, in some ways, we are further advanced, and I am more than happy to work with him on whatever basis to develop that relationship. I have a positive relationship with my colleague Michael Noonan, principally on the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) and banking issues. I have regular conversations with him about those matters.

The Member mentioned procurement as one example of where we could have better cross-border cooperation. Let me add a note of caution. At the risk of being called a technocrat again or, worse, a child, I think that there are risks in going bigger. This is one of the tensions that we have over procurement when we have debates in the House. If you were to go for a bigger volume of tendering — the Member suggests an all-Ireland basis — that might equate to better value for money, which, in some ways, as a Finance Minister, I am happy to see, but it puts pressure on in letting contracts go to small and medium-sized enterprises, which is not, of course, something that we can distort our procurement system to favour, but we have been able to protect that sector successfully, in my view, in Northern Ireland.

I think one of the reasons why we have such a comparatively high volume of SMEs tendering for and getting work in Northern Ireland is that, although some of the tenders are big in a Northern Ireland context, they are small in a European context and do not elicit the interest of some of the larger firms. If we wanted to get bigger procurement tenders put forward, we could all just work within the UK's procurement framework and then we

would receive even bigger benefits than we would on an all-Ireland basis.

8.15 pm

The second question was about the One Plan and the university for Derry. That is an issue primarily for other Ministers, but I am happy to have conversations with other Ministers to help them to develop the detail. He mentioned the University of Ulster. I think the use of financial transactions capital for the University of Ulster is an innovative thing for us to do.

The Member mentioned £25 million. It was actually a £35 million loan of £25 million last year and £10 million this year. That loan is in addition to the proposed European Investment Bank loan, which is not actually finalised yet. We are not underwriting its loan in any way. I have had conversations with the European Investment Bank about that project and, although it did not require us to underpin any of its loans, it did make it clear that government support exhibited by the Assembly and Executive would assist in unlocking the EIB support. That is something that I have been personally involved in and I hope that we see positive progress in the not-too-distant future.

He mentioned welfare reform, which was a constant theme through most speeches, so I want to come to it towards the end. It was his view that DWP had the measure of DSD. Without wishing to speak for the Minister for Social Development, I think it is fair to say that he is trying to make devolution work. He is trying to wring as many concessions as he possibly can and get ameliorative measures in place to dampen down the worst impact of welfare reform. I think those that are already publicly known will be greatly beneficial to people in Northern Ireland and those that are not in the public domain will be even more beneficial to the people in Northern Ireland.

Although I do not agree that DWP has the measure of DSD, it does still have a large measure of control in the process. He alluded to it himself. An even greater control is exuded by Her Majesty's Treasury, not least in the huge subvention that it gives us to pay the welfare bill in Northern Ireland, as well as the IT support that it provides. He asked what my involvement in the process was. Although I am not directly negotiating with the Department for Work and Pensions, I regularly meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury — I am due to meet him next week — and he makes the large measure of control that they exhibit perfectly clear. That is why he wrote to my predecessor and said that he would dock our Budget by £5 million per month from last month.

My view is that the flexibilities that we already have in place are the envy of our Scots and Welsh counterparts. I know that from speaking to them and listening to them. For all of the lauding of the Scots today, they have not achieved anywhere near what we have in welfare reform. I suggest that they will go absolutely spare when they find out what other measures the Minister for Social Development has negotiated. We have pushed them far, but I recognise what Mr Attwood mentioned about the ideological approach of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Minister for Work and Pensions. The distance that we have pushed them is, in the face of an ideological approach to welfare reform, pretty impressive on the part of the Minister for Social Development. I do not believe that there is much more that the Minister for Social Development can do, but what we have is more than we might have expected.

The Member's fourth and final question — it seemed like more than four, but I think there were only four — was around funding for Together: Building a United Community, or T:BUC, as it is now affectionately known. Forgive me if I picked some of it up wrong, because he talked quite rapidly, but he talked about redirecting existing resources and targeting resources differently in funding T:BUC. I think he was talking specifically about the funding of shared school campuses. I will come on to the general principle of redirecting and targeting resources differently in a second, but our capital position, as the Member will be aware, is improving. We can see that we will be in a better capital position in 2015-16, and we expect to see that beyond 2016-17 and the next spending round. He will be familiar, too, with the success in the negotiations on the economic pact, where the First Minister and deputy First Minister brought back the power to borrow a further £100 million for their RRI initiative as long as it was targeted towards shared housing and shared education projects. So there is an improving capital position and, through the facility that we have in RRI, the ability to fund a substantial number of shared education campuses.

In a tone that would almost suggest that this is a bad thing and is something that we should not do, the Member discussed the broad principle of redirecting existing resources and targeting resources differently. I am all for redirecting existing resources and targeting resources differently, if the places to which we have targeted them previously have not worked or produced outcomes. It is a challenge to all Ministers that we carefully consider what we are already spending our money on. I heard it said a lot today, as I am sure happens in every Budget debate, that Members want more money spent here, there and everywhere. However, sometimes the answer to the question of where we get the money from is where we are already spending money. I do not think that our job is to continue to fund projects that have not worked; it is to fund projects that do work so that we can achieve the objectives and outcomes that we all share and want to have in Northern Ireland.

Jo-Anne Dobson asked me several questions and then left immediately afterwards, so I hope that she will pick up the answers from the Hansard report. She began by criticising the Executive for inaction and then welcomed their decision to offer £4 million in hardship funding for farmers who were adversely affected by the bad weather last spring. So I am not sure whether we got good marks or bad marks for that. She talked sensibly about the Going for Growth plan, which is something that I am supportive of. The latest updated position on that is that DETI and DARD will respond on the report to the Executive for our consideration. It is already on public record that I will not be found wanting in respect of good bids that are made to capitalise on the growth potential in the agrifood sector. However, the resourcing of the strategy will be very much an issue for the Budget process moving forward. She then curiously expressed the view that she had no sympathy with me for various failings in not funding this, that or the other. She said that I am jointly to blame because I am part of the Executive. I will point this out to Mrs Dobson: so is Danny Kennedy.

Mrs Kelly, in her actual contribution rather than her intervention, talked about the social housing development programme and was critical of what the Social Development Minister has been doing. However, the Budget contains £83·9 million for 1,275 new and affordable homes. I will point out to Mrs Kelly that DSD is reporting that it is still on target to exceed the PFG target of 8,000 new and affordable homes. She acknowledged the good news that there has been on employment, but she was right to point out that there is still more to do. Our unemployment rate has fallen for 11 consecutive months, but it remains too high, and we have underlying problems with youth unemployment. I think that she and others should, and do, acknowledge that progress is being made economically.

Mrs Kelly also made some comments about SIF funding. Unfortunately, given the lateness of her contribution, I have not had time to respond fully to it. If there are any issues that I miss out, I am sure that I can come back to her. I think that there was a glimpse of gratitude for the release of SIF funding that the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced yesterday. I may have picked her up wrong, but I think that she asked me to justify how the very long list of schemes that she read out would benefit people. I have to say that some of the projects that she named sounded very positive to me. She complained that they are not located in neighbourhood renewal areas. However, I think that there is a valid point to be made that people who are deprived and live in neighbourhood renewal areas do not always have to use facilities that are located in deprived areas. She concluded with her customary criticism of the Executive and what they are doing and not doing. Like Mrs Dobson, I remind Mrs Kelly that her party is, of course, represented on the Executive.

Before I conclude, I want to touch on a theme that I touched on yesterday and that has been constant throughout today's proceedings. It was raised by Mr Girvan, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mr Weir, Mr Attwood, Mrs Kelly and various others in different ways.

A number of Members have, once again, expressed concern about the impact on our public services of further delays to the Welfare Reform Bill. As I have detailed to the Assembly, the penalties next year are forecast at £105 million and will increase to over £300 million by 2018-19. That will require substantial cuts to departmental budgets and will have a significant detrimental impact on public services, all at a time when public spending is falling and we are, as Members highlighted, still pursuing the devolution of corporation tax.

I am also extremely concerned about the potential impact on claimants when we reach the point in the not-too-distant future of being unable to process payments to hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable because we can no longer use the Department for Work and Pensions IT systems. I have also referred to the potential loss of over 1,400 jobs at local service centres in Belfast and Lisahally in Londonderry, which causes me grave concern. Stewart Dickson referred to the need to work constructively to get the Bill agreed. The Minister for Social Development and I have been doing that, and I just wish that others would do the same.

I take exception — great exception, in fact — to Mr Copeland's comment that it was the DUP that was delaying welfare reform. The Member well knows or should well know that the delay is being caused not by the DUP but by other parties represented in the Executive. I think that that much is pretty clear; it should, at least, have been pretty clear in the past 24 hours. I see the Member nodding in agreement. Perhaps he will reflect on his earlier comments. If he is prepared to accept that Nelson McCausland has been fighting for concessions and has not been holding up progress, I may refrain from reminding him that his party was once allied to the Tories, whose reforms these are.

Mr Maskey was almost ever-present in the debate, although he did not make a contribution. I was half expecting him to do so. Today, he has accused me of employing scare tactics about welfare reform. I assure him that I am not employing scare tactics, although I agree that the figures are scary and will be scary for many people. It is a matter for the party opposite and, indeed, others to justify —

Mr Maskey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Hamilton: I will give way, yes.

Mr Maskey: Does the Minister not accept, when I refer to his use of scare tactics, that, when he suggests that, if there is no welfare reform by 2016, the whole system will grind to a halt and it will us cost £1 billion for non-implementation, all of that is silly? I said that I accepted that you were a man of some intelligence and that that made it even more disappointing that you had adopted the approach that you had. I made my position very clear and do so again on behalf of my party tonight: I believe and am confident that we can secure greater changes to the Welfare Reform Bill, if your party and the rest of us knuckle down and talk directly to the British Government in a manner that seeks to represent the best interests of the people whom we all represent. I believe that we can get more changes to the Welfare Reform Bill, if we make that effort and do not simply respond to British Government threats to fine us, surcharge us, take money out of the block grant and pay off 1,300 workers who currently run the IT system.

Mr Hamilton: Whether I was being silly or scary, I like to think that I was being sensible. Being sensible means pointing out the facts, which are those that I have outlined. It is for others to justify the reality that £15 million has gone from the Budget this year. Perhaps £15 million does not sound like a lot of money in the context of the Budget that we are agreeing today, but it rises rapidly to £105 million next year, which will necessitate serious cuts right across the board. It will go then from £300 million by 2018-19 to a total of £1 billion in the next five years. That is bad enough, and it is scary enough. It is absolutely sensible, not silly, to point out the reality of not moving forward with welfare reform and of not doing so, as the Member knows, on the basis of the package of measures that the Social Development Minister has negotiated, which will ameliorate some of the worst impacts of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. It would be irresponsible not to proceed on that basis.

It is bad enough that we face those reductions to the block grant, which will severely affect all budgets in the Executive, including the Education Minister's budget, mine and others, but we also face the prospect of 1,400 jobs being lost, the estimated cost of £1·8 billion for a new IT system and very real pain. We talk about people who are vulnerable, needy and in poverty suffering as a result

of welfare reform: how much more will they suffer when we get to 2016, if the benefit system that we use now no longer operates and they are unable to receive the benefits to which they are entitled?

They are scary prospects for people in Northern Ireland. I hope that, even at this late stage, people see the sense in progressing with welfare reform.

8.30 pm

To conclude, the Budget Bill brings to a close the 2013-14 financial year and makes provision for the early months of 2014-15. It is easy to underestimate the work of the Assembly in the formation of the Bill. The figure work that it contains is a result of the Assembly's agreement to Budget 2011-15 and the associated Main Estimates voted for back in June last year. As well as the Executive's work in revising those allocations in the June, October and January monitoring rounds, many hours have been spent revising the Budget plans to ensure the best possible outcome for the citizens of Northern Ireland. Many hours have been spent debating those plans, and not just today. I commend the Assembly for the role that it has played and will continue to play in that very important process. On that note, I ask the Assembly to support the Bill.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we move to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, the motion will require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

> *That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 32/11-15] be agreed.*

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Education: Post-primary Provision in South and East Belfast

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately four minutes. I must advise Members that, although taking interventions is a matter for their own discretion, I will be unable to award the customary one minute of extra time if they give way.

Mr Spratt: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, given that my South Belfast colleague Michael McGimpsey has just come back to the Chamber today, I would like, on behalf of my party, to offer my sincere condolences to Michael and the McGimpsey family on the recent death of his mother and to assure him that he and the family are very much in our thoughts and prayers at this time.

I am pleased to be able to bring this Adjournment debate to the House tonight. Post-primary education in South Belfast and East Belfast has been a subject of debate in the House before. As an MLA for South Belfast, I remain concerned about future provision and the impact that that might have on local children in the area. I do not think that any of us should be playing politics with this issue. I think that that would send out the wrong message to parents and pupils alike. It would be much more helpful if everyone considered all the issues around both schools and put the education of pupils in those schools first and foremost.

I have to say at the outset that it is somewhat unhelpful that a number of leaflets have been circulating in one particular school in relation to a meeting that is to be held on Wednesday 26 February in Newtownbreda. The leaflets appear almost like election leaflets. Having spoken to Anna Lo earlier, I know that she told the school that it could have a quote but not a leaflet. Those leaflets are being put into children's school bags and sent home to parents. I agree with many of the sentiments in the leaflet, in the case of Ms Lo and, indeed, in the case of Michael McGimpsey. Some of the issues —

Ms Lo: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I want to clarify that the leaflet was not produced by me. I agreed that, if they were producing a leaflet inviting parents to come to the public meeting, they could use a quote that I made during a meeting with the school. I understand that the leaflet was produced by a member of the parents' group without me ever seeing it. I made a complaint to the school, and it stopped circulation of the leaflets.

Mr Spratt: I already accepted that. I can agree with much of the content of Mr McGimpsey's leaflet with regard to the Newtownbreda site etc. However, there have been quotes to suggest that the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) has proposed to close Newtownbreda and Knockbreda schools to create a newly amalgamated school, despite strong opposition from local MLAs and parents.

We have to be very responsible about what is happening to this school. To refer to Knockbreda as a failing school and

to call for its closure is potentially very damaging to both schools. If parents think that Knockbreda is likely to close, they are more likely to take their children out of the school or not send them there in the first place. All of that could mean that the new school would have lower numbers and could well face problems, and that is not the way to protect post-primary education in South Belfast and East Belfast.

I, along with party colleagues in East Belfast, have held a number of meetings with stakeholders, including the South Eastern Education and Library Board. I welcome the opportunity to hear a wide range of views, and meetings have been proposed for tomorrow and the coming days. Following the closure of Deramore High School, Dunmurry High School and Balmoral High School, it is fair to say that Newtownbreda is the last controlled post-primary school in South Belfast. As I have said many times, it has been closure after closure in that area for post-primary education at secondary level. Of course, I want to see the Newtownbreda site remain and flourish as a school, but we must all face the reality that many of the children who will be affected come from the east of the city, including Newtownbreda and Knockbreda. We have to be aware of that, whether we like it or not.

It is essential that everyone supports the amalgamation or merger — call it what you will. My understanding is that the Minister has made a decision, which, I do not want to misquote him, “cannot be overturned”. I thank the Minister for being in the House for the debate. Perhaps he will clarify the exact position when he speaks a little later. However, with regard to this site, our focus must be on getting the very best outcome for teachers and pupils.

I know that there is a very strong lobby at Newtownbreda to keep the school as it is. I have spoken at length to Rev Adrian Green, and my office and other offices have had numerous emails from Newtownbreda and Knockbreda parents. In contrast to Newtownbreda, Knockbreda staff and parents have been less vocal on the issue and have been actively trying to keep up the morale of the school and the pupils, given that the school got a fairly severe battering from the press in the past.

I said before in the House that parents whose children attend Knockbreda have told me that they are content with the education that their children receive. I had a meeting recently with the principal and some of the governors and teachers of the school. They have had a very positive open night that, hopefully, will keep the numbers up. The numbers in both those schools will lead to the opportunity for a very viable school in the future.

In meetings with the South Eastern Education and Library Board in the past number of days, we have been advised that an interim board of governors is being set up. According to the SEELB, it will be drawn from both schools. That may be something that the Minister will choose to clarify this evening. Other important steps will include the appointment of a new principal. I do not know who that will be, but it will be a matter for the new board of governors. My understanding is that the board will argue that there are a number of ways in which to improve relations between the two schools while the amalgamation is taking place. Together, the new board of governors will, and should, be able to agree the ethos and values of the new school, agree the budget, develop a communications strategy for pupils and staff, and provide newsletters detailing those areas.

In his statement to the House, the Minister said that the school will initially operate on a split site. In the meeting that I mentioned, the board referred to a split site for a period, with the possibility of a junior school on one site and a senior school on the other to allow the for the newbuild, which should be on the Newtownbreda site, given the size of that site. I am not convinced that a split site will be attractive to parents. The issue needs to be very seriously managed by the Department and the board. Serious work needs to be done on exactly what is proposed or what is going to happen, because split sites have never really worked in the past. That is a big danger.

I know that there has been a very strong lobby from Rev Green on behalf of Newtownbreda parents. At the beginning of this month, I saw a number of communications about the amalgamation with Knockbreda, and I am concerned that the paper refers to questions that will require answers before a decision is taken by the Education Minister. Well, folks, the Education Minister made a statement to the House. At this stage, perhaps he needs to make clear to the lobby group whether there is any wriggle room or any possibility of changes. I am very hopeful that the Department, the Minister and the board will take very seriously the concerns of all parents and pupils from both sites and try to manage the situation in the best way possible. If that is not done, there is a real possibility that we could face a situation of dear knows what in the future. Possible legal challenges and all sorts of other things are already being mooted. Therefore, I think very serious work needs to be done at the two sites.

A very clear and positive message needs to sent out that the new site — new school, new name, whatever — will be on the Newtownbreda site. A positive message will be sent out to South Belfast, including Belvoir, the wider Four Winds area and the area around the Newtownbreda site, that there will be a sustainable school with the possibility of — I am not misquoting what the Minister said previously to the House — around 1,000 pupils in the future. So there is a lot of positivity around that.

I plead with Members in this House tonight not to try to politicise this thing. That is why I said that at the outset of my remarks. Let us not try to lead parents and pupils in a direction in which they believe that something can be done to save the school and to save this, that and the other. Let us do what is best for the pupils, the parents and the very dedicated teaching staff in Newtownbreda. I have had meetings with the Knockbreda staff as well, and there are a lot of very good, dedicated staff there, too.

8.45 pm

Let us face it, the exam results at Knockbreda have improved dramatically. There are very dedicated staff in Newtownbreda school as well, and they need to be dealt with positively and sympathetically in the days ahead. So let us all try to get our shoulders to the wheel to do what is best for kids right across the board. I hope that colleagues in the Chamber tonight, from whatever party and whatever area, whether South Belfast or East Belfast, do what is best for everyone. It might be easy to go down the route of a protest or something like that, but that is not a route that I intend to go down. I will not be at the meeting on 26 February, and I have already made that clear to the school. Unfortunately, I have medical tests on that particular

evening, which have been rescheduled to allow me to do my business in the House. That is the reason why I will not be there, and I have already made that very clear. Let us all try to be very positive in all this.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they will have four minutes in which to speak. There will be no extra time if you accept an intervention.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank Jimmy Spratt for bringing this matter to the House again. It is the second time that the Member has brought an Adjournment debate on the issue, and I think that it is important to continue to highlight the issues. I am particularly grateful to the Member for the manner in which he rightly raised a number of concerns that have been expressed by teachers, parents, boards of governors and others around what the future might hold for Knockbreda and Newtownbreda high schools. It is important that those concerns are firmly placed on the record. I also think that it is regrettable that, all too often, when we hear debates around schools, particularly if there is an argument around school closures, amalgamations or mergers, we get people who, in my view, unfortunately, take up what I can only describe as opportunistic and populist positions. Hopefully, that will not occur this evening.

It is of paramount for us, as representatives of South and East Belfast, that we need to recognise that these times and these decisions are very challenging, particularly for parents who have pupils at the schools. I speak from the point of view of having a brother who is a principal of a school, and his future at this time is uncertain. I can say very safely that he is the principal of that school, and the teachers, parents and boards of governors are equally committed to making sure that they do the best for that school and, particularly, for their pupils.

That is what is most commendable about the vast majority of the teaching profession that we know and those who are involved in the education estate. We all need to remain mindful of what we are all about, which is about making sure that our young people get the best opportunity to move into the future that we can possibly give them. Therefore, when Jimmy Spratt asked Members to treat this sensitively and sensibly, that was a very important call to make, and I hope and expect that all Members will respond to that.

As I said, there is no doubt that these matters are very challenging to people, and I know that the Minister will respond later. I was under the impression that the decision has been made that the schools will amalgamate or merge, or whatever the description may be, but a lot more work has yet to be done on the schools, parents and boards of governors working with the South Eastern Education and Library Board and others on what precisely will happen in the future. I have no doubt that, if those schools amalgamate, you will be looking at a school for probably a 1000-plus pupils. The modern schools estate, where new schools have been built and opened, is marvellous. People who have been in those premises in recent years cannot help but marvel at the facilities that are now available to young people who go to school today, and that is as it should be.

I hope that the decisions and deliberations in the time ahead and the discussions that will rightly take place among parents and people involved in making the final decisions have the absolute singular focus of making sure that we have the best school and the best educational opportunities available to young people from the areas who will go to the new school, wherever it may be located. That is a matter for others to decide, not me. I wish them well in their deliberations, and, more important, I wish the young people who will attend the new school, wherever it may be located, well for the future, because those young people will have a wonderful opportunity and a great education. As we all know, life is difficult and challenging enough, and the best thing that we can do for our young people is give them the best education possible to allow them to go forward with two feet forward.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Dr McDonnell: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate on the provision of post-primary education in South Belfast and East Belfast. There is much overlap between the two constituencies. Many children from South Belfast attend schools in East Belfast, and many children from East Belfast attend schools in South Belfast. It is vital that children who live in the overall area have access to a high standard of post-primary education, and our objective must always be to ensure quality educational outcomes.

We could indulge in a debate about selection, but it would not be helpful in this case. This debate hinges on providing the right atmosphere and the right conditions for learning for a large number of young people in South Belfast and East Belfast. We have the potential to create a very powerful comprehensive school in the controlled system for young Protestants in that area, and Mr Spratt rightly said that a number of secondary schools in South Belfast have closed and that has restricted access. Large sections of the community need those schools, and it is unreasonable to expect children in their early years, or even at 11 or 12 years of age, to travel a long distance.

In my experience, Newtownbreda High School is just the type of school that we should seek to emulate in many other areas of Belfast and across the North. I am not as familiar with Knockbreda, although I know that it is there and I have visited it. However, Newtownbreda High School is an asset to post-primary education and provides an excellent environment for educating young people in the Belvoir and Milltown areas. The recent decision, as was rightly outlined earlier, on the amalgamation of Newtownbreda and Knockbreda has created concern, but that is normal in such cases and, as Mr Spratt said earlier, it must be handled sensitively.

It is worth putting on the record that, in recent years, Newtownbreda has gone from strength to strength, with the highest GCSE performance of all co-education controlled post-primary schools in South Belfast and East Belfast. GCSE results are well above the Northern Ireland average, and that is testament to the hard work of staff, pupils and their parents. The school receives very high commendations from inspections, Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) grading and in various other assessments.

If the amalgamation goes ahead, which it no doubt will, there should be minimum disruption to pupils and staff. I know that there is a debate about the naming of the place, and that has to be dealt with sensitively. I have no doubt that the school should remain on the Newtownbreda site.

Enrolment figures at Newtownbreda are very high, and that reflects how popular the school is and the quality of education there. I was familiar not just with the current principal but with previous principals, and the quality of education that they produce there is high.

The school has the potential to grow further and to develop over coming years. It can adapt and work with parents and others. I urge the Minister to work sensitively and to recognise the sensitivities, needs and anxieties of many of the parents, teachers and pupils.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Copeland: I think that it is fair to say that the overall educational performance in East Belfast could be described as patchy at best. The educational inequalities are more apparent in East Belfast than practically anywhere else in the city. Testament to that is the fact that we have the lowest proportion of school leavers gaining at least five GCSEs at grades A* to C. East Belfast has four of the wealthiest wards and four of the poorest wards sitting almost side by side. In some cases, they are separated by the width of a main road. If you are born in one postcode, your future is assured for all the right reasons, but, if you are born in another, your future is assured for almost all the wrong reasons. Some of the best-performing schools in Northern Ireland function cheek by jowl, in some cases, with some of the most challenged.

I could talk all night about education in its widest sense and about the well-documented problems of underachievement in the working-class districts of our constituency. I will, however, try to concentrate on the current proposals to reconfigure secondary school provision in the area. A central feature of the aim was the 2006 Bain report, which was the proposal for area-based planning and a new strategic approach to planning schools estates to provide a system of strong, sustainable educational facilities. That is a very laudable and fine sentiment. It led to education and library boards carrying out viability studies, which, in turn, led to area plans that were published a year ago. Now, the Belfast and South Eastern boards have published six development proposals that affect seven post-primary schools in the east of the city and Holywood. The Minister made pronouncements on his proposals in the House on 14 January.

What is instructive in all that is that now, in February 2014, the South and East Belfast focus appears to be on post-primary secondary schools in the state-controlled sector. We seem, almost accidentally perhaps, to have wandered far away from the vision of Bain in 2006. One might ask about what happened to the cross-sectoral working, the sharing of resources and facilities, and, forgive me, the ministerial rhetoric that said that no sector would stand apart from the rest. That vision seems to have been lost somewhere in the area-planning process. Why was the all-encompassing vision allowed to lapse? Why was one sector allowed or able to rationalise its schools estates completely independently of the rest? Where is the building of relationships and the sharing of classes to deliver the entitlement curriculum between the grammar and the non-selective sectors, that is, the maintained, controlled and integrated? It may not be politically correct to say it, but I truly believe in a single education system for Northern Ireland. It may be a long-term pipe dream, but I am quite happy to place on record my belief that the state should provide one system.

Back in the here and now, the board has proposed the amalgamation of Newtownbreda and Knockbreda high schools, the closure of Orangefield and Dundonald high schools and an increase in the size of Ashfield Girls' High School, Ashfield Boy's High School and Priory Integrated College in Holywood. Moreover, in his development proposals, the Minister has given a very welcome reprieve to Dundonald High School. However, he has not found it possible to accede to an increase in the number of pupils in Ashfield. The most controversial proposal is to amalgamate Newtownbreda and Knockbreda into a single school of 1,000 pupils to operate initially on a split campus, with the possibility of a new school in the future. It is fair to say, Minister, that there is much unease about that. I do not like the fact that the two schools have, in actuality, been pitched against each other.

Often in politics, perception is all important. There is a widespread perception in East Belfast, although I am not saying that it is a reality, that the Minister is targeting the state-controlled —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Copeland: — sector for particular attention. Perhaps, in summing up, the Minister could address those concerns.

Ms Lo: First, I offer my condolences to Mr McGimpsey on his recent bereavement.

I will focus on the amalgamation of the Newtownbreda and Knockbreda high schools.

I spoke at the Adjournment debate on the proposal last year and I wrote to the area-planning team to highlight my concerns.

9.00 pm

I have recently received about two dozen emails from concerned parents and pupils who are very distressed about the Minister's decision to amalgamate the two schools. The parents feel that there is no clear rationale for doing so and that they have not received an assurance that the future of their children's education is secure. Last week, I met with senior officials in the SEELB who explained in more detail the reasons and plans for implementing the amalgamation. I was assured by the imminent formation of the interim board of governors and recruitment of a principal designate to oversee the process.

I do not believe that it is ideal for the combined school to be based on two sites, even if they are 1·5 miles apart. I hope that this separation will not last any longer than two years, which was the expected time frame that was given to me by officials. Given the recent capital development at Newtownbreda High School, I strongly support the new school being on that site. There has been speculation as to whether the amalgamated school might be moved to the Orangefield site in five or six years' time. However, as it is the only controlled school in South Belfast, I would be strongly opposed to that proposal.

It is clear that there is a need for a well-managed transition that must be properly communicated to the schools and parents to avoid uncertainty and speculation. My support for the parents and teachers of Newtownbreda remains

strong. I want the Department to do all that it can to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible.

It is essential that there is proper post-primary planning across all sectors in South and East Belfast to ensure appropriate levels of social and physical connectivity between schools and communities. As an Alliance Member, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the demand from parents for the provision of integrated education, which makes up only 7% of post-primary provision. That is despite OFMDFM's good relations indicators update showing that 70% of people are in favour of mixed schools. In the South Belfast constituency, we have Lagan College, an integrated school that is consistently oversubscribed and that achieves excellent results at GCSE and A level. Decisions taken by the Minister should take the demand for more integrated education on board.

Mr Newton: I thank Mr Spratt for securing the debate and the Minister for being here. Minister, the last time that we debated East Belfast, the statement you made was perceived to be bittersweet. It was not as well received by those associated with Knockbreda and Newtownbreda high schools, as it was by those who are associated with Dundonald High School.

In the time that is available to me, I want to underline a few points on the principles behind making decisions on education. I assume that everyone in the House wants long-term, high-quality provision of education in East Belfast and South Belfast. A number of factors underpin the decision, and paramount among them is the need for parents to have confidence that their children will receive the very best possible education, with committed teachers and appropriate facilities to deliver it. Under the proposals, the parents of pupils at either school do not see that taking place and there is some dissention.

Minister, I welcome the decision that you took a short time ago to democratise, once again, the Belfast Education and Library Board through the appointment, albeit three years late, of councillors to represent parents. However, this decision is being taken by a South Eastern Education and Library Board that has no parental representatives. Indeed, the board is run by three commissioners, a situation that has existed for much longer than the Belfast Education and Library Board. So it is a decision taken by three commissioners when they were appointed more than three years ago. The board has no elected representatives and, therefore, no parental representation or input into the workings of the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

You recognised, Minister, in your statement to the House a few weeks ago that there was a situation that you found unacceptable:

> *"I believe that an opportunity was missed when all publicly funded post-primary schools were not brought into the equation and subsequent planning process."* — *[Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p319, col 1.]*

You were dissatisfied with that decision, Minister, and you made that quite clear. You will understand why parents are now asking, "If the Minister was dissatisfied with the planning process, why is he continuing with a decision made prior to his recent statement?"

The parents need to be convinced, particularly those in Newtownbreda, who put forward a proposal, 'Area Planning: The Way Forward', and they wanted to support two alternative proposals within that. In addition, Newtownbreda already has a good track record of integrating pupils from other schools such as Lisnasharragh, Dundonald and Dunmurry high schools, yet the decision to continue with a split site remains.

Let me say one thing about education investment: there is a need —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Newton: — to look at what is best for young people, and we —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, the Member's time is up. I have to be fair to others.

Mr Newton: — and parents need to understand what that investment will be.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for attending and my colleague Jimmy Spratt for securing the debate. I also thank Mervyn Storey, Chair of the Education Committee.

This decision by the Minister has raised concerns among pupils, staff, politicians, churches and, indeed, many within the greater East Belfast area. That is no surprise because for many of the parents, teachers and children, there is the insecurity of change and what that means for the future. Anna Lo mentioned the transition period, and it is key that that is managed well. There has to be communication, and parents, staff and others need to have a sense of ownership and involvement in this major decision, which affects all their lives.

As my colleague Jimmy Spratt said, this is not about politics. It is not about East Belfast versus South Belfast, as some would have it, and it is not about Knockbreda High School versus Newtownbreda High School. It is a debate about the future of the children, the quality of the education, the future of the staff and how people are appointed. This must be about the slogan, "United we stand, divided we fall." An us-and-them situation would cause more discontent and insecurity and more problems within the area in trying to get the very best for our children.

Let me quote a young man who has been on placement with me for the past couple of days: He is Nicholas Hunter, a former pupil of Knockbreda High School:

> *"There is nothing I could probably say about the school that is bad or misleading. My brothers and sisters went to the same school years ago and it didn't do any harm to them. They said to me on the first day of school that Knockbreda is a fantastic school with excellent teaching staff".*

Those are the sorts of quotes and that is the sort of passion and commitment that we are talking about. People want the best, not just for him, but for his sisters at that school as well.

From a parent, Lucinda:

> *"as the parent of a son who is currently in year 11 at Knockbreda High School and a daughter who left in 2012, I would like to share with you why Knockbreda High School is a good school. It is not a failing school. The last ETI report was classed as satisfactory improvement and continuing to improve. Knockbreda has embraced the changing population in the area and*

continues to have pupils from all races and creeds, developing into a multicultural school."

I think that that is a tremendous vision and future for the children of the school.

This is an amalgamation that we are talking about. It is a bringing together, and we need to manage that in the best possible way. My father was a former shipyard worker; he was a red leader at the shipyard. I was down at the Titanic Quarter recently, which has the motto "Building the future from the past". For me, that is what this amalgamation is all about. It is about bringing the two schools together while building a future for all of us.

Mr McKinney: This is an important debate for east and south Belfast. Given the location of Knockbreda and Newtownbreda in south Belfast, I wish to confine my remarks to these two schools, the characteristics and qualities of which Members have reflected on.

Part of the Minister's vision is that every school should be a good school. I have raised this issue directly with him on two occasions in this Chamber, reflecting on the harm that parents, pupils and staff feel his proposals are doing to their valuable establishment. On the first occasion, the Minister said that he did not care about the institutions, only about the output, but this is their good school.

On the second occasion that I raised the issue with him, I did so because I am acutely aware of the concerns of parents, pupils and staff. I suggested that the Minister might like to lay to rest the concerns that some people have had about the school being relocated, particularly on the Orangefield site. However, the Minister chose to rebuff the request and say that he did not care about postcodes. How is that consistent with valuing that good school?

It is 34 years since I left a school that I deeply value as a quality school. It was situated in a good town with great staff and brilliant outcomes and valued by parents, pupils, staff and the local community. It had ambitions to be better than good, and, in my view, achieved excellence. Newtownbreda, too, is situated in a community that values its output, its staff and its pupils, and it is endeavouring to improve and be the best that it can be. Those staff and pupils value its name, value the institution and value the location, so to simply dismiss those views, whatever the Minister's overall ambition and plan, can be harmful to the school and the community's view of it. This may be acceptable at a political level, but it causes much disquiet at classroom and pupil level and in the wider community.

We should, when making adjustments, make equitable and values-based decisions. If numbers are falling in a school, it is reasonable that, if they fall substantially below a certain level, decisions can be made around that. However, when both the quality and the numbers are improved at a school, you can understand why proposals such as this cause the disquiet that they do. To leave people hanging about the school name and site dismisses concerns and rejects the values that those pupils, parents and teachers place in their institution.

I ask the Minister to reflect on it in through the very human story that I am telling: people value their school. As I said last week, all MLAs in South Belfast, as has been confirmed here tonight, are getting emails and letters reflecting those concerns.

It is not just an institution in that sense; its location and values are hugely important to people who share in an education way and in a community way. It is important also, not just to look back at a school, but to look to its future. Given the improvement that Newtownbreda has experienced and the increased numbers and prospect of greater numbers, I urge the Minister to think again about his amalgamation proposal and the closure impact of it.

9.15 pm

Mr McGimpsey: I thank Jimmy Spratt for bringing forward the debate. I also thank colleagues for their kind words initially. This is a discussion about integration or amalgamation. We have two schools: Newtownbreda and Knockbreda. Newtownbreda is doing well. It is succeeding. It has shown a 30% improvement in its academic achievement over the last three years. Pupil numbers are rising. Its academic standards are going up. It is a popular school. Knockbreda is doing less well. Nevertheless, it gets a reasonably good rating as far as education standards are concerned.

The question is this: integration or amalgamation? With integration, the stronger school would carry on and the weaker school would eventually integrate into the stronger school. As Robin Newton said, there have been examples of that recently, particularly around Newtownbreda.

Amalgamation, on the other hand, would be to formally shut both schools and form a new school. The new school would be formed on a split site on either side of the busiest traffic junction in Northern Ireland. Anybody who is familiar with the Forestside junction will know the nightmare that pupils and staff would face if there were a split site.

To formally close Newtownbreda, a school that is doing well, is succeeding and has the support of the full school family — parents, pupils and staff — would, to put it mildly, be highly unpopular. I was at a public meeting in the school a number of months ago. The opinions expressed there were as strong as I have heard at a public meeting. It was in a packed school hall. The strong view was not about Newtownbreda versus Knockbreda. It was about Newtownbreda, which is succeeding and doing well: reinforce it, support it, invest in it.

What we have is a proposal that takes an ivory tower approach. Commissioners in the South Eastern Education and Library Board are saying, "We are not listening to any of that. All the parents, all the pupils, all the staff put together — it does not matter what they are saying. We are going to do it a different way. We know best." That is most unfortunate. To say that there is a public relations disaster brewing is to put it very mildly.

I was not aware of the leaflet that Jimmy Spratt referred to; I have not seen it. However, where my sympathies lie is not about leaflets. It is about the pupils in these schools. It is about the children in Newtownbreda and Knockbreda getting the best education that we can give them. Our sympathies have to be with those schools and their school populations.

What is proposed is a rushed process. A rushed process is likely to be a botched process. There is a rush to get a new headmaster. As I understand, he will not be based on either campus. He will be based in the South Eastern Board and not even at the school. How do pupils, staff and parents relate to that? There is also a target date of around

June 2014. It is a rush. Even if you think that this is the way forward, it cannot be made to work in practical terms.

There are a number of reasons why this should not happen, but the key reason is this: amalgamations have a detrimental impact on quality of education. It is well-documented that, in 68% of amalgamations, the schools affected see a drop in their academic achievement; 51% of those never regain that position.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGimpsey: I remind colleagues that there is a meeting in Room 277 at 1.00 pm tomorrow. I invite everybody to come along to meet some of the parents.

Mr Lyttle: I, too, thank Mr Spratt for securing the debate. This topic is a good use of an Adjournment debate. To be honest, there are more elephants in the room on this issue than there are at Belfast Zoo. As regards why we see a reduction in pupil numbers in secondary schools, two of those elephants are called inequality and segregation. Another one is called a fragmented area-based planning process —

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Academic selection.

Mr Lyttle: That as well; yes. The area-based planning process is turning into a sector-based planning process.

The Education Minister made a significant statement to the House on 14 January, in which he said:

> *"At the centre of the process must be decision-making in the best educational interests of children and solutions that can be implemented in a manageable manner." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 90, p316, col 2.]*

He also said that recognition on everyone's part that change is necessary is needed to deliver high-quality education and that the best solution for pupils on an area basis will require a high level of collaboration and coordination.

MLAs need to be very honest in the debate. We need to think outside the box and put the needs of areas and every child before lines on maps. We need to channel all the energy and passion that we have for the education of our children and young people into area-based planning. We need to engage in fully participative processes that include parents, staff, children and young people and that, although taking account of sensitivities, ultimately prioritise quality education for all.

How does that apply to the proposed amalgamation of Newtownbreda High School and Knockbreda High School? Undoubtedly, there are concerns, caused perhaps by a lack of clarity. As MLAs, we have heard from parents that they have requested meetings with the Minister. Some of the parents remain to be convinced that the proposal is in the best interests of all children and young people in the area. Indeed, they have asked for clarity on issues such as naming, the principal, leaderships teams, which sites will be used, and so on. I hope that the Minister can add some clarity to those issues tonight.

There is a responsibility on MLAs and parents to be clear and accurate in their information and communications. The most recent ETI reports show two schools that are making significant improvements and moving in the right direction in providing quality education for our children and young people. We have testimonies from pupils at both schools on the positive impact that education in the area is having on our children and young people. It is essential that we have good, accurate and clear communications on the process to ensure that continued improvement is at the heart of what is achieved.

I understand that letters have been sent to parents to outline the process. I would say, however, that those seem to be quite bureaucratic. It is incumbent on the Minister and his officials to set out a vision and plan for children in the Newtownbreda and Knockbreda areas in more detail and in more human terms. We could have parent information evenings that would give an opportunity for that type of vision and plan to be put forward, because I think that there is a positive vision for education in the area.

We need to look at whether more innovative solutions can be brought about through integration —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Lyttle: — all-ability co-education and utilising appropriate information for academic progress.

Mr Storey: I thank my colleague Mr Spratt for tabling tonight's Adjournment topic. I also express my condolences to Mr McGimpsey on the passing of his mother.

I welcome the opportunity to speak. I have a particular interest, not only as Chair of the Education Committee but as the DUP's education spokesperson. When the Minister announced the decision on the six development proposals issued by the Belfast Education and Library Board and the South Eastern Education and Library Board, he admitted that, in the light of this exercise, the Department had learned a number of lessons.

I know that many Members will share the view that the process initiated by the two boards was neither strategic nor well planned. The fact that the Minister disagreed with or amended five of the six proposals says much about the process that was adopted. Furthermore, the fact that, in communicating his decision to the House, he admitted that more work needed to be undertaken on sixth-form provision in the area shows that we do not have any semblance of an area plan for young people, which is the point that my colleague Mr Newton was making.

The Education Committee has expressed its grave disquiet at the handling of the Orangefield situation. Over the past number of months, since the publication of the development proposals, I have endeavoured to be actively involved with the boards of governors of Newtownbreda and Knockbreda. I met with the senior management team in Dundonald and with representatives of Orangefield. On behalf of the party, I presented the two boards with a paper on a strategic way forward for post-primary provision in the area, which regrettably they have chosen to ignore.

As a result of this, I trust that I know and understand the feelings and concerns that have been expressed by many Members this evening. The current decisions have clarified a number of situations. Orangefield will close, Dundonald is to stay open and the Ashfields are not being permitted to increase their enrolments. I know that there is still disquiet in regard to the Breda schools.

The decision by the Minister in clarifying the situation creates a number of challenges for us. For example,

Dundonald is to stay open, but we know that this, in itself, does not generate nor guarantee a successful school in the future. This will only come about with community support, the active and positive support of the boards and a high-quality teaching and learning environment created for all pupils. Similarly, in regard to the Breda schools, the reality is that, with no capital build on the horizon any time in the near future, the SEELB is faced with operating the arrangement of a new school in a less-than-favourable situation.

I concur with Mr McGimpsey's comments, and I make the plea to the Minister to seriously have a conversation with the two boards because not only is the proposal to be on the basis of a split site but it is my understanding that it will be on the basis of a junior and a senior school. If the Minister has rejected in his constituency the Dickson plan, albeit for different reasons, I doubt whether we should be going down the road of bringing a different form of education into east Belfast.

Mr O'Dowd: Thank you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In January, I made a detailed statement to the Assembly about the reshaping of post-primary provision in the greater east Belfast area, which encompasses the parliamentary constituencies of South Belfast and East Belfast. Details of my decisions and my rationale in each case are also clearly documented on my Department's website.

To clarify and confirm for Mr Spratt: I have made a decision on the amalgamation of Newtownbreda and Knockbreda. It is no longer a proposal; it is a decision.

Today's debate will give me an opportunity to update you on developments since my statement and to reassure Members of my resolve to ensure that the pupils in this area have access to the high standard of education they deserve. I also want to affirm that the area planning process, which the education and library boards are leading on, must account for the needs of all sectors and plan for the needs of all pupils in a given area.

The six greater east Belfast development proposals that I recently decided upon are a first phase in reshaping post-primary provision in this area. It was evident, however, that more work is needed, and a number of Members referred to that. However, the fact that work needs to be continued will not have affected my decision on the amalgamation of these two schools.

Not only is further work required to ensure the provision of adequate places for pupils at years 8 to 12 and at sixth form but the final area solution that has been reached encompasses the needs of all school sectors. Further engagement with those sectors is required, and my officials will be working closely with the Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards over the coming months to ensure that this happens. At the centre of the process must be decision-making in the best educational interests of the children plus solutions that can be implemented in a manageable manner. I will accept nothing less.

Before I outline developments since my statement of 14 January, I want to clarify a couple of matters that have arisen in the interim. There appears to have been some confusion and concern about who will lead in effecting the changes that I announced. With regard to the amalgamation of Knockbreda and Newtownbreda, it is the South Eastern Education and Library Board, not my Department, that is responsible for all operational and management arrangements required to effect this amalgamation. Similarly, the Belfast Education and Library Board is responsible for all operational and management arrangements required to close Orangefield High School.

I turn to developments since 14 January. I expect the board to carry out the task of amalgamating these schools in an effective and timely manner. The South Eastern Education and Library Board's plan was to amalgamate Knockbreda and Newtownbreda from September 2014. However, since my decision, the board has considered the implementation timetable. It has indicated that, for practical reasons and taking account of the best interests of the pupils concerned, the 2014 school year will be a transitional one, with full amalgamation being achieved in September 2015. The SEELB has given its assurance that it will work with staff and parents to ensure that the transition is as smooth as possible.

9.30 pm

The board will consult all those directly involved in the transition process, and I will take a particular interest in how it consults and communicates with the schools, teachers, boards of governors, parents and pupils on the matter; because, sometimes, we can be too clinical in our approach, in how we write to people and in how we inform them of those matters. We can be too functionary at times rather than ensure that parents receive the information that they require.

Part of the process will be to bring forward an interim board of governors that will have a very important task. It will answer a number of the questions that have been raised. The idea that a new school principal will be stationed in board headquarters sounds ridiculous to me. If that is the plan, I will be using my authority to ensure that it is changed. The schools' staffing and management structures are matters for the new interim board of governors.

As with all other schools, my Department will set the budgets; however, how those budgets are spent in the schools is a matter for the interim board of governors. The curriculum will have to meet the entitlement framework, but how the curriculum is made up is a matter for the interim board of governors. Other matters for the interim board of governors include post-16 and special education provision; school name and uniform; as well as year admissions criteria and other school policies.

Therefore the interim board of governors — as with the board of governors of any school — will have to be representative of the school and the community that it serves, and it will have to have a skills base that will ensure that it delivers an effective and efficient education system in the school. That is important with respect to why there will be an amalgamation, rather than allowing one school to close, end or "wither on the vine", as the case was put.

I am disappointed that some MLAs concentrated only on Newtownbreda High School. There are more than 300 pupils still attending Knockbreda who deserve a future, representation and a voice. Their needs should also be represented in this debate. I could not allow myself as Education Minister to leave a school of 300 pupils to wither on the vine. If I were to do that, I would be in dereliction

of my duty. Some Members have done the maths and considered that 800 or 900 pupils are represented in that school, so there are more parents involved; therefore they have decided to concentrate on the needs of that school and forget about the other. Any Member who does that is in dereliction of their duty as a local MLA.

The amalgamation is the best way forward for the entire school community in that area. If we were not to take decisions now, neither of the two schools could confidently stride into the future. We have now made a decision that allows for the provision of post-primary education in the area for generations to come. I am confident that, if we approach this properly as MLAs in a leadership position, as the South Eastern Education and Library Board, my Department, and I as Minister —

Mr Newton: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one second. If we approach this properly, and I am confident that we can, we will develop a school that is not just satisfactory or good but very good and excellent. It will deliver education for generations to come in that area. I give way to the Member.

Mr Newton: Minister, underpinning that work has to be the confidence of parents. There is not that confidence, and it will not be there until parents see, in their words, a different plan and an investment in the schools to assure them of their future. There is no investment in the schools at this stage.

Mr O'Dowd: I can give confidence to the parents that I, as Education Minister, will take a very close interest in how those plans develop. In my opinion, the South Eastern Education and Library Board has taken the right decision: to delay the amalgamation for a year. However, anyone who is using their energy to overturn that decision is wasting it; they are wasting an opportunity to build on this and move forward.

In relation to investment in the schools, bricks and mortar alone do not make good schools. You can have the most modern, up-to-date school, but if you do not have the proper leadership team, staffing and board of governors in it, you are wasting your time. So let us get the leadership and board of governors right in the school and make sure that the teaching staff have the proper leadership to move forward. Then we will invest in an amalgamation and a newbuild.

So let us not get ahead of ourselves. Let us use our energies constructively in the months ahead.

I have no basis on which to overturn my decision. I have no inclination to overturn my decision, so I advise anyone who is preparing to launch the campaign that they are perfectly entitled to do so in any democratic society. However, I will say this to them: use your energies more effectively and more efficiently elsewhere and start building a new school for all the pupils in that area.

I see that Mr McKinney and the SDLP have employed their selective quotations editor again, who snips out words that are convenient in any debate but that may not include the complete responses or sentences. They are very busy up in the SDLP cutting office. Let us be clear about this: if there is going to be a newbuild — under the amalgamation, a newbuild will be required in the future — where that school is built will be a matter for the SEELB or the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), whichever comes into place. However, it will also have to be done in consultation with the school, local representatives and the parents. I said to you that I am not interested in the postcode. I, as Minister, have no interest in imposing a newbuild in a specific geographical location. It is up to the local managing authorities to consult and to decide where it is best to build in the future.

I think that the future of education in that area is bright. Difficult decisions have been made and are now being worked out. I believe that, if everybody keeps cool, calm heads and plans for the future, we will be able to look back on this occasion and say that, yes, it was the right decision, albeit a difficult decision, but our young people now have a school that they can all be proud of. We can assure ourselves that we have an education facility in the area that will serve the community for generations to come.

Adjourned at 9.37 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Northern Health and Social Care Trust Procurement Issues

Published at 2.00 pm on Friday 24 January 2014

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): This Statement draws to the Assembly's attention a report of audit investigations arising from information reported by whistle-blowers about potential malpractice in the procurement and management of building maintenance in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

I first brought this issue to the attention of the Assembly on 2nd July 2013, when investigations were ongoing into allegations received by the Trust in February 2012 and by my Department in August 2012. The ongoing investigation was also raised in the annual accounts of the NHSCT for 2012/13.

Investigations have been carried out by BSO Internal Audit, BSO Counter Fraud Unit and the Procurement Policy and Compliance Unit in my Department, under the oversight of officials in my Department. They have recently concluded and the completed report is now available on the DHSSPS website.

I am very concerned that the report highlights a serious lack of control within the Estates Management function in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, and indeed relevant legacy organisations. Examples of weaknesses in the implementation of procurement controls and guidance include:

- Single Tender Actions awarded without formal approval:
- A contractor working without a contract for several years;
- Contractors used outside of their contracted areas;
- Documentation missing from files to verify expenditure;
- Lack of checks on work carried out and invoices presented for payment;
- Contracts being completed in excess of tender quotation due to additional work undertaken.

The BSO Counter Fraud and Probity Unit has analysed findings from the report and has concluded there is no clear evidence of fraudulent activity. However, whilst the investigations found no incidence where services were paid for which were not provided, it was not possible to verify if this expenditure represented value for money in all cases.

The total value of work that has not been subject to appropriate control or procurement is estimated as £5.7m over the past 14 years. This is a matter of serious concern.

There are a total of 72 recommendations in the report. I am assured that the NHSCT management have accepted all of the recommendations and are taking steps to implement them to ensure that these failures will not be experienced again. The Trust has made significant progress in implementing the recommendations to date. My Department is ensuring that all recommendations are implemented so that the public can have full confidence in NHSCT Estates procurement practices

In addition, both BSO Internal Audit and Procurement Policy and Compliance Unit within my Department are undertaking a series of procurement audits and compliance checks across all Trusts to ensure that similar practices are not occurring elsewhere.

The mismanagement of procurement and contract management at NHSCT was brought to the attention of NHSCT and my Department through the Whistleblowing process and, once again I want to say that it is appropriate and important that where anyone has information about the potential abuse of public money they inform their organisation or my Department so that the specific issues can be resolved, appropriate lessons learned, and public confidence restored.

Where wrongdoing has occurred it must be addressed, with a proportionate and appropriate response. NHSCT management are assessing the reasons behind the failures identified in the report and an independent review will consider whether any further action is appropriate.

Environment

Planning — Preparing for 2015

Published at 4.00 pm on Wednesday 29 January 2014

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): In my October statement to the Assembly on the Planning Bill I affirmed my commitment to driving forward reform of the planning system including the transfer of the bulk of planning powers to councils in 2015.

I wish to make a written statement to outline my vision for the planning system as we move towards transfer next April. I also want to set out my agenda for delivering what I believe will be key improvements to the system. Improvements which will create a system which is less complex, more effective, more efficient and more customer-focused, without compromising on environmental standards.

I want to create a better environment and a stronger economy. My aim is to create a planning system that works to achieve this. A system that is fast, fair and fit for purpose. One that delivers for business - with timely decisions that bring investment and jobs but not at the expense of our environment, planet or people. A system which realises that the environment and the economy should not, and cannot be, at loggerheads. A system that fully recognises that a vibrant, sustainable environment can be a driver of prosperity and job creation. Similarly a strong economy and a prosperous society can be good for the environment. I am committed to do things differently and better.

This is an exciting and challenging time for planning. In just 15 months, our new 11 councils will be responsible for drawing up their own development plans, making the majority of planning decisions and shaping how their areas will grow and develop in a way that responds to the needs of their local communities. It is my job to ensure that we transfer planning as seamlessly as possible. That we ensure that the new system is in the best possible shape for transfer. To do this there are 5 key actions I want to focus on to bring the new system to life over coming months.

Key Actions

1. I want to shorten and simplify policy. Move to a single Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) rather than 20 separate policy publications – aiming for 100 pages of policy compared to some 800.
2. I want to initiate key reforms to the planning system. While the Planning Bill, as originally intended, would have allowed many of these to be delivered on a legislative basis, there are measures that can be set in place without legislation, such as new local development plan preparatory work, setting in place the new hierarchy of development arrangements, extending pre-application discussions and encouraging more widespread pre application community consultation. Better informed applications will be processed quicker.
3. I especially want to tackle response times from consultees - particularly those from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) within my own Department. I intend to therefore bring forward statutory consultee response times to remove delay in the process so that we deliver faster decisions
4. I want to improve customer service and access to case officers, and
5. I want to ensure all those with responsibility for delivering the new system have the capacity to do so.

Benefits

These measures will benefit all users of the planning system. Communities who want to input in a genuine and meaningful way to development plans for their areas, and who want to be consulted before applications are submitted by developers will benefit. Also developers will have more certainty in terms of speedier decisions and outcomes. The environment will benefit from better informed decisions. The Department will benefit in the short term but councils too will reap benefits in the longer term through improved efficiencies and performance.

I also want to challenge all those involved in the planning process – developers, planners, councils, communities, environmental groups, professional bodies to help me deliver my vision for the new planning system.

Recent performance

Before considering in more detail the actions for improvement I would like to acknowledge the work of my predecessor and the Department in delivering quicker decisions and providing greater certainty and outcomes for managing applications, than previously.

Improvements have been evident in all categories of applications. Over the most recent quarter, the average processing times for Major, Intermediate and Minor categories of planning applications reduced by four, two and one week respectively compared to the equivalent quarter in 2012/13. Article 31 applications have reduced by more than 50% in the last 18 months. There were 60 and there are now less than 30. I want to clear more Article 31 cases and to continue to exceed the 6 month target for large scale investment decisions.

Since I took up office the Department has made several major decisions and done so quickly:

- Biogas Combined Heat & Power Plant Newtownabbey 6 weeks (November)
- £2.5m storage, 7 distribution centre Newtownabbey , 3 months (November)
- 48 bed extension and new leisure centre Galgorm Manor less than 2 months (November)
- £20m data hub Coleraine based on innovative communications infrastructure linking Northern Ireland to USA & Europe, 2 months (October)
- £12m Forensic Science Lab Carrickfergus, less than 4 months (August)
- Young people's indoor safety village Belfast 6 weeks (September)
- In addition I have made decisions on a number of Article 31 applications, including:
    - A mixed use development at Glenmona in West Belfast;

- The redevelopment of the former Crepe Weavers factory site in Newtownards;
- The redevelopment of Casement Park; and
- £85 million energy from waste gasification plant at Bombardier Aerospace

I do acknowledge, however, that there are those who believe that the Department is not doing enough to improve the planning system. I readily accept that more needs to be done. I recognise that the planning system can, and should, do much more to unlock development potential, support job creation and aid economic recovery.

I have met with, and listened to, those running, wanting to expand and trying to set up businesses in NI, environmental groups, communities, the public among others. I told them I wouldn't just listen, I promised I would listen and act on their feedback. I hope I have demonstrated that I am prepared to listen to views and make difficult decisions.

As I listen, one of the issues I hear most is the need for greater certainty. Certainty in terms of the timescales for processing applications to decision – be it a yes or no; certainty of the policy context so stakeholders will know what is likely to be acceptable or unacceptable; certainty that the views of local communities will be sought and considered in a meaningful way and certainty that the planning system that will transfer to councils in 2015 will be fair and fit for purpose.

There are a number of key actions I intend to deliver.

ACTION 1 - Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS)

Firstly, I want to shorten and simplify policy. I intend to bring forward a new draft single Strategic Planning Policy Statement. This will ensure we have a policy framework which reflects the aims and priorities for planning and provides better clarity and certainty for all users of the reformed planning system.

The SPPS is an essential, key element of the broader planning and local government reform programme that will assist in the transition to the two tier planning system in 2015. It is strategic in nature and provides the context for detailed operational policies to be brought forward by new councils within future local development plans.

It will be a relatively short and concise statement of planning policy. The emphasis will not merely be on consolidating into one document the strategic elements of extant policy but critically on improving it.

It will also set out the core planning principles to underpin delivery of the reformed two-tier planning system from April 2015 including promoting sustainable development, well being and shared space. In addition, the SPPS will bring forward new strategic policy relating to town centres and retail.

The draft SPPS will issue for public consultation in early February and be published in final form in good time before planning functions transfer.

ACTION 2 - Planning Act reforms

Secondly, as we move towards the implementation of the Planning Act 2011, I want to bring forward as many of the reforms contained within it in advance of the transfer.

I firmly believe that moving quickly towards mirroring the new structures that will be in place from 2015 and implementing the reforms, will individually and collectively provide a real opportunity to speed up decision making. It will also provide greater certainty for applicants, and enhanced community involvement.

Preparatory work on local development plans

Planning decisions should be taken against a framework of up to date and effective development plans and supplementary guidance. Again that provides greater certainty to investors, applicants and communities. I am now establishing Area Plan teams to commence preparatory work on local development plans for all the new council areas. This work will involve close working with statutory transition committees and in due course new shadow councils. This will allow the new councils to move quickly to bring forward their own development plans once they become the planning authorities next year.

Hierarchy of Development

I want to put in place the new development management approach as set out in the 2011 Planning Act. This incorporates a 3-tier hierarchy of development (consisting of local, major and regionally significant) so that greater resources can be directed at those applications with economic and social significance, through more proportionate decision making mechanisms tailored to the scale and complexity of the proposed development.

All major and local developments will be dealt with by councils under the new planning system. Major developments will be subject to pre-application consultation with the community. Regionally significant development proposals will also be subject to pre-application community consultation and will be determined by the Department.

Over coming months, I will consult on the legislative thresholds for the 3 categories. However, in the interim I have instructed officials to put the hierarchy arrangements in place as soon as possible, well in advance of the transfer of planning functions to councils. Alongside this I will be bringing forward, in consultation with local government, a new performance management regime and redefined targets to align with the hierarchy.

I have also asked for specialised multi-disciplinary/ multi-agency teams to be set up and deployed across the new clusters to actively manage major applications drawing on consultee expertise and with appropriately trained planners with knowledge of property, finance and commercial issues. Essentially I'm cascading the model used for regionally significant applications, including pre application discussions and pre application community consultation to a more local level.

I am also looking creatively at how we deal with particular pressures on the development management system. I have appointed retail consultants to assist in the assessment of Article 31 retail applications that are particularly labour intensive.

Pre-application discussion

I also want to continue frontloading the planning system by encouraging developers to engage in pre application

discussions both with the Department and communities affected by the proposal.

I am therefore introducing new arrangements for pre application discussion (PADs). The best way to ensure a quick planning decision is to discuss proposals with the Department at the earliest opportunity before making an application. I intend to adopt a new approach. For smaller scale applications, applicants will be encouraged to call in to their local office for an informal discussion. On large, economically significant projects the Department will facilitate a more formal round table discussion involving all the relevant agencies depending on the nature of the scheme. This will help applicants to submit applications with all the necessary information addressing all the planning issues. I intend to launch new PADs guidance shortly.

Pre application community consultation

I will also be encouraging applicants for major developments to engage in meaningful consultation with the community affected by the development before submitting their application so that the views of local people can influence the scheme. This worked particularly well for example in the Windsor Park stadium redevelopment application - this application was processed in 11 weeks.

ACTION 3 - Improving consultee performance

Thirdly, I want to reduce response times from consultees, particularly those from within my own Department notably NIEA.

I am fully aware that the time taken to conclude consultations with key consultees is seen by many as a key cause of delay in the development management process. I intend to put in place measures to improve the performance of consultees so that sound decisions are made more quickly delivering decisions to support economic recovery and sustainable development.

As part of the implementation of the 2011 Planning Act I will provide greater clarity and certainty for the consultation process. For the first time, identified consultees will be statutorily required to provide a substantive response to a consultation request from a planning authority within a specified timeframe and to report on their performance in meeting their duty to respond.

All future consultation responses will have to be "substantive" providing sufficient information to allow the application to be determined. A holding response will not be regarded as meeting the requirements of the duty to respond. I believe this new element of the system will be a valuable opportunity to identify any difficulties or bottle-necks in the system but also to identify good practice. The annual reports produced by consultees in England provide a good example of how this system can work to identify opportunities for improvement going forward.

NIEA performance

NIEA has a critical role as a consultee on many planning applications. All NIEA consultee input will meet the new statutory timelines when they come into effect.

In the interim, NIEA will conduct a series of 'Backlog Blitzes' to clear outstanding planning consultations, with the first two being;

- All 'brownfield site' consultations greater than 12 months will be cleared by the end of March and the remainder of the backlog will be cleared by the end of June;
- 95% of all 'natural heritage' outstanding consultations (currently 230 applications) will be cleared by the end of March.

On the 1st of February, NIEA will establish a Planning Control Team which will:

- assign a single contact officer for all NIEA planning consultations. This will make it easier for applicants to get co-ordinated negotiation and advice from NIEA;
- develop new protocols for how the different sections of NIEA will streamline and improve their planning consultation processes.

NIEA will also start a series of projects with industry sectors to agree ways for NIEA and businesses to work together during the pre-applications phase, starting with:

- A Contaminated Land conference on 25 March for property development, construction sectors, councils, NIEA and others.
- Similar workshops will be conducted with the agri-food and renewable sectors in April

ACTION 4 - Improving customer service and applications.

Fourthly, I want to improve customer service. Speed of decision making is not the only measure of a quality planning system. It is also important to focus on customer needs. Therefore I want to improve customer service by listening to customer needs and responding to their requirements. In particular, I intend to improve direct telephone access to planners.

Better applications

It is important to remember that responsibility for improvement does not only rest with the planning authority and consultees. It has to be a collaborative approach. An efficient, effective, fair and fit for purpose planning system can only be delivered if all stakeholders work together. I am challenging my department but I am also laying down a challenge to applicants and agents to engage in pre application discussions and submit good applications. The Department will support those that have put in the time to submit good applications and reject badly prepared applications.

Therefore, applicants and developers need to play their role in ensuring quality, soundly based applications are submitted. And, in return, they can expect quicker decisions. Better performance based on better, comprehensive and complete applications is the way forward.

Poor applications with incomplete or low quality information clog up the system. DOE planning officers and consultees spend time going back and forward with these applicants seeking more and better information. This diverts our time and energy from dealing with good quality planning applications.

ACTION 5 - Preparing for Transfer

Capacity Building and Training

As well as improving the existing planning system in preparation for the transfer, I am also committed to helping councils get ready to receive their new powers. It is, therefore, vital that the new councils, and councillors, have the skills, knowledge and capability to deliver the new planning system and a mandatory code to follow. It is essential that everyone is properly prepared and aware of their role and responsibilities. Future decision makers must, for example, understand the delicate balancing act between environmental and economic considerations in development planning and development management. They must also appreciate the need for prompt, sound decisions.

Last year Executive funding of £3m was secured for capacity building and training. This money will ensure that essential training for councillors who are involved in making planning decisions can be carried out in good time and will mean that they are well equipped for, and have the confidence as well as competence to make, sound planning decisions right from day one.

The requirement for councillors to understand the planning process and the new role they will play in it will form a very important part of the capacity building programme that I have instructed officials to develop. The programme will ensure that councillors will be better equipped and better placed to deal with planning issues; from deciding planning applications through to the ethical standards and Code of Conduct they will be required to adhere to.

Working in partnership with a range of stakeholders, the action plan to deliver the overall capacity building and training programme will be rolled out during 2014 and right up to the point of transfer. Planning-specific training and relationship building at a local level between councils and area planning offices has already begun.

Checks and Balances, Audit and Performance Management

It is important that central government has an appropriate oversight role to ensure regional policies and objectives are implemented and that a consistent approach is applied to planning across the region.

The role of audit, inspections, performance management and monitoring of the planning system will also be critical in ensuring that planning functions are carried out and are seen to be carried out in a fair and consistent manner and that best practice is applied across the new district councils.

The 2011 Planning Act allows the Department to conduct an assessment of a council's performance and how a council deals with applications for planning permission. The Act also contains a range of oversight and intervention powers.

Performance Management

In terms of performance management, my Department will continue to work with local government to develop a system of performance management for planning. While much of this detail will be contained in guidance, the Local Government Bill, currently before the Assembly, provides enabling powers to allow the Department to set performance indicators and performance standards. If a council fails to comply with performance requirements the Department has powers to intervene.

Code of Conduct

When exercising their new decision making powers in respect of planning, councillors will be required to observe a mandatory Code of Conduct, which the Department is drafting and will issue for public consultation in the next few weeks.

This Code will include specific references to how councillors should conduct themselves when dealing with planning matters. The Code will be accompanied by detailed supplementary guidance to advise councillors on what they can and cannot do with regards to planning.

The guidance will deal with matters such as: lobbying of and by councillors; recommendations made by planning officers; councillors' personal and prejudicial interests; decisions contrary to an officer's recommendation; decisions contrary to the development plan.

Allegations of breaches of the code may be investigated by the Commissioner for Complaints and, if the Commissioner finds that a breach has occurred, sanctions may be taken against the councillor. The Code and guidance will offer protection to councillors executing planning duties and assurances to the public about councillor conduct.

Communication

There is also a need for enhanced public understanding of the changes to planning services. A Communications strategy is guiding the timely publication and dissemination of information through a range of media, including bulletins, articles and events.

Resources

The transfer of planning will only be successful with the right resources in place. I am, working to ensure the smooth transition of staff from central to local government. Work force models have been developed to inform the staffing levels required in each of the new councils.

Conclusion

I believe this package of measures will ensure that a fast, fair and fit for purpose planning system transfers to councils in 2015, and continues beyond, for the benefit of all. I also believe this package will provide certainty to investors and ensure that planning plays its full role in supporting economic recovery and sustainable development without compromising on environmental standards.

Over coming weeks I will issue the SPPS for consultation, progress the other actions and continue to press ahead with determining key planning applications.

Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme

Published at 12.00 noon on Thursday 30 January 2014

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I have today laid before the Assembly the first Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (Adaptation Programme).

There is no doubt that climate change represents the biggest environmental, economic and social challenge of the 21st century. The threat of global warming, the impact on the polar ice caps, sea level rises, increases in the frequency of extreme weather events, cyclones, floods, wildfires can all have extremely serious consequences for the environment, the economy and society.

These are global issues but they can and will continue to have significant local impacts. We have already experienced first hand extreme weather in the form of heavier snowfalls, more intense rainfall and the associated flooding events of recent years. Many of us as individuals and as part of the wider community have felt the severe and harsh consequences of these events.

As part of our obligations under the UK Climate Change Act 2008 relevant Northern Ireland Departments are required to lay programmes before the Northern Ireland Assembly setting out objectives, proposals, policies and associated timescales to address the risks and opportunities identified in the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (CCRA). The CCRA, which was published in 2012, brought together the best available evidence to identify the main risks and opportunities related to climate change. This Adaptation Programme is our response to the findings in the CCRA for Northern Ireland.

The Adaptation Programme sets out our vision to build 'A resilient Northern Ireland which will take timely and well-informed decisions that are responsive to the key risks and opportunities presented by climate change'.

By working in partnership across Government and with relevant stakeholders, raising awareness of the likely effects of climate change, promoting and supporting the enhancement of scientific evidence, fulfilling the statutory duties and engaging with other administrations we have started the process towards achieving this vision.

This first 5-year Adaptation Programme sets out our strategic direction and objectives in preparing Northern Ireland for the effects of climate change. It identifies the initial four primary areas for action, within which progress on the application of the objectives and adaptation principles will be pursued. These are Flooding; Water; Natural Environment; and Agriculture & Forestry. The Programme focuses on integrating climate change adaptation into relevant key policy areas across Government, developing the climate change adaptation evidence base and communicating and promoting adaptation messages through our stakeholders.

The Adaptation Programme is the start of an ongoing climate adaptation process. It provides a proportionate and flexible cross-departmental response to the priority risks and opportunities identified for Northern Ireland. It will also act as a catalyst for everyone in Northern Ireland to rise to the challenge of adapting to our changing climate. I am confident that we will rise to this challenge, and in doing so boost our resilience to a changing climate, improve the adaptive capacity and support our environment, society, and economy now and for future generations.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for the Environment
13 February 2014

Local Government Bill [NIA 28/11-15]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Ian Milne

The Chairperson: I will now commence the formal clause-by-clause analysis of the Local Government Bill. I remind members that formal clause-by-clause consideration is the last opportunity to discuss the clauses of the Bill and any decisions will be final. I intend to group clauses about which the Committee has previously indicated that it is content.

Clause 1 agreed to.

Clause 2 (Constitutions of councils)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 2, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Mr Boylan: Excuse me, Chair, can we do some of the clauses en bloc or together?

The Chairperson: Yes, we can.

Mr Boylan: Do we have to go through them individually now?

Ms Éilis Haughey (Bill Clerk, Northern Ireland Assembly): Chair, I should advise that the Committee had previously asked for a Committee amendment to be prepared for clause 2 to insert a date upon which the first —

The Chairperson: Yes. You have a tabled paper, members, with Éilis's proposed amendment. So, clause 2 there — sorry, jump back. Éilis, talk to us about that. Clause 2 is options.

Ms Haughey: The Committee had wished to insert a date by which the first constitution would be made available. The amendment tabled is at clause 2, page 1, line 17. It would insert, after the word "that" in line 17 in subsection (2), which is the subsection that requires copies of the constitution to be available at the principal office for inspection by members of the public at all reasonable hours, that copies must be available from 30 April 2015.

The Chairperson: Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

Clauses 3 to 9 agreed to.

Clause 10 (Positions of responsibility)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 10, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: I want to put it on record that I want STV to be the default position instead of d'Hondt.

Clause 11 (Arrangements for discharge of functions of council)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 11, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 12 to 24 agreed to.

Clause 25 (Council executives)

The Chairperson: We have two Committee amendments tabled. Can you explain those to us please, Éilis?

Ms Haughey: Clause 25, page 11, line 31: leave out "four" and insert "six". That was on the Committee's request to raise the minimum number of members of the executive. Then there is a further amendment consistent with that to clause 25, page 11, line 34: leave out "four" and insert "six", which would affect committees in a streamlined committee executive and ensure a minimum number of six members.

The Chairperson: What about that one on the chair and deputy chair?

Ms Haughey: OK. There is one more, an amendment to clause 25, page 11, line 29: leave out subsection (3) and insert new subsection (3):

"The chair and deputy chair of the council shall be ex officio non-voting members of the executive."

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clauses 26 to 33 agreed to.

Clause 34 (Reference of matters to overview and scrutiny committee etc.)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 34, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 35 to 49 agreed to.

The Chairperson: I have been requested to return to clause 25. Let me just confirm that Members are content with the three suggested Committee amendments.

Members indicated assent.

Clause 50 (Application to committees and sub-committees)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 50, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 51 to 57 agreed to.

Clause 58 (Investigations)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 58, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 59 to 61 agreed to.

Clause 62 (Decision following report)

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with clause 62, subject to the proposed departmental amendment and Committee amendment to specify grounds of appeal?

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 62, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: Do you need Éilis to talk you through that?

Mr Boylan: No, we are content to agree.

Ms Haughey: We do not have a drafted amendment yet, Chair.

Clause 63 (Decisions on interim reports)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 63, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 64 (Recommendations)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 64, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 65 to 67 agreed to.

Clause 68 (Interpretation)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 68, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 69 to 77 agreed to.

Clause 78 (Duties of departments in relation to community planning)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 78, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 79 to 84 agreed to.

Clause 85 (Powers to make supplemental provision)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 85, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 86 to 94 agreed to.

Clause 95 (Improvement planning and publication of improvement information)

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with clause 95, subject to Committee amendment and one departmental amendment as well?

The Committee Clerk: We have not got a departmental amendment.

The Chairperson: No? Just the Committee amendment. Éilis could quickly mention that.

Ms Haughey: The Committee had previously requested that an amendment be prepared to grant an enabling power to the Department to amend the date in clause 95(3)(a).

Question, That the Committee is content with the clause, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 96 (Improvement information and planning)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 96, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 97 agreed to.

Clause 98 (Audit and assessment reports)

Clause 98 agreed to.

The Chairperson: We do not have a Committee amendment on this one? Yes, we have. Sorry, I will read that again.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 98, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 99 to 105 agreed to.

Clause 106 (Partnership Panel)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 106, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 107 to 110 agreed to.

Clause 111 (Power to repeal provisions relating to surcharge, etc.)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 111, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 112 to 115 agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with new clause 115A?

The Chairperson: Yes? I did not hear you.

Mr Boylan: You paused there, Chair. Is that a capital A?

The Chairperson: Capital A, yes.

Question, That the Committee is content with the new clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 116 agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with new clause 117A?

Question, That the Committee is content with the new clause, put and agreed to.

Clause 118 agreed to.

New Clause

The Chairperson: There is a new clause after clause 119. We need to see clause 119 too. We have not said 119.

The Committee Clerk: We have got 119. That is a new clause too.

The Chairperson: OK. New clause after clause 119.

Question, That the Committee is content with the new clause, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: Do we need to call out clause 119?

The Committee Clerk: It just comes under new clause after 119.

The Chairperson: We just say, "Is the Committee content with the clause as amended?".

Ms Haughey: We need to put the question on clause 119 as it stands, as well as the new clause — the existing clause 119.

Clause 119 agreed to.

Clause 120 agreed to.

Clause 121 (Schemes for transfers of assets and liabilities)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 121, subject to the proposed amendments, put and agreed to.

Clause 122 (Compensation for loss of office or diminution of emoluments)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 122, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 123 (Supplementary and transitional provisions for the purposes of this Act and other purposes)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 123, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 124 (Interpretation)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 124, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clause 125 (Regulations and orders)

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 125, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Clauses 126 to 128 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Schedule 4 (Appointment of councillors to committees, etc.)

The Chairperson: Schedule 4 is subject to a proposed Committee amendment. Éilis, can you explain about that, please?

Ms Haughey: We do not have the text of an amendment yet, but the Committee requested that we prepare an amendment to ensure that the formula for appointments to committees be run for all committee positions at once for the duration of the council term based on the number of seats that each party has immediately after the election. It is a recommendation that an amendment be developed, so the question will be on schedule 4 subject to such an amendment.

The Chairperson: Is the Committee content with schedule 4, subject to the Committee amendment?

Mr Milne: I just have a question. I have some experience in council. After the chair and vice-chair, how is it decided what committee comes next? There has to be some kind of formula or procedure.

Mr Eastwood: Usually d'Hondt is run within —

Mr Milne: Yes, I know that it runs on one after the other —

Mr Eastwood: It is your choice to pick which Committee, is that not right?

Mr Milne: Yes, but who decides which committee comes after the chair and the vice-chair?

The Chairperson: Is it up to the party? Is that what Colum is saying?

Mr Eastwood: You would be picking the chair of each committee as well. Say our party was up first; we would pick the chair of the development committee, or whatever it is. Then, if you are next, you pick the chair of environment, and then it runs through the membership. Is that not right?

Mr Boylan: That is the normal process. Where do you see an issue?

Mr Milne: With putting other members onto the committee. After the chair and vice-chair of the committee, how do we select further members? I am of the opinion that I would say, "Right, we elect someone onto the housing group", because I wanted to fit in with the way that d'Hondt runs. How is all that determined?

The Chairperson: I know what you mean, because there are so many different committees.

Mr Milne: It is very important.

Mr Eastwood: Normally, what happens is that each committee is the same size. Those positions are given out based on the size of your party. The largest party gets a certain number, and so on. You get numbers, and the party then slots in the members. Isn't that the way it works?

Mr Boylan: Yes, you pick out the committee chairs first right across the committees, and you fill the positions.

Mr Eastwood: The chairs first, and, after that, you have a certain number.

The Chairperson: For whatever you want, spreading it out, generally; is that right?

Mr Eastwood: No. Say, we had four members. If we had the chair, there will only be three members after that. It is then up to the party to nominate the three or four members onto the committee. The committee numbers in each committee will also be decided by d'Hondt separately. Do you know what I mean?

Mr Boylan: Are you happy enough?

Mr Milne: Yes, that makes more sense.

The Chairperson: That is normally the way that it is done; is that right?

Mr Boylan: You go down through each committee. You take the chair and the main positions and then fill the committees out.

The Chairperson: Whichever committee you want to fill, you put it in: is that right?

Mr Eastwood: After the chairs and deputy chairs, there is a set number based on d'Hondt. You run d'Hondt separately.

Mr Boylan: That is the way you run it.

The Chairperson: OK. Are members agreed with that one? Do you want me to read it again?

Mr Boylan: Yes, Chair. Read it into the record.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 4, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedules 5 to 8 agreed to.

Schedule 9 (Minor and consequential amendments relating to local government audit)

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 9, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 10 agreed to.

Schedule 11 (Minor and consequential amendments: general)

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 11, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

Schedule 12 (Repeals)

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 12, subject to the proposed amendment, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson: OK, members. Thank you very much. That concludes formal clause-by-clause consideration of the Bill. The draft report will be brought forward for members' consideration at our next meeting, which is an additional meeting next Tuesday, from 12.30 pm until 2.00 pm, in Room 29. The draft will be sent to members.

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 17 January 2014

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will appoint representatives to the UK Commission on Child Poverty and Social Mobility.
(AQW 23501/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): This matter is currently under consideration.

Childcare Strategy

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what guarantee they can give that the childcare strategy will be published and implemented before the introduction of the provisions contained in the Welfare Reform Bill.
(AQW 27555/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: "Bright Start" was launched on 25 September 2013. The first phase of the Bright Start Strategy sets out a strategic direction and lists 15 key first actions that will be put in place to address the main childcare priorities identified during consultation and research. All key actions will be initiated in 2013/14.

The Executive has yet to conclude its discussions on Welfare Reform.

Social Investment Fund: South-eastern Zone

Mr Dunne asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the Social Investment Fund implementation in the South East zone.
(AQW 28553/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Ten projects were submitted by the South Eastern Steering Group and are currently going through the appropriate economic appraisal procedures. On the basis of present projections, we are hopeful of supporting all these projects, subject to satisfactory economic appraisals. Until this work is completed it is not possible to comment further.

Victims and Survivors Service: Update

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Victims and Survivors Service.
(AQO 5114/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Victims and Survivors Service has undertaken nearly 2,000 individual needs reviews and funded a total of 68 Victims and Survivors groups to date.

However, we are aware that issues have been raised in relation to the Service, which we take extremely seriously. We have therefore established a Programme Board, chaired by the Director of Equality and Strategy Directorate. The Commissioner for Victims and Survivors, Kathryn Stone, and the VSS Chief Executive, Anne Dorbie, also sit on the Board along with Special Advisors.

We will work together to resolve these issues and see this through to a conclusion to ensure that victims and survivors receive the best possible support.

City of Culture 2013: Tenders and Funding

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) tenders awarded; and (ii) funding provided to organisations in Derry to deliver the City of Culture 2013.
(AQW 28766/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In relation to the City of Culture's 2013 cultural programme, all contracts were entered into with Derry City Council, therefore the Department did not award any tenders.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure secured approval for a business case to provide £12.6m funding for the City of Culture programme which was paid to Derry City Council. This included a contribution of £1.5m from OFMDFM through Ilex. In addition, a further contribution of £250k was provided by OFMDFM through Ilex to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to assist with the marketing of the city during 2013.

Child Poverty

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the forecast by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that child poverty is set to increase significantly by 2020 based on their current policy interventions, (i) whether they intend to maintain the income based measurement of child poverty; (ii) whether they intend to meet their statutory targets to reduce child poverty under the Child Poverty Act; and (iii) what additional progressive interventions they intend to undertake to meet these obligations.
(AQW 28987/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) on Child and Working-Age Poverty in Northern Ireland from 2010 to 2020, published in May 2013, was commissioned by our Department to inform our work to tackle poverty and disadvantage. These projections are necessarily subject to uncertainties and limitations, which are noted in the report. IFS is working on an update using more recent data and we hope to publish in the New Year.

We are required, under the Child Poverty Act 2010, to publish a Child Poverty Strategy that contributes to meeting the targets set out in the Act, which are measured by household income.

We published the Executive's Child Poverty Strategy, Improving Children's Life Chances, in March 2011. In pursuit of the targets required by the Act, this Strategy sets out two key strands of work to address the causes and consequences of child poverty: reducing poorly paid work and unemployment amongst adults with children; and improving longer-term prospects through child-based interventions which are designed to tackle the cyclical nature of child poverty. Annual reports on progress were produced in 2012 and 2013 and are available on our department's website.

We are required to adhere to the Child Poverty Act and report progress against its targets and measures until 2020. In addition, in the Programme for Government 2011-15, the Executive made a commitment to deliver a range of measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion through the Delivering Social Change Framework. This was a new approach to tackling multi-generational poverty, based on additional, strategic actions which can make a difference, ultimately with a view to improving long-term outcomes. Delivering Social Change represents a new level of collaborative working across departments. We have sought to drive real initiatives which will have genuine impact on the ground through our seven Delivering Social Change Signature programmes.

Teachers are being recruited to deliver tuition to primary school pupils who are struggling with reading and maths at Key Stage 2 and post-primary pupils who are not projected to get a 'C' grade in English or Maths. Twenty additional Nurture Units are being created in local primary schools to help address barriers to learning among children arising from social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Trained staff will select the children who will benefit most from additional support and develop individual learning plans agreed with parents and teachers.

Parenting programmes have been developed which will provide support to new parents living in areas of deprivation. Sixteen existing Family Support Hubs are receiving additional support to provide early intervention family support services and 10 new Hubs will be established by April 2014. A targeted intervention programme to support young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training and their families will also be rolled out; providing work placements, skills training and employment advice.

The programmes will also see investment in local communities. Eleven Social Enterprise Hubs will offer business advice and practical support to social enterprise entrepreneurs to encourage social enterprise business start-ups within local communities and £1.6 million is being invested to enhance play and leisure opportunities.

In addition, we continue to commission research to identify best practice and inform our work to tackle child poverty. In October, we published a Child Poverty Outcomes Framework, developed by the National Children's Bureau and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, to support a cross-departmental approach to reduce child poverty. This Framework seeks to identify interventions which will improve outcomes.

We are currently reviewing our Child Poverty Strategy and using the Child Poverty Outcomes Framework to develop a new strategy, under the banner of Delivering Social Change, to improve outcomes for all of our children.

Social Investment Fund: South-eastern Zone

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many applications for funding in the South East zone of the Social Investment Fund (i) have been submitted; (ii) are currently being processed; and (iii) have been approved.
(AQW 29118/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Ten projects were submitted by the South Eastern Steering Group. Four of these projects have full approvals in place and the other six are currently going through the appropriate appraisal procedures. On the basis of present projections we are hopeful of supporting all these projects, subject to satisfactory economic appraisals.

Child Abuse

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action their Department and its arm's-length bodies are taking to protect children from abuse through the internet.
(AQW 29147/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We recognise that while the internet offers new opportunities for children to expand their knowledge and experience, it also brings risks. The Executive is committed to ensuring children and young people are protected from abuse including through the internet.

Over the last year, OFMDFM has taken forward a range of actions to protect children from abuse through the internet, including:

- the commissioning of research to gain a better understanding of internet use by P7 pupils;
- engagement with the UK Safer Internet Centre, including involvement in Safer Internet Day activities on 5 February 2013; and
- a review of activity on internet safety across relevant departments to identify current actions, gaps and any further actions that may be required to address risks.

We have used existing cross-departmental structures such as the Delivering Social Change Programme Board and Children's Champions to ensure work is co-ordinated across the Executive.

In addition, OFMDFM has contributed to work which is being taken forward by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to evaluate the effectiveness of current internet safety messages for children and young people, parents and practitioners.

Junior Ministers have also met the Adviser to the EU Commissioner for the Digital Agenda to consider how we could work with the EU to address the issue of child internet safety, including raising awareness of cyber bullying.

In light of its concerns over internet safety, the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has updated its 'Social Media Policy' and it's 'Social Media Guidelines' in relation to the participation of children and young people. NICCY's Legal and Investigations Department deals with casework on a daily basis, some of which involve issues in relation to internet safety.

Childcare: Bright Start

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how 3000 childcare places will be provided by social enterprise through the Bright Start Community Childcare Programme.
(AQW 29228/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We propose to sustain or create the 3,000 childcare places for school age children through a grant funding scheme. The detail of the proposed grant scheme is currently in development with a view to launching early in 2014.

Childcare: Bright Start

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a breakdown of the budget for programmes provided for in the Bright Start Strategy.
(AQW 29230/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department continues to work on the detailed costings for several of the key first actions set out in the first phase of Bright Start. As a consequence, we are not in a position to provide a breakdown of the budget for each of the programmes in Bright Start. However, we are intending on making more details available on this shortly.

Childcare: Bright Start

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the need for the number of extra childcare places being provided for under the Bright Start Strategy was established.
(AQW 29231/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Bright Start's key first actions aim to address the priority childcare needs that were identified during public consultation and research. These needs included a lack of provision for school age children; for children with disabilities; and for children in rural areas. The additional childcare places envisaged under the first phase of Bright Start represent a major step towards addressing these needs.

Childcare: Bright Start

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide further detail on the Bright Start Childcare Information Programme.
(AQW 29232/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Under the first phase of the Bright Start Childcare Strategy, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is enhancing the Family Support NI website. This includes a new childcare specific search facility that is already operational. The facility enables parents to search for childcare services in their area and filter the results by a number of categories – eg the type of childcare being provided, any current vacancies, and the hours during which the childcare services are available.

DHSSPS has also commissioned a social media application. This will replicate the Family Support NI information and enable parents to search for childcare services using smart phones.

Delivering Social Change: Child Poverty

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures will be incorporated as part of delivering social change to address child poverty.
(AQW 29353/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Delivering Social Change is about reducing poverty and associated issues, across all ages; and an improvement in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities, breaking the cycle of multi-generational problems.

Six Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes, specifically focused on children and families, are currently being implemented to address the causes and consequences of poverty. In October, we announced a seventh Signature Programme to enhance play and leisure opportunities for children and young people. A range of possible future initiatives are also under consideration.

We are currently reviewing our Child Poverty Strategy, Improving Children's Life Chances, and aim to publish a new strategy, setting out future measures to address child poverty under the banner of Delivering Social Change, in March 2014.

Children's Services

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have any plans to improve the integration of planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services; and to provide further details.
(AQW 29401/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Direct responsibility for the planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services falls within the remit of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

However, the Member will be aware of the work we are taking forward through the Delivering Social Change framework to provide a co-ordinated approach across the Executive to reduce poverty and bring about improvements in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities.

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Update

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse led by Justice Hart.
(AQO 5252/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse has been up and running since October 2012, when its confidential Acknowledgement Forum began hearing accounts from victims and survivors.

Of course, the Inquiry is independent from government and, subject to the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act and Rules, the procedure and conduct of the Inquiry are directed by the Chairperson.

However, we note that applications from those victims and survivors who wished to be heard by the Inquiry closed on Friday 29 November 2013. Over that 14-month period, the Inquiry has received 433 applications. The Inquiry will commence its oral hearings in the former Banbridge Courthouse today. This will focus on opening statements by the Chairperson Sir Anthony Hart and Christine Smith QC, Senior Counsel to the Inquiry.

Hearings will initially focus on Institutions at Termonbacca and Sisters of Nazareth, Bishop Street Derry/Londonderry. The dates for the subsequent hearings will be announced by the Inquiry in due course.

The Inquiry's terms of reference anticipate that it will have completed all its work by January 2016.

Social Investment Fund: Update

Mr Irwin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the Social Investment Fund.
(AQO 5258/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We have agreed indicative financial allocations for each of the nine Social Investment Fund zones. Officials have subsequently met with the Chairs of the nine Steering Groups and then with each Steering Group to agree the projects within each of the area plans which can be funded within the available resources for the zone and to discuss the next steps to progress the delivery of these projects. We expect that the first tranche of projects will receive letters of offer in the coming weeks.

Officials are currently focusing further efforts on securing approval to those projects which sit within the limits of affordability within each zone but have not yet been fully approved. We anticipate completing this exercise by the end of the current financial year.

International Relations Strategy

Mr I McCrea asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the development of an International Relations Strategy.
(AQO 5260/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The International Relations Strategy reflecting recent international visits and activity has been circulated to Executive Ministers for consideration and comment and will be discussed at a forthcoming Executive Meeting.

St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena

Mr Frew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on a strategy for lands at St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena.
(AQO 5261/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are working with the Department for Social Development and Ballymena Borough Council to develop strategic plans for the St Patrick's site. Interested stakeholders within the public sector have been identified and regular meetings are held with them to discuss progressing development of the site.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Rural Crime

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to cluster areas of rural crime where there have been multiple livestock and agricultural machinery theft, (i) whether any evidence has emerged of criminal gangs operating to order; and (ii) whether any links to the crimes in localised areas have been identified.
(AQW 29207/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Responsibility for tackling crime, including rural crime, lies primarily with the PSNI and the Department of Justice. My Department does not hold the information you ask for.

I understand that the PSNI holds statistical and other information relating to crime.

Coastal Defences: Strangford

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assessment has been made of the coastal defences in the Strangford constituency as a result of the recent tidal surges.
(AQW 29513/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The sea defences which protect Newtownards and Downpatrick were severely tested during the recent storms. Early indications are that the defences performed well and the Agency has already commenced a post-event inspection programme.

Coastal Defences: Strangford

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the additional resources he will make available for the repair and improvement of coastal defences in the Strangford constituency, particularly around the Ards Peninsula.
(AQW 29514/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency's responsibilities include the sea defences which protect Newtownards and Downpatrick and there is no doubt that these defences were severely tested during the recent storms.

I am pleased to advise that Rivers Agency's initial assessment suggests that these defences performed well and the Agency has already commenced a post-event inspection programme of its defences. The findings of these inspections will dictate whether additional resources will be required for repairs or improvement.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the level of progress her Department has made in eradicating Bovine TB in cattle.
(AQW 29524/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: TB herd incidence has fallen from its peak of 7.46% at 31 October 2012 to reach 6.48% at 30 November 2013. Whilst there has been slight fluctuation in the herd incidence level on 2 occasions during this period, there has been a 24.3% reduction in the number of animals removed as reactors in the 11 months ending 30 November 2013 when compared with the same period in the previous year, with a corresponding 13.5% reduction in the number of new herd breakdowns. In addition, since November 2012 there has been a downward trend in % animal incidence.

While this reduction is welcome, I am not complacent and it is my aim to achieve a sustained and progressive reduction towards the ultimate eradication of TB in cattle here.

Coastal Defences: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding is available for the strengthening of coastal defences; and what (i) capital; and (ii) resources are allocated to this task.
(AQW 29562/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency is responsible for some 26 km of designated coastal flood defences which are subject to a rolling programme of inspection and maintenance. River Agency's initial assessment following the recent events in early January suggests that these defences performed well. A more extensive inspection of these defences is underway. Should this inspection identify the need for works, these will be given appropriate priority from the Agency's total opening budget allocation of £24.5m for the coming financial year.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) how farmers, who realise they had inadvertently claimed ineligible land in a field, can correct mistakes after submitting their Single Farm Payment claims; and (ii) who farmers should contact and the timeframe they have to rectify mistakes after submitting their forms.
(AQW 29572/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

(i) If farmers have inadvertently claimed ineligible land, they can remove this at any time after the submission of their application, provided the Department has not already told them of an error with their application, or they have not been given notice that an on-the-spot check will be or has been carried out.

If the correction affects the Maximum Eligible Area of the field then the farmer should also complete a Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS) correction form to enable the Department to update the mapping system.

(ii) To amend their Single Application Form (SAF), farmers should complete and return the SAF 3 (included in their Single Application packs) or put their request in writing to Single Farm Payment Branch in Orchard House. The LPIS correction form should be sent to their local DARD Direct Office.

Advice on amendments, corrections or withdrawals of single application forms is clearly set out in each year's Guide on how to complete the Single Application and Field Data Sheet. For 2014 applications, this Guide will be issued to claimants in mid-March 2014.

Flooding: Risk Management

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, further to the expiration of the Statement of Principles governing flood risk management, what consultation she has engaged in to ensure adequate insurance provisions are in place to provide for those affected by localised flooding.
(AQW 29592/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I, along with officials from my Department, have had regular contact with representatives of the Association of British Insurers (ABI), DEFRA Ministers and officials from Departments in England, Scotland and Wales on the replacement to the Statement of Principles on Flood Insurance. Specifically, I met with the ABI as far back as November 2012 to discuss options for a replacement for the Statement of Principles. I have written to DEFRA Ministers on a number of occasions, stressing the need to ensure that home insurance, including provision for flooding, remains available and affordable for all residents in the north of Ireland and that this is adequately reflected in any agreed solution. Senior officials from Rivers Agency have also worked closely with DEFRA on the potential options to replace the Statement of Principles, which were subject to public consultation last year. As insurance is a reserved matter, the new arrangements will also apply to the north of Ireland and are being brought onto the Statute book using the Water Bill in Westminster.

Farming: Arable Land

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the amount of acreage of land used for arable farming in (i) 1982; (ii) 1992; (iii) 2002; and (iv) 2012.
(AQW 29665/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Information on arable land use is collected by DARD as part of the annual June Agricultural and Horticultural Survey. The total arable area and summary information on the main activities for selected years is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Area Under Arable Production (ha), 1982-2012

Year	Wheat	Oats	Barley	Other Cereals	Potatoes	Field Vege-tables	Other Arable[1]	Total
1982	1,039	2,727	48,632	567	13,252	1,292	6,655	74,164
1992	7,638	2,028	37,941	143	11,124	1,538	5,524	65,936
2002	7,235	2,351	28,455	56	6,708	1,519	6,323	52,647
2012	9,395	1,879	25,533	259	4,150	1,253	10,544	53,013

Source: June Agricultural and Horticultural Survey, selected years, DARD.

Note 1: Other Arable includes maize and arable forage crops, fruit, short rotation coppice willow and ornamental plants.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 5265/11-15, whether the delay in processing Single Farm Payments is a result of matching aerial photographs with existing field maps.
(AQW 29756/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Calculations of payments to approximately 3,000 Single Farm Payment claimants have not yet been completed for a range of reasons. They remain to be completed, not as a result of matching aerial photographs with existing field maps, but for a range of reasons including the need to update field maps in the light of inspection findings, the need to have bank details from claimants, the need to investigate claims greater than the maximum eligible area, the need for feedback from two parties where two businesses have claimed the same field and the need for the completion of probate or inheritance proceedings.

Wind Turbines

Mr Wilson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on how many Forest Service sites will wind turbines be installed.
(AQO 5264/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Mr Speaker with your permission I will answer questions 2 and 8 together.

At the start of January 2014 a Wind Farm Development Manager joined Forest Service on secondment from the Strategic Investment Board. We know from market soundings, that there is likely to be strong interest in developing some of the potential forestry sites but at this stage it is premature to speculate about the number or location of the sites that will be developed.

As the main benefits from wind farm operations are felt by the wider economy it is only proper that local communities affected by schemes receive a more direct benefit from energy projects.

Hence what we on this side are anxious to do is protect local communities from the damaging effects of energy generation from whatever source and, where the public interest is clearly in favour of projects going ahead, to ensure local communities are adequately recompensed. For that reason I am keen to see Forest Service projects become a test bed for schemes that provide community benefits from wind farms. The new wind farm manager will be looking closely at the models that have already been developed in other jurisdictions.

In general terms I look for communities to benefit by becoming an active participant in projects from concept through to operation, as well as seeing material gains from jobs in construction and maintenance, in supplying hotel accommodation and other services; and in community benefits schemes producing monetary or "in-kind" benefits as payments for access and as recompense for disruption.

Single Farm Payments

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the percentage of Single Farm Payments made since 1 December 2013.
(AQO 5269/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: To date, 92% of Single Farm Payment claims have been finalised since the opening of the payment window on 1 December 2013. The Department set its highest payment target ever for December 2013 at 85% and significantly exceeded it by finalising 90% of claims. More farmers received their Single Farm Payment in December 2013 than ever before.

The value of Single Farm Payments made so far is £238.75 million and is a vital element of farm incomes. The improved payment performance this year is a welcome boost for the farming industry and the wider rural economy.

Wind Farms

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the benefits of the proposed wind farms on Forest Service land to the local communities.
(AQO 5270/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At the start of January 2014 a Wind Farm Development Manager joined Forest Service on secondment from the Strategic Investment Board. We know from market soundings, that there is likely to be strong interest in developing some of the potential forestry sites but at this stage it is premature to speculate about the number or location of the sites that will be developed.

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Marine Research and Seafood Sector Low-carbon Road Map

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she intends to participate in the consultation process, recently launched by her counterpart in the Republic of Ireland, on the preparation of a Marine Research and Seafood Sector Low Carbon Roadmap.
(AQO 5271/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has not participated directly in the preliminary stakeholder consultation on the preparation of a Marine Research and Seafood Sector Low Carbon Roadmap launched by Minister Coveney on 5 December and which ended on Friday 27 December 2013.

The Department of the Environment is the lead Department for cross cutting climate change issues and, given the consultation was not exclusively fishing focused, but included coastal infrastructure and wider environmental issues, it would have been the appropriate department to consider input into the consultation.

My Department has provided input to the Climate Change Risk Assessments that have informed the DOE's soon to be published Climate Change Adaptation Programme which encompasses all sectors of the local economy including the marine environment.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why she sought to transfer funds from the Pillar 1 to the Pillar 2 budget of the Common Agricultural Policy without the agreement of the Executive.
(AQO 5272/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The reform of the CAP and the development and delivery of the RDP are absolute core elements of my remit as Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development. These are key policy and operational roles for my Department.

I firmly believed that I am best placed to balance the numerous and often very complex issues which play into decisions on CAP funding. Taking account of legal advice, I believed that I had the authority to take this decision to transfer 7% of the Direct Payments funds. As Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development, I have dealt with all aspects of CAP reform for over 2½ years.

I had taken previous similar decisions, in particular the decision in 2012 not to apply an additional year of voluntary modulation, without any of these decisions being challenged. Indeed, my predecessor's decisions on the transfer of funds from direct payments to rural development were not challenged.

The Court held that the issue met the criterion of being significant or controversial and outside the Programme for Government. In fact, the judgement was that the issue was significant and controversial.

Rural Development Programme

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the level of funding available for the next Rural Development Programme following the zero percent transfer rate from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2.
(AQO 5273/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The eventual shape and size of the Programme will ultimately depend on the resources that are available. The notification of a 0% transfer from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 has the potential to reduce the scope and flexibility of the next Programme.

Funding for the Rural Development Programme is drawn from a number of sources. We know the amount of funding we already have allocated to us from Europe, which is approximately 227 million euro.

DARD also contributes to the Programme from its own budget. I am continuing to discuss with my officials how much money from DARD's own budget can be used to fund the Programme.

The onus is now on all of us in the Executive to come up to the mark and make available funds to bridge the deficit which will support the farming sector, enhance the environment and meet the needs of rural communities.

Aquaculture

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she will progress the aquaculture industry. **(AQO 5274/11-15)**

Mrs O'Neill: I have just written to Minister Rabbitte in the south suggesting we convene an All Island Aquaculture Shellfish Conference to look at issues of importance to the aquaculture sector. The Conference will look at research that is currently being undertaken on diseases affecting the shellfish sector, particularly the Oyster Herpes Virus and to identify what lessons can be learned to benefit the industry. The Conference will consider other issues of interest to the sector including licensing regimes, environmental issues, education and training, funding and marketing opportunities.

My Department continues to co-fund the Cross Border Aquaculture Initiative. This organisation provides a range of support services for the sustainable development of aquaculture and represents the interests of the aquaculture industry on a number of government lead groups. On 30 July 2013, our Bottom Grown Mussels received the prestigious Marine Stewardship Council certification. An Aquaculture Representative Group was established and I had a very positive meeting with representatives from the Group in November.

My Department also continues to provide EU funding for capital grant projects under the European Fisheries Fund Aquaculture Measure. To date, the aquaculture sector has received £1.02m. The Reformed Common Fisheries Policy aims to give a higher priority to promoting the sustainable development and to enhancing the competitiveness of EU aquaculture. This will help to underpin the recommendations of Going for Growth which is currently being taken forward.

EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the December Fisheries Council. **(AQO 5275/11-15)**

Mrs O'Neill: This was a tough Council, we faced an initial proposal for a large 24% cut in the quota for Area VII prawns and I pressed hard for a sustainable quota that reflected the scientific advice and fishing patterns.

In spite of scientific advice that was only 8.4% less than last year, the Commission frustratingly sought a much larger reduction. I was successful in getting the cut down to 9% which is broadly in line with the scientific advice.

The Council result, across the range of our most important stocks in the Irish Sea and western waters, saw increases in Herring, Anglerfish, and Hake quotas, but with cuts in haddock, plaice and cod. I think this was a reasonable result given the Commission's initial proposals. The cut in the prawn quota can be mitigated over the year through banking of unused quota from 2013 and the use of the quota swap system. Finally, I was pleased that the Commission agreed to our argument for no changes to the number of days at sea that can be fished by the local fleet.

Rural White Paper

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she will progress the Rural White Paper. **(AQO 5276/11-15)**

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural White Paper Action Plan is an Executive initiative aimed at improving the wellbeing of rural communities and contains commitments by all Departments across a wide range of rural issues and challenges.

I am pleased to report that good progress has been made by Departments in delivering their commitments in the Action Plan during its first year of operation since it was launched in June 2012. The first Annual Progress Report on the Rural White Paper Action Plan has now been published and is available on the DARD website.

I see the Rural White Paper Action Plan as a live initiative which continues to respond to the needs of rural dwellers and I intend to ask my Executive colleagues to identify within their Departments new and challenging actions for inclusion in a refreshed Action Plan during 2014.

I also propose looking at how complementary initiatives such as rural champion and rural proofing could help deliver benefits more effectively for our rural communities and I have asked my officials to explore potential options for taking forward this work.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Sports: Representation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the recent report by the Independent Working Group Examining Boxing in Ulster, what plans her Department has to address barriers which prevent sports people from Northern Ireland from representing the UK at international events like the Olympics.
(AQW 29383/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): My Department is fully supportive of the principle that sports people from the north of Ireland can choose to represent either Britain, or Ireland, at International Events. My Department will support Sport NI in its collaborations with other sports councils to provide and enhance guidance to sports governing bodies operating in Britain and Ireland on their responsibilities under the Good Friday Agreement.

In addition, my Department, through Sport NI, provides support to local athletes to enable them to meet the performance standards necessary to qualify for international competition. However, athletes must also meet the required eligibility and selection criteria of the sports concerned. The criteria will vary across the sports and will be dependent on the affiliation structures within the sport, the rules and processes of their governing organisations, and the rules, eligibility and selection criteria applied by the competition organising committees.

Creative Industries

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact that increased funding for arts initiatives could have in stimulating the growth of the creative industries.
(AQO 5285/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Vibrant and creative places and initiatives play a vital role in helping creative ideas, entrepreneurs and businesses to emerge and flourish. The arts and cultural sector provides a crucial ecosystem which helps to develop knowledge, skills, training and networks that contribute to the development of the creative industries.

Many people will, for example, learn their craft in community and professional theatre and then move onto areas such as television, film, music and more broadly onto education and community development.

Derry's term as City of Culture has clearly demonstrated the transformative power of the cultural sector to support a confident, creative, informed and healthy society. Key events such as the CultureTECH festival and the Fab Lab initiative have raised international awareness of the city as a hub for innovation and the creative industries. Initiatives such as DCAL's Creative Learning Centre in Derry, and those elsewhere, are supporting digital and creative skills and inspiring the next generation of creative entrepreneurs and businesses.

My plans for City of Culture legacy will therefore support the economic potential to grow our creative industries and further develop the blend of skills around creativity and entrepreneurship needed in the global economy.

Our arts and cultural landscape can help more of our young people, and more people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, to flourish. That is why I intend to make a bid to the Executive to support ongoing and new interventions which maximise City of Culture benefits and strengthen Derry and the North West as a regional driver for innovation and the creative industries.

Suicide Prevention

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any plans to provide additional support for suicide prevention.
(AQO 5286/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has made a significant contribution in promoting mental well-being and awareness of suicide prevention through Sport, the Arts and Libraries. This includes:

- The DCAL Strategy for Sport: 'Sport Matters' which is a key contributor to the DHSSPS Suicide Prevention Strategy, Protect Life.
- A commitment to pilot a programme of suicide awareness and prevention training in two areas or the north identified as having high levels of suicide.
- I have also provided funding of £500k per year, for the period 2012/13 to 2014/15to the IFA for a Health Programme, part of which will address issues around suicide awareness.
- DCAL provided £42k through Sport NI to deliver an awareness programme to support the existing Public Health Agency campaign and carrying the "Minding Your Head" message.
- The Libraries NI Health in Mind programme, in partnership with mental health charities, provides positive mental health and wellbeing information.
- The Arts Council's Youth Arts Strategy includes a commitment to pilot a youth sector initiative aimed at young people at risk of poor mental health.

Re-imaging Communities Programme

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of previous reimaging schemes for sectarian murals in the light of the creation of several new murals in recent months.
(AQO 5287/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The previous Re-imaging Communities Programme invested over £3.3million in 155 community projects across the north of Ireland. The programme, rooted in A Shared Future, brought together key statutory bodies and departments and delivered an integrated and co-ordinated approach to addressing the issues of flags, emblems and sectional symbols in the north of Ireland. While it is always disappointing to learn of the creation of new sectarian murals, the Re-Imaging Communities evaluation concluded that the programme has been a considerable success both in relation to its own aims and objectives and also in relation to the wider context of inter-group relations across the north of Ireland. In addition, the report highlighted significant benefits to communities including increased community cohesion through strengthening relationships, the development of links between communities and Councils and an increased willingness for individuals and communities to dissociate from division and hostility.

The new "Building Peace Through the Arts – Re-Imaging Communities Programme" is currently underway after its launch in April 2013.

iPads: Pilot Scheme

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on how the pilot scheme for iPads for deprived areas will be developed, including which areas will benefit.
(AQO 5288/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During this financial year my Department is providing start-up support to pilot community initiatives across Belfast to highlight the benefit of mobile technologies in supporting formal and informal education and learning, as well as health and wellbeing initiatives.

It builds on the work of the DCAL supported Creative Learning Centres and their programmes for schools and young people in the use of new creative digital technologies. This work has a core remit of providing support to those from disadvantaged areas and backgrounds.

Although the initial focus is finalising on approximately four or five initiatives across Greater Belfast, I hope that the outcomes and positive impact of these pilot projects can lead to an expanded scheme across the region.

Arts: West Tyrone

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the level and extent of her Department's financial assistance towards promoting the Arts in West Tyrone in the last 3 years.
(AQO 5289/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The level and extent of my Department's financial assistance towards promoting the arts in West Tyrone in the last three years is as follows:

- The Arts Council provided a total of £57,850 to arts projects, examples include funding towards public art for the new acute hospital for the South West and the purchase of musical instruments and new arts equipment for arts venues;
- The Arts Council provided funding of £10,000 towards the Fleadh Uladh which took place in Dromore Co. Tyrone from 20 to 29 July 2013.
- NI Screen provided funding of £73,075 to schools in West Tyrone for children to participate in after school FILMCLUBs. This figure includes funding for a short film production.
- My Department provided funding of £0.5m towards the Tyrone GAA Centre of Participation at Garvaghy in 2013. The centre includes a range of sporting, culture and arts facilities including a 200 seat auditorium and Irish language facilities.
- Community Festivals funding of £73,700 was made available to the area. Of which, £41,100 was allocated to Omagh District Council and £32,600 was allocated to Strabane District Council.

Boxing: Funding

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following findings by the Independent Working Group that concluded that Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club was discriminated against, whether she will review the grants to local boxing authorities.
(AQO 5290/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no plans to review the grants to local boxing authorities.

The Independent Working Group made twelve recommendations in its report and DCAL and Sport NI will be available to provide practical support to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) as they take forward their considerations of these recommendations.

The current funding being provided to the IABA through the Boxing Investment Programme is to procure and supply boxing equipment, and to carry out technical surveys for facility improvements to eligible clubs across the north of Ireland.

The conditions of this grant include an equity clause to ensure that the facilities and premises assisted by the grant are used in an inclusive manner which will both aspire to and promote good relations. This has been accepted by the IABA.

C S Lewis Festival

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to further develop the C.S. Lewis Festival, organised by the East Belfast Partnership, following a successful first year.
(AQO 5291/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware of the highly successful, inaugural CS Lewis Festival which took place from 18-23 November 2013 to mark the 50th anniversary of his death and celebrate the life of one of the most talented authors in the world. I congratulate the East Belfast Partnership on the festival's success and it is important that this momentum is not lost.

I am committed to supporting the arts in East Belfast and my Department has assisted with funding in this financial year for the development of an arts strategy for the area. One way I can help develop the C.S Lewis Festival and the arts sector in East Belfast is to continue to provide support to implement the strategy which will help create a vibrant, creative and inclusive part of Belfast with thriving arts and creative industries.

I believe a CS Lewis legacy would be an appropriate and integral part of this vision, providing a platform to commemorate the life of this renowned author, theologian and academic who has brought our city international acclaim.

Department of Education

Childcare: Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of applications for childcare places made in the Foyle constituency in the last twelve months, broken down by provider; and the number of applications refused due to lack of spaces.
(AQW 29239/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Department of Education does not provide childcare. Its Pre-School Education Programme provides funded pre-school education places to children in the year immediately before they start compulsory education.

Admission to pre-school is preference based and parents are encouraged to list a number of preferences as it is not always possible to accommodate everyone's first choice. At the end of the 2013/14 admissions process, 99.9% of all children whose parents engaged fully with the process were placed with over 85% placed in their first preference setting.

All children in the Foyle constituency, whose parents engaged fully with the process, were placed. The Pre-School Education Advisory Group in the Western Education and Library Board will continue to ensure that sufficient provision is available in the area to meet demand.

The table below shows the number of funded pre-school education places available in each setting in the Foyle constituency and the number of first preference applications received by each setting for admissions in 2013/14.

Name of Setting	No. of Places Available	No. of 1st Preference Applications Received
Ashlea PS	26	31
New Buildings PS	26	34
Belmont Nursery School- Full-time	26	80
Belmont Nursery School - Part-time	52	4
Bligh's Lane Nursery School	52	59
Carnhill Nursery School	52	54
Chapel Road Community Playgroup	42	22
Craigbrack Pre-School Group	16	5
Drumahoe Community Playgroup	22	9
Ebrington PS	52	50
Eglinton PS	26	24

Name of Setting	No. of Places Available	No. of 1st Preference Applications Received
Eglinton Community Pre-School Centre	24	19
Fountain PS	26	16
Galliagh Nursery School	52	64
Glendermott PS	26	12
Good Shepherd PS	52	55
Greenhaw PS	52	51
Hollybush PS	52	43
Holy Child PS	52	40
Holy Family PS	52	77
Lisnagelvin Nursery School - Full-time	26	74
Lisnagelvin Nursery School - Part-time	52	7
Little Acorns Pre- School	10	2
Londonderry Model PS	26	40
Longtower PS	26	32
Mullabuoy Pre- School Centre	17	10
Naiscoil Dhoire	26	10
Naiscoil Eadain Mhoir	26	23
Naiscoil na Daroige	13	12
Nazareth House PS	26	29
Oakgrove Integrated PS	52	48
Rainbow Child and Family Centre	21	6
Rosemount PS	52	55
St Bernadette's Playgroup	24	6
St Brigid's PS	26	34
St Eugene's PS	26	20
St Joseph's Community Playgroup	16	14
St Paul's PS	26	16
Steelstown PS	26	44
Strathfoyle Nursery School	52	60
The Academy Nursery School - Full-time	26	61
The Academy Nursery School - Part-time	52	3
Trench Road Nursery School	52	59

Sure Start

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what percentage of children attended a Sure Start programme in each of the last five years; and how much was spent on Sure Start in each year.
(AQW 29283/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Sure Start is a programme targeted at parents and children under the age of 4 living in the top 20% most disadvantaged wards in the north.

DE delivers the Sure Start programme through the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), which has operational responsibility for the delivery of Sure Start. During 2012/13 HSCB developed and implemented a Sure Start database (Sure Start Play) funded by DE, to ensure future effective monitoring of activity within Sure Start projects from 2012/13 onwards.

Information on how many children were registered until the establishment of the database is not held centrally by DE or the HSCB and will have been collated in different ways by the various projects.

In respect of 2013/14 there are 127,324 children aged 0-4 living in the north of Ireland (Source NISRA 2012 Mid Years Population Estimates). 27% of those children (34191) are registered with Sure Start projects.

The budget for the Sure Start programme over the past 5 years was:

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Sure Start budget (£m)	17.561	20.666	21.935	21.600	22.352

Teachers: Retirees Re-employed

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education how many retired teachers have been re-employed as teachers since January 2013.
(AQW 29392/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not publish data in the format requested. However a comprehensive analysis of provision of substitute cover by retired teachers is contained in the statistical press release "Teacher Workforce Statistics In Grant Aided Schools In Northern Ireland 2012/13", published by the Statistics and Research Team on the Department's website. This can be found at www.deni.gov.uk/workforce_stats_press_release_for_web-3.pdf.

Table 20 in the document indicates for example that the total number of days worked by retired teachers providing substitute cover was 26,831 in the 2012/13 financial year.

The Department continues to advise employers that retired teachers should only be reemployed to provide short-term cover where newly qualified teachers or experienced non-retired teachers are unavailable.

Schools: Defibrillators

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work of the Education and Library Board's and British Heart Foundation's Inter-Board Working Group on defibrillators; and whether an approved product has been identified for use in schools.
(AQW 29447/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware that the Education and Library Boards and CCMS established an Inter-Board/CCMS working group (the Group) to consider and address the increased volume of queries from schools on the use of automatic external defibrillators (AEDs).

The Group is currently taking forward work to:

- draw up an AED specification and commence a public procurement competition;
- draw up an AED training specification and issue tender documentation;
- develop AED "safe-use" guidelines for schools.

I am pleased to advise that the ELBs have confirmed that draft school guidelines have been developed. In addition, work is at an advanced stage regarding the development of an AED training pack for schools.

The Group is also working to develop a specification for the AED and to progress the AED procurement process in line with the statutory requirements under European Union procurement regulations.

Schools: Defibrillators

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education what action he is taking to ensure that each school has a defibrillator and adequately trained staff to use the equipment.
(AQW 29448/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The decision on the part of a school to acquire a defibrillator and train staff in its use is a matter for each school individually. The health and safety of pupils and staff is the responsibility of the school management, accountable in the first instance to the Board of Governors. I have no plans to place any requirement upon schools in this regard.

However, I would refer the Member to my answer to the recent Written Assembly Question (29447/11-15) which details the current work of the joint Education and Library Board/CCMS working group on the use of automated external defibrillators in schools in this regard.

Integrated Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how his Department has discharged its statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the growth of integrated education further to the enactment of Article 69(1) of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.
(AQW 29517/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Firstly, I should clarify that the statutory duty (placed on the Department of Education) to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education sits within Article 64 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.

I take the Department of Education's statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education (that is to say, the education together, at school, of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils), very seriously.

The integrated sector continues to grow. In 2011, the schools' census indicated that there were 21,170 pupils attending 42 primary, and 20 post-primary integrated schools here. This has increased to 21,301 pupils according to the 2012 census figures.

To help discharge the statutory duty, my Department provides funding to the Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to assist with the encouragement and promotion of integrated education. A budget of £646k has been allocated for 2013/14.

In addition, DE also provides funding to help schools with the process of transformation to integrated status. This assists schools in the initial stages of the transformation process, and with the employment of a teacher from the minority community in the school to assist with religious education. The budget available for 2013/14 is £185k.

I recognise the vital and valuable contribution that the integrated sector, together with all sectors of education, makes to building a peaceful and stable future for our children.

Going forward, the Department of Education will ensure that it continues to have a rigorous approach to its duty to integrated education.

Educational Psychologists: South Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) longest; and (ii) average waiting time between a pupil being referred to an educational psychologist and having their first appointment, since June 2013, in the South Eastern Education and Library Board Area.
(AQW 29548/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The South Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed that the longest and the average waiting time between a pupil being referred to an educational psychologist and having their first appointment, during the period 3 June 2013 to 31 December 2013, is as follows:

Longest Waiting Time – 298 days*
Average Waiting Time – 116 days

*In some cases, such as very young pre-school children already in receipt of ongoing developmental and therapeutic support, it is accepted good practice to carry out the educational psychology assessment after the child has had this support so that the child's response to intervention can be taken into account as part of a comprehensive special educational needs assessment.

Kirkinriola Primary School

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the present round of reconstituting of Boards of Governors, whether his Department intends to again appoint (i) three governors to Kirkinriola Primary School; (ii) the chair of the Board of Governors; and, if so, what are the respective timescales, given that the Governors are presently without a chair.
(AQW 29577/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Currently there are two additional DE appointed governors serving Kirkinriola Primary School. As part of the reconstitution of school Boards of Governors the Department intends to:

(i) continue with the appointment of two additional governors to Kirkinriola Primary School; and

(ii) review the need for a DE appointed Chair in consultation with the North Eastern Education and Library Board,

in accordance with statutory requirements. The reconstitution process normally takes 12 to 18 months to complete but every effort is being made to expedite the process for Kirkinriola Primary School. When a vacancy occurs in the office of Chair or when the Chair is absent, the voting members can elect one of their number who is not a member of staff to act as Chair.

Kirkinriola Primary School

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has approved the action plan for Kirkinriola Primary School, arising from its intervention status; and, if not, what is the likely timescale for approval.
(AQW 29578/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The actions plans submitted by the school in March 2013 were cleared by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) in April 2013 and the school was notified accordingly on 29 April 2013.

A revised action plan relating to Strategic Leadership was forwarded to the Department on 22 November 2013. This action plan has also been seen by the ETI and the Department wrote to the school on 8 January 2014 to acknowledge the response that the school has made, and plans to make, regarding this area for improvement.

Kirkinriola Primary School

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education why there has been a delay in the appointment of a leadership mentor in Kirkinriola Primary School.
(AQW 29579/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Kirkinriola Primary School had a follow-up inspection in November 2012 and the current post-inspection action plan on strategic leadership includes a specific action to provide a leadership mentor. However, this action plan could not be agreed ahead of the school principal's return to work in August 2013 following a long-term absence.

From August 2013 a number of meetings took place between the principal and the North Education and Library Board's Curriculum Advisory Support Service (CASS) link officer to address issues within the action plan including the mentoring programme. The final action plan was agreed by the school's board of governors and forwarded to the Department on 22 November 2013. The Department has since written to the school to acknowledge the response that the school has made, and plans to make, regarding the key areas for improvement in strategic leadership.

The NEELB has advised that the mentoring programme has commenced and the first meeting took place on 18 December 2013.

Schools: Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Enhancement Scheme

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what was the total funding awarded to schools through the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Enhancement Scheme in (i) 2012/13; and (ii) 2013/14.
(AQW 29597/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I can confirm that the total funding awarded to schools through the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Enhancement Scheme was £221,995 in 2012/13. It is estimated that approximately £213,225 will be awarded in 2013/14.

Catholic Primary Schools: South Belfast

Mr Maskey asked the Minister of Education to detail the projected intake to Catholic Primary Schools in the South Belfast Constituency for the next academic year; and what provisions will be put in place for potential over subscription of these schools.
(AQW 29617/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The process for consideration of applications for admission to primary schools in September 2014 has only just begun with the closing date of Friday 10 January for receipt of applications from parents by schools. It will therefore be some time before the extent of oversubscription, (if any) in a particular area is known. The Education and Library Boards and the Department will work with schools in the period up to 30 April 2014, when letters issue advising parents of the primary school to which their child has been placed (or not), to ensure as far as possible that all pupils are placed in accordance with parental choice.

I am committed to ensuring that all children are placed in a school within their preferred educational sector that is within reasonable travelling distance of their home address. Where necessary the Department will consider an application from a school for a temporary one-year increase of its admissions number to cater for a genuine demographic pressure in its area.

The longer term availability of primary school places in particular areas is being addressed through the area planning process.

Schools: Enrolment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether a parent is compelled to comply with the choice of school for a child as directed by the Education and Library Board.
(AQW 29637/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Education and Library Boards support parents in finding a school for their child both during, and after, the open enrolment processes (which place children in a school). If a child's preferences have been exhausted, the Education and Library Board will supply the parents with a list of alternative schools with places available and ask them to make a further school selection.

If at the end of the process a child remains unplaced, their parents are advised to identify a preference for one of the schools with places available in order to ensure that their child will be placed in time for the beginning of the school term. Details of children un-placed and not attending school after the start of the school year are forwarded to the Education Welfare Service, as it then becomes an attendance issue. An Education Welfare Officer will contact the family and offer advice and support to enable the family to reach a decision.

Home Tuition

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to outline the circumstances that home tuition, provided by qualified teachers, is legally permissible as an alternative to school tuition.
(AQW 29638/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Home tuition is not an alternative to full-time school attendance. It can reduce the impact of a disruption upon a child's education but cannot provide the same breadth and quality of learning that school attendance would provide.

Education and Library Boards (ELBs) operate their Home Tuition services as part of their responsibility under Article 86 of the Education (NI) Order 1998, to provide 'education otherwise than at school' (EOTAS) for 'those children of compulsory school age who by reason of illness, expulsion or suspension from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them'.

Within the range of EOTAS services ELBs provide, home tuition is most frequently offered to support pupils recuperating from a long illness, enabling them to keep in touch with learning until they return to school. Its provision is normally limited to a few hours per week and should be supplemented with additional support from the child's registered school.

St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the extension for pre school places granted to St. Patrick's Primary School, Killyman Road, Dungannon, whether he will consider making this dispensation permanent, or guarantee that it will be extended into the next school year.
(AQW 29648/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In order to fulfil the Executive's Programme for Government commitment of ensuring that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it, the Department of Education approved a temporary increase to the enrolment number of the nursery unit of St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon for the 2013/14 school year only to accommodate evidenced exceptional need in the Dungannon area.

On 2 September 2013, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) published Development Proposal (DP) No. 294, which proposes the establishment of an additional full-time nursery unit at St Patrick's Primary School, Dungannon. The statutory two-month objection period ended on 4 November 2013.

DE officials are in the process of preparing advice for my consideration and I anticipate being in a position to make a decision on the proposal in the near future.

Schools: Transport

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education whether a full feasibility study concerning the provision of free public transport for all school pupils will be carried out within the review of the home-to-school transport policy, launched by his Department in December 2013; and if so, whether this will be undertaken in consultation with the Department for Regional Development.
(AQW 29809/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As outlined in my reply to you in AQW 23442/11-15 which was published in the Official Report on 24 May 2013, the feasibility of providing free public transport for all school pupils will be considered as part of a wider Review of Home to School Transport policy. The Review was launched on 2 December 2013.

As part of the terms of reference for the Review, I asked the Panel to consider the option of providing free public transport to all school pupils. Given the independent nature of the Panel, it would be inappropriate for me to dictate how the Review is conducted and, therefore, it is wholly a matter for the Panel to determine what actions they feel are necessary in order to fulfil the Terms of Reference of the Review.

The Panel is due to report its recommendations to me by the end of August 2014.

Education Bill

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the delay in bringing forward the next stage of the Education Bill.
(AQO 5298/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill completed its Committee Stage on 8 April, 2013. The Bill cannot advance to Consideration Stage without the agreement of the Executive. This remains outstanding.

Post-primary Provision: Craigavon

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Education for an update on reorganisation of controlled post-primary provision in the Craigavon area.
(AQO 5299/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At the outset I want to make clear that it is the responsibility of the relevant managing authorities to determine the most appropriate structure of education provision for children living in their area.

The SELB issued consultation questionnaires during the last week of November 2013 to parents, governors and staff of all controlled post primary schools and designated contributory primary schools in the Craigavon two-tier system. The deadline for return of completed questionnaires is 27 January 2014.

The SELB advise that an analysis of the responses to the consultation will be presented to the Board at its meeting on 12 February 2014. A decision will then be taken on progression of development proposals for any changes proposed.

Education Bill

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Education Bill.
(AQO 5300/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Bill completed its Committee Stage on 8 April, 2013. The Bill cannot advance to Consideration Stage without the agreement of the Executive. This remains outstanding.

Special Educational Needs: Assessments

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education to outline the average waiting time for an assessment for Special Educational Needs in each Education and Library Board area.
(AQO 5301/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Legislation requires an Education and Library Board to complete a statutory assessment of a child's special educational needs in no more than 26 weeks, allowing for valid exceptions. This period of time allows for a detailed assessment to be undertaken with input commissioned from the pupil's parents or guardians and a range of educational and health professionals if appropriate.

The Boards have advised that the average number of weeks taken for completing a statutory assessment and finalising a statement of special education needs in the academic year 2012/13, allowing for valid exceptions, is as follows:-

Belfast Education and Library Board	21 weeks
North Eastern Education and Library Board	20 weeks
South Eastern Education and Library Board	24 weeks
Southern Education and Library Board	22 weeks
Western Education and Library Board	22 weeks

Free School Meals

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to outline the options his Department has considered in determining future eligibility for Free School Meals under Universal Credit.
(AQO 5302/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: If the Welfare Reform Bill as currently drafted progresses through the Assembly, it is intended that Universal Credit (UC) will be introduced here on a phased basis during 2014.

It is proposed that Universal Credit will replace a number of existing social welfare benefits which are used to determine eligibility for free school meals and uniform grants. Therefore, it has been necessary to identify alternative options for free school meal eligibility criteria under Universal Credit.

In developing these options my priority is to ensure that children from lower income households do not lose out following the introduction of Universal Credit here.

The potential options which I am considering in this regard are based on an applicant being in receipt of Universal Credit combined with various household income thresholds.

I am also considering options for transitional protection based on the provision of such protection for various time periods.

I consider that the options currently under development will ensure that free school meals, as a key passported benefit, continue to provide support to those families who are most in need.

Subject to progress with the Welfare Reform Bill it is my intention to consult on these options in due course.

East Belfast and South Belfast Corridor

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education for an update on the development proposals for the East and South Belfast corridor.
(AQO 5303/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I reported my decisions on the six development proposals for the East and South Belfast corridor to the Assembly this morning. A copy of my statement has been provided to all Members.

I want to emphasise that I see these decisions as very much the first phase of the reshaping of provision in the area. They do not rule out further changes or further development proposals being published.

My officials will be meeting both Boards to discuss the detail of how they will progress my priorities for the next phase of development in this area. I want this done as a matter of urgency to ensure that there are adequate places, in the right schools, to meet future demand.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development: Education Report

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education what actions he proposes to take in light of the recent Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development report on the local education system.
(AQO 5304/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In November 2012, I announced that we would participate in an OECD review of evaluation and assessment frameworks for improving school outcomes. I felt that we could learn from the experience of others and drive improvements in educational outcomes.

I welcome the publication of the OECD Report on Evaluation and Assessment in Education; it is a detailed and comprehensive report, which outlines a number of strengths and challenges in our system.

I, along with other education stakeholders, will be giving careful consideration to this report along with the recently published results from the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) 2012 Study.

International benchmarking of our education system in this way provides valuable evidence which helps to inform the development of education policies in line with my Ministerial priorities.

I intend making a formal statement in due course, on evaluation and assessment, which will include a strategic response to this report and an outline of the future of GCSE and A-Level qualifications here. The statement will set the future direction for qualifications and assessment in the north.

I shall continue to encourage stakeholders to examine the report, and my Department has arranged for a workshop at which one of the authors will be making a presentation and facilitating discussion of the report's findings.

Common Funding Formula

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education to outline the outcome of the consultation on proposed changes to the Common Funding Formula.
(AQO 5305/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The changes to the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) remain on track for delivery for the new financial year. At the closing date of 25 October, nearly 15,000 consultation responses were received to the main consultation, evidence of real engagement.

A full analysis of those responses is currently underway and I will give careful consideration to the views of all those who responded before making my final decisions. And I will arrange for a consultation summary to be published on the DE website, shared with the Education Committee and placed in the Assembly Library in due course.

Department for Employment and Learning

Gifts and Hospitality

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many entries his Special Adviser has made in the Department's Register of Gifts and Hospitality since being appointed; and what is the total value of such entries.
(AQW 29010/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): In the years 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14 to date, my Special Advisers made ten, four and three entries respectively in the Department's Register of Gifts and Hospitality; all entries related to hospitality. The estimate value of all entries was £260, £125 and £115 by year. The estimated value of hospitality accepted was £175, £125 and £115. All hospitality received was in the course of accompanying me on official business.

October Monitoring Round

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the projects he submitted for funding allocation in the October Monitoring Round 2013.
(AQW 29211/11-15)

Dr Farry: No projects were submitted by the Department for additional funding in the October Monitoring Round.

October Monitoring Round

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the departmental projects that were awarded funding in the October Monitoring Round 2013.
(AQW 29212/11-15)

Dr Farry: As the department did not submit any bids for additional funding, no projects were awarded funding in the October Monitoring Round.

Armed Forces Veterans

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the opportunities his Department has made available to Armed Forces Veterans injured in combat over the past 3 years.
(AQW 29356/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has adopted the Higher Education Scholarship, which was introduced by the coalition Government in October 2010 from academic year 2011/2012. The aim of the scheme is to give the children of those killed in the service of their country a head start in life by giving them the opportunity to gain a higher education qualification. The scheme will be open to all children for whom the deceased person had legal parental responsibility at the time of death, and biological children born within the 10 months after the death. The scheme is to include those bereaved since 0001 hours on 1 January 1990 and is available in the UK only. The scholarship in Northern Ireland will be set at £7,325 for academic year 2013/2014; this is based on, but not tied to, the sum of tuition fees and maintenance loan.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Defence, my Department will also be introducing the Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme in Northern Ireland. The Scheme will pay the tuition fees of service leavers who are resident in Northern Ireland when they are studying for a first full level 3 qualification, a first undergraduate or foundation degree, or a first HNC or HND.

My Department is also in discussions with the Ministry of Defence in regard to implementing the Enhanced Learning Credit Scheme in Northern Ireland. The Scheme will give financial help to qualifying service leavers with up to three payments towards the cost of 'higher level learning', namely achieving a qualification at level 3 or above such as an NVQ 3, A-level, HNC, foundation or ordinary degree or equivalent qualification.

Through its Disability Employment Service, my Department provides a range of programmes and services aimed at helping people with disabilities progress towards, move into, and sustain employment. This includes: specialist pre-employment support to help build confidence and prepare the person for work; financial assistance to purchase special aids and equipment; and longer term support to assist with travel to work and other in-work provision to both the disabled employee and their employer, as necessary. Similar measures are also in place to support persons with disabilities who participate in the Department's training programmes, ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success.

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by the Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29411/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department for Employment and Learning has contracted with the following third sector organisations on ten contracts as outlined in the table below.

Contract	Overall Value + Time Frame	Third Sector Organisations	Notes
1. Training for Success	£150m 3 Years	1. BCW Training 2. Belfast Central Training Ltd 3. Rutledge Joblink 4. South West College (SWC) 5. South Eastern Regional College (SERC) 6. SWANN Training Services 7. Impact Training 8. Loughview Training Services 9. North Down Training Ltd 10. Belfast Metropolitan College (BMC) 11. Customized Training Services 12. Derry Youth & Community Workshop Ltd 13. Northern Regional College (NRC) 14. North West Regional College (NWRC) 15. Oriel Training Services 16. Southern Regional College (SRC) 17. Springvale Learning 18. Workforce Training Services	This contract also includes 10 private companies.

Contract	Overall Value + Time Frame	Third Sector Organisations	Notes
2. Steps to Work	£117m 3 Years	1. Network Personnel 2. SERC 3. SWC 4. NWRC 5. Springvale Learning	This contract also includes four private companies.
3. ApprenticeshipsNI	£50m 3 Years	1. BCW training Ltd 2 Belfast Central Training Ltd 3 SERC 4 SRC 5 SWC 6 Springvale Learning 7 SWANN Training Services 8 Workforce Training Services 9 Youth Action NI, 10. CAFRE 11. Impact Training 12. Loughview Training Services 13. North Down Training Ltd, 14. NWRC 15. BMC 16. Coalisland Training Services Ltd 17. Derry Youth & Community Workshop Ltd 18. NRC 19. Plumbing & Mechanical Services Training NI Ltd 20. Rutledge Joblink 21. Customized Training Services 22. Electrical Training Trust 23. Oriel Training Services	This contract also includes 18 private companies.
4. Framework for the Delivery of DEL LEMIS 2 Programme	£6m 4 years	1. Derry Youth & Community Workshop 2. East Belfast Mission Job & Training 3. Gems (NI) Ltd 4. Upper Springfield Development Trust 5. Customized Training Services 6. Network Personnel Ltd	This contract also includes three private companies.
5. Work Connect Programme	£4m 2 years	1. The Cedar Foundation 2. Action Mental Health	
6. Framework for the Delivery of the Community Family Support Programme	£3.6m 2 Years	1. Customized Training Services 2. Upper Springfield Development Trust 3. Network Personnel Ltd	This contract also includes one private company.

Contract	Overall Value + Time Frame	Third Sector Organisations	Notes
7. Delivery of Workable (NI) Programme	£3.3m 3 Years	1. Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL) 2. Action Mental Health 3. The Cedar Foundation 4. Disability Action	
8. Disability Support for Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI	£1.5m 3 Years	1. USEL 2. The Cedar Foundation 3. Disability Action 4. Sensory Learning Support	This contract includes two private companies.
9. Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Awareness Raising Project	£75k 2 Years	The Rainbow Project	
10. Assessment Service for Deaf and Hard of Hearing	£70k 4 years	Action on Hearing Loss (formerly Royal National Institute for Deaf People)	

University of Ulster: New Site

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether any attempts have been made to change the planning condition, that168 cycle parking spaces be provided at the new University of Ulster site and if so why.
(AQW 29508/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster is an independent body and issues relating to planning permission for the new University of Ulster site are a matter for the University and the planning authority. I have therefore asked Departmental officials to refer your question to the University of Ulster requesting that they respond to you directly on this matter.

Training Organisations: Registration

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what steps a company should take to establish themselves as a Registered Training Organisation.
(AQW 29683/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department's procurement of programmes and services is subject to public tendering processes advertised through the Department of Finance and Personnel's Central Procurement Directorate.

In order to be considered suitable to deliver tendered programmes on behalf of the Department, an organisation or company has to meet specific selection criteria, for example; show that it has suitable premises for the delivery of training; hold Awarding Body approval to deliver qualifications; have staff that are appropriately qualified; and display a proven track record in delivering training programmes. Criteria are set out in the related project tender documentation.

Central Procurement Directorate publishes a range of Guidance Notes which aims to increase knowledge and understanding of public sector procurement and so support the development of capability to compete successfully for public sector contracts. These guidance notes are available through the Central Procurement Directorate website - http://www.dfpni.gov.uk/index.htm.

Awarding Bodies are best placed to offer advice on how to become an Accredited Centre for qualifications.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Space Industry

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to quantify the value, and potential value, of the space industry to the local economy; and what her Department is doing to support the sector.
(AQW 29432/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Invest NI recently completed a survey that indicated that there were approximately twenty companies engaged in the space sector generating revenue of £27.5 million per annum.

The space sector is an emerging sector with projections indicating a global space sector to be worth £400 billion by 2030. The UK Space Agency has set a 10% global market share for the UK space industry.

My Department, through Invest Northern Ireland, is working on a number of initiatives with this sector, evidenced by the recent investment by European Space Propulsion and a number of space sector workshops.

Tourism: Accommodation

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of (i) bed and breakfasts and beds; (ii) hotels and hotel beds; (iii) caravan spaces; and (iv) camp sites spaces, (a) in 1993; (b) 2003; and (c) for the most recent year available.
(AQW 29433/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information requested is as follows:

Category:	Year:	(a) 1993	(b) 2003	(c) 2013
(i) Bed & Breakfasts	No:	660	709	584
	Beds:	7487	8166	4982
(ii) Hotels	No:	124	128	138
	Beds:	7085	13218	17657

Please note data from 1993 is limited and records do not show the exact month when these figures were collated. Figures for 2003 and 2013 are from December 2003 and December 2013.

Data for Caravan spaces; and Camp Site spaces is not held by my Department or The Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Local Authorities are responsible for the licensing of these sites.

Economy

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following the report in the Belfast Telegraph on 19 December 2013 titled 'Red tape burden to be reviewed', to detail (i) the agreement between the Executive and Westminster on measures to build a stronger economy; and (ii) the documents in her possession relating to this agreement.
(AQW 29552/11-15)

Mrs Foster: HM Government and the Northern Ireland Executive launched 'Building a Prosperous and United Community', the NI Economic Pact, on 14 June 2013. The Pact demonstrates the Government and Executive's shared commitment to help Northern Ireland fulfil its economic potential and ensure lasting peace and prosperity.

It sets out a wide range of measures to help rebalance the Northern Ireland economy and drive investment, jobs and growth. It also underpins efforts to tackle community divisions and build a shared future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

An update on progress on commitments contained within the package was published by the UK Government and the Executive on 10 October 2013.

You can access these documents on the HM Government website at the links below:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206979/Building_a_Prosperous_and_United_Community.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/249239/Building_a_Prosperous_and_United_Community_-_A_Progress_Report__publication_version_.PDF

Wind Turbines

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any subsidies provided for wind turbines, during and after their construction, since 2003.
(AQW 29621/11-15)

Mrs Foster: No subsidies are provided before or during the construction of wind turbines by my Department. Wind turbines and other renewable electricity technologies only receive support once they accredit under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) and start generating electricity.

NIRO support is provided in the form of Renewables Obligation Certificates (ROCs) issued to generators by Ofgem. As the NIRO is a market-based support mechanism, the actual value of a ROC to a generator will depend on the supply and demand for ROCs during a given obligation period, and the individual arrangements reached between generators and the supplier or other person to whom they sell their ROCs. Table 1 sets out the approximate value of ROCs issued in each financial year since the NIRO's introduction in 2005.

Table 1: ROCs issued to onshore wind generators 2005/06 – 2012/13

Year	ROCs issued*	ROC value (buyout price plus 10%)	Total
2005-06	253,889	£35.56	£9,028,293
2006-07	320,706	£36.56	£11,725,011
2007-08	404,996	£37.73	£15,280,499
2008-09	592,512	£39.33	£23,303,497
2009-10	715,407	£40.90	£29,260,146
2010-11	694,828	£40.68	£28,265,603
2011-12	1,127,027	£42.55	£47,954,999
2012-13	1,059,842	£44.78	£47,459,725

* **Source**: Ofgem RO Annual Reports

Wind Turbines

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail Northern Ireland's EU renewable energy target; and for an update on how this target is being met through the use of wind turbines.
(AQW 29623/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In 2009, the EU set renewable energy targets for Member States. The UK target is for 15% of energy (i.e. electricity, heat and transport) consumption to come from renewable sources by 2020. Devolved Administrations each took action to contribute to the overall UK target.

The Strategic Energy Framework, agreed by the Executive in 2010, set targets of 40% of electricity consumption to come from renewable sources by 2020.

In the rolling twelve month period to the end of November 2013, approximately 16% of electricity consumption was from renewable energy sources of which 93% came from onshore wind.

Energy Efficiency Directive

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the process of transposing the Energy Efficiency Directive; and to outline the requirements that have yet to be completed.
(AQW 29653/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The majority of the Energy Efficiency Directive (EED) must be transposed by 5 June 2014. Transposition will be mainly through a UK-wide statutory instrument that is being developed by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC).

Articles 9-11 (Energy Billing and Metering) and Article 15 (Energy transformation, transmission and distribution) will be transposed separately in Northern Ireland.

Article 15 will be consulted on in February 2014. DETI will lay secondary regulations in the Northern Ireland Assembly in due course to transpose Articles 9-11 and 15.

Invest NI: Grant Aid

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount paid to the twenty largest recipients of grant aid from InvestNI, in the last six years.
(AQW 29668/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The amount paid to the twenty largest recipients of grant aid by Invest NI during the last six financial years (2007-08 to 2012-13) was £220million.

InterTradeIreland: Budget

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any budget reductions to InterTradeIreland proposed by her Department.
(AQW 29669/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department is co-sponsor department for InterTradeIreland in conjunction with the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation in Ireland. However, the Department of Finance and Personnel in Northern Ireland and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the Republic of Ireland are responsible for providing sponsor departments

and North South Bodies with business planning and budget guidance on the preparation and submission of 2014-2016 Corporate Plans and 2014 Business Plans.

The guidance includes a requirement for further minimum cash releasing efficiency savings of 4% in 2014 cumulating to 12% in 2016. The baseline for these efficiency savings is the 2013 agreed budget for InterTradeIreland.

Broadband

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the procurement of Basic and Superfast Broadband Services; and when the tender will be announced.
(AQW 29744/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The procurement for the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project has concluded and the tender response is being carefully evaluated to ensure that best value for money is achieved. Assuming that the evaluation is satisfactory and, pending necessary approvals, it is anticipated that a contract will be awarded in the coming weeks with implementation commencing immediately thereafter and ending in 2015.

Department of the Environment

Northern Ireland Environment Agency: Complaints Handling

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the public compliants handling and record keeping procedure used by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in relation to industrial noise, odours and pollution.
(AQW 29063/11-15)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) regulates noise, odour and pollution from industrial installations permitted under the Pollution Prevention Control (PPC) Regulations (Northern Ireland), and investigates reports of water pollution and discharges to waterways and underground strata under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

Complaints relating to industrial installations regulated under PPC are dealt with by the Industrial Pollution & Radiochemical Inspectorate (IPRI), who aim to respond to the complainant within 1 working day. The complaint investigation will include a site investigation where required, and details are recorded in the IPRI database. The complaint details and any actions taken to resolve the complaint are reviewed by line management before the complaint can be closed. IPRI's internal target is to respond to 85% of complaints within 1 working day, and since April 2013, they have responded to 95% within that timescale.

The NIEA Water Management Unit, operates on a 24-hour, 365 days-a-year basis, to co-ordinate the Agency's response to reported incidents of water pollution and promotes use of the 24-hour Water Pollution Hotline (0800 80 70 60) for incident reporting. A graduated response is used to prioritise incident investigation and targets are in place to investigate reported incidents of water pollution in a timely manner. Details of all stages of the investigation are recorded on PIMS (Pollution Incident Management System), which tracks the progress of all investigations.

A record of all information relating to complaints is retained for a minimum of five years.

Taxis: Wheelchair Users

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28439/11-15, (i) whether wheelchair users are provided with an accessible 7-seater private hire taxi when booking and standard private hire taxis are not deployed in these instances; and in these instances; (ii) if standard taxis are deployed whether they charge the standard or an enhanced fare; and (iii) if standard taxis are not deployed, is this a breach of the Disability Discrimination Act by only offering one type of taxi at an enhanced fare to wheelchair users.
(AQW 29126/11-15)

Mr Durkan:

(i) The provision of taxi vehicles by operators is a matter for each individual operator to determine according to the needs of the particular consumer. It is worth noting that early indications from a consultant's report prepared for the Department are that not all wheelchair users wish to travel in a large wheelchair accessible taxi, but that some prefer to travel in a saloon car with the wheelchair stowed in the boot. It is likely, therefore, that in practice both vehicles types are requested and despatched to wheelchair users. The consultant's report will be provided to the Environment Committee and placed on the Department's website when it is finalised.

(ii) Private hire taxi fares are not regulated by the Department. Operators are free to determine their own fee structure. That said, I reiterate my previous statement that the Equality Commission has advised that DDA legislation makes it unlawful for organisations such as transport service providers, including taxi operators, to discriminate against disabled people in the way in which they provide or do not provide their services. It would be my expectation, therefore, that it is not appropriate for an 'enhanced' fare to be applied to a standard saloon type taxi in these circumstances.

(iii) The definitive legal position as regards the circumstances described can only be ascertained when tested in court, with the details of a specific instance brought forward by a member of the public affected by such a scenario or by their representatives, and the court making a judgement on the facts of the case brought. If an operator has been advised by a customer that they have a wheelchair, and the customer does not specify a preference between vehicle types, it may be considered reasonable by the courts for the operator to assume that the customer prefers a wheelchair accessible vehicle, but that would be for the courts to determine. If the operator refused, on request, to provide a saloon type car, they would appear to have more of a case to answer in respect of the relevant DDA legislation.

Taxi Operator Licences: Numbers

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the number of (i) taxi operator licences issued in 2013; and (ii) drivers included under (a) small; and (b) large operator licences.
(AQW 29276/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Taxi Operator Licensing was introduced on 1 September 2012.

DOE Official Statistics relating to taxi operator licences, which were published for the first time on 28th November 2013, show that there were 1,884 taxi operator licences as at 30 September 2013. Of these 1,637 (87%)2 operator's licences issued were for small operator's licences and 247 (13%)2 were large operator licences.

As at 12 December 2013, there were 1,6521 drivers included under small operator licences and 6,1211 drivers included under large operator licences.

1 Please note these figures are not part of official statistics and have not been subject to data validation.

2 The figure represents the position at 30 September 2013.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement: Economic Development

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of the Environment which specific provisions for economic development will be included in the Strategic Planning Policy Statement.
(AQO 5194/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Work on the development of a single Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) is now well underway.

The SPPS is required to be in place prior to the transfer of planning powers to Councils in 2015. It is my intention, therefore, to consult on a draft version of the SPPS in early 2014, with a view to publishing it in final form in good time for the transfer of planning powers.

The SPPS will ensure that the Department's planning policies are more proportionate and appropriate for the introduction of the new two–tier planning system. It will be pitched at a higher, more strategic level than in the past so that the councils can take it into account in providing the more detailed operational planning policy in their new local development plans. The SPPS will be shorter, clearer and more focused and will be much more accessible and intelligible.

The SPPS will also underscore the wider context of the Executive's aims and objectives, and clarify the Government's expectations of the new planning system.

The new SPPS will set out the Core Principles of the new planning system which will include explaining what concepts such as furthering sustainable development and promoting / improving well-being mean for planning. It will also detail how economic development factors are dealt with in planning, including clarifying and reaffirming that economic considerations are material in the determination of planning applications.

I am committed to ensuring that this new approach to planning policy plays its part in contributing to growing a dynamic, innovative and sustainable economy in the North.

Strategic Planning Policy Statement: Publication

Mr Swann asked the Minister of the Environment to outline when he expects to publish his Single Planning Policy Statement.
(AQO 5196/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Work on the development of a single Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) is now well underway.

The SPPS is required to be in place prior to the transfer of planning powers to Councils in 2015. It is my intention, therefore, to consult on a draft version of the SPPS in early 2014, with a view to publishing it in final form in good time for the transfer of planning powers.

The SPPS will ensure that the Department's planning policies are more proportionate and appropriate for the introduction of the new two–tier planning system. It will be pitched at a higher, more strategic level than in the past so that the councils can take it into account in providing the more detailed operational planning policy in their new local development plans. The SPPS will be shorter, clearer and more focused and will be much more accessible and intelligible.

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I am committed to ensuring that this new approach to planning policy plays its part in contributing to growing a dynamic, innovative and sustainable economy in the North.

Taxi Regulations: Belfast

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what provision is being made, or proposed, in taxi regulations to cover the unique taxi situation that exists in Belfast.
(AQW 29436/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The new taxi licensing regulations planned for September 2014 will mean that taxis will either be licensed as wheelchair accessible or non wheelchair accessible and all taxis will be able to ply for hire anywhere in Northern Ireland.

I remain committed to the aims of the Taxis Act, of creating a modern, fair and fit for purpose taxi industry in Northern Ireland. However I recognise that the new regulations bring greater challenges for Belfast Public Hire drivers than for other sectors of the taxi industry. Therefore to assist Belfast Public Hire drivers with this transition, the draft regulations will continue to limit Belfast City Centre ranks to wheelchair accessible taxis only. The specification for a wheelchair accessible taxi will also be modernised, and I will shortly be releasing a consultation which proposes that the current Belfast public hire fleet be the only vehicles granted grandfather rights for the new accessibility requirements. This means they will be able to continue to use their existing vehicle to the end of its useful life, which provides continued protection in terms of their unique access to Belfast City ranks.

Taxi Regulations: Implementation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the regulations, and the proposed timescale for the introduction of these regulations, planned to implement the taxis legislation.
(AQW 29437/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department is preparing five sets of subordinate regulations to implement the provisions of the Taxis Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 ("the Taxis Act"), which are summarised below. The titles of the Statutory Rules may change slightly from those listed below during the legislative process.

The Taxi Vehicle Regulations will introduce the new taxi vehicle test, define the various classes of taxi, and introduce single tier licensing, as well as requiring new roof signs and taxi plates. They will come into operation on 1st September 2014.

The Taximeter and Maximum Fare Regulations will require the fitment of taximeters and compliance with a Northern Ireland-wide maximum fare structure. The Regulations, which will become operative on 1st September 2014, will require taximeters to be fitted in early 2015 and receipt printers to be fitted a year later. These derogations have been included in response to concerns raised by the Environment Committee about the financial impact of the new measures.

The Taxi Accessibility Regulations will introduce an improved specification for such vehicles, and will be operative on 1st September 2014.

The Taxi Driving Test Regulations will re-introduce a driving test and a requirement for periodic training for taxi drivers and will be operative on 1st September 2014. Periodic training for existing drivers will be deferred for one year from this date to help address concerns about the financial impact of the new measures.

The Taxis Retention and Disposal Regulations will provide for a system of seizure and retention of vehicles suspected of operating as taxis without a valid taxi licence, based on the power already provided in the Taxis Act. These will come into operation on 1st September 2014.

As well as the five main statutory rules, a number of minor consequential statutory rules will be required to revoke elements of the existing system and to commence the necessary sections of the Taxis Act.

Habitats Directive: River Faughan

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28983/11-15, and given his confirmation that a full review of extant permissions was not carried out at the time the River Faughan became a candidate Special Area of Conservation, what assurances he can give that (i) there are no extant permissions which should have been reviewed but have been missed; and (ii) that no harm has been caused, or no risk of harm is posed to the designation by permissions that should have been reviewed but may not have been.
(AQW 29457/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The River Faughan and Tributaries SAC has been designated for salmon, otters and oak woodland. The features of Atlantic salmon and otter are in favourable condition; although salmon is considered to be at risk due to the uncertainty of the long term trend in returning adults. The woodland feature is in unfavourable condition due largely to the presence of invasive species such as beech. It is, therefore, considered that the integrity of the site has not been impacted by extant permissions having been missed.

Habitats Directive: New Special Areas of Conservation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28983/11-15, for his understanding of the (i) purpose; and (ii) required outcome of the review of extant permissions required by the Habitats Directive for new Special Areas of Conservation.
(AQW 29458/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The purpose and outcome of any review is to prevent any impact on the integrity of the SAC by projects which have been given permission before designation of the site.

Habitats Directive: River Faughan

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28983/11-15, why his Department did not carry out a full review of extant permissions likely to affect the River Faughan Special Area of Conservation, if this is a lawful requirement of the Habitats Directives.
(AQW 29459/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Habitats Regulations require Competent Authorities to review all permissions 'as soon as reasonably practicable'. This is an ongoing process. The Department is undertaking the required review on a case by case basis. That is, where there are amendments or modifications to earlier applications approved before designation of the SAC, or if it is deemed necessary due to the Department becoming aware of a particular issue with the project.

Habitats Directive: New Special Areas of Conservation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated; (ii) how many are in good status; (iii) how many are in unfavourable status; and (iv) how many were the subject of a full review of extant permissions likely to have a significant effect on those designations, as required by the Habitats Directives.
(AQW 29460/11-15)

Mr Durkan:

I. Northern Ireland has designated fifty four Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). In addition, two candidate SACs have been submitted to the European Commission for adoption as Sites of Community Importance (SCI); and one SCI will be designated as a SAC in due course.

II. Sixteen SACs are currently in favourable condition.

III. Five sites are currently classed as being in unfavourable but recovering condition; which means that favourable management is in place, but the sites are not yet fully achieving their conservation objectives. There is an expectation that these sites will recover to favourable status within a reasonable period of time. Thirty three SACs are currently in unfavourable condition.

IV. The Department has not undertaken a full review of all extant permissions, but it is undertaking the required review on a case by case basis where there are amendments or modifications to applications approved before designation of a SAC, or if it is deemed necessary due to the Department becoming aware of particular issue with the project.

Taxis: Single-tier System

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment to provide a copy of the original consultation paper on the proposed single tier taxi system; and to list the respondents.
(AQW 29595/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department issued a consultation on 4 July 2011 concerning proposals for Taxi Licence and Powers of Seizure (including single tier licensing) within Northern Ireland. The consultation closed on 30 September 2011 and responses were received from 27 individuals as well as the following organisations:

- Ards Borough Council
- Belfast Taxi CIC
- BRAKE
- Consumer Council for NI
- Disability Action
- DS Executive Services
- Fonacab
- Glenone Taxis
- Guide Dogs for the Blind Association
- IMTAC
- Lagan Taxis
- NEELB
- North West Taxi Providers
- Provincial Chauffeurs Association
- PSNI Road Policing
- Public Hire Coalition
- Southern Health Trust
- Value Cabs

The consultation and associated synopsis of responses can be found at the following links:

Consultation

http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/information/foi/recent-releases/publications-details.htm?docid=8283

Synopsis of Responses

http://www.doeni.gov.uk/index/information/foi/recent-releases/publications-details.htm?docid=8579

Council Employees

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what disqualifications and restrictions exist to prevent a council employee becoming a councillor in an other council.
(AQW 29606/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972, section 4(1)(a), disqualifies a person from being elected or being a councillor if they are employed by that council or any other council.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Welfare Reform: Financial Implications

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 28846/11-15, and given the recent statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding future reductions in expenditure in Welfare Reform, what are the financial implications in addition to the current extra cost of £5 million per month.
(AQW 29605/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The penalties applied to the Northern Ireland Executive are reflective of the additional costs being incurred by the UK Government as a consequence of welfare policy in Northern Ireland not aligning to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Whilst the penalty currently stands at £5 million a month, it is expected that this will increase significantly as welfare reforms are rolled out in Great Britain and will reach an estimated £200 million per annum by 2017-18.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer recently indicated that it would be necessary to make further savings in welfare costs after the next General Election. This has the potential to further increase the disparity between welfare systems in Great Britain and Northern Ireland should we not implement similar reforms. As a consequence, the penalties applied to the Northern Ireland Executive would increase.

In addition to the penalties applied by the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive will incur significant IT and administrative costs if our welfare system is not aligned to the rest of the United Kingdom.

Construction: Expenditure

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the estimated expenditure on construction by (i) the private sector; and (ii) the public sector, broken down by district council area, in each of the last ten years.
(AQW 29666/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The information requested is not available for district council areas.

However, the Northern Ireland Construction Bulletin publishes a table which provides information on estimates of Construction Output on New Work at the Northern Ireland level for the private and public sectors since 2000. The latest published table is attached overleaf.

Table 1 – Volume of Output[1] in Northern Ireland (New Work only) by Type of Sector
Current Prices (£ million)

Year	New Work for Public Sector	New Work for Private Sector	All New Work
2000	576.6	1242.3	1818.9
2001	638.4	1314.0	1952.4
2002	574.1	1296.8	1870.9
2003	588.5	1422.4	2010.9
2004	632.0	1503.1	2135.0
2005	764.8	1583.8	2348.6
2006	817.3	1859.8	2677.1

Year	New Work for Public Sector	New Work for Private Sector	All New Work
2007	861.2	1884.1	2745.3
2008	1009.0	1540.7	2549.7
2009	1088.4	1190.6	2279.1
2010	779.5	1132.4	1911.9
2011	770.6	819.8	1590.4
2012	898.2	667.6	1565.8

1 Includes output by contractors only

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Private Healthcare Providers

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total spend on private health care providers within the UK and the Republic of Ireland, between January 2011 and January 2013.
(AQW 28948/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The total spend on private health care providers within the UK and the Republic of Ireland amounted to £52.6m in 2011/12 and £66m in 2012/13.

Ambulance Service: Voluntary Drivers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to clarify the rate per mile for voluntary drivers providing services for NI Ambulance Service; and when the rate was last reviewed.
(AQW 29527/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am advised by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust that the standard mileage allowance currently paid to volunteer drivers to cover expenses is thirty eight pence per mile travelled. This rate was introduced on 1 January 2011. The previous rate of thirty three pence per mile travelled was introduced on 1 October 2005.

Healthy Start Scheme

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether additional measures can be implemented to ensure pregnant women have access to the Healthy Start scheme.
(AQW 29533/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Healthy Start Scheme is a nutritional safety net for low-income families. The Scheme is open to those who are at least 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under 4 years old, are in receipt of certain benefits, and have an annual family income of £16,190 or less. All pregnant women under the age of 18 qualify for the Scheme, whether or not they are on benefits.

Information about the availability of Healthy Start is included in leaflets and in online information about benefits and tax credits. Details on Healthy Start are contained in 'The Pregnancy Book' which is supplied to all pregnant women at first booking appointment and 'The Birth to Five Book' which is supplied to all mothers leaving the maternity unit. This information is also available online at www.healthystart.nhs.uk and www.nidirect.gov.uk.

My Department continues to actively look for ways of signposting the Scheme and issues regular Information Updates on Healthy Start for Health and Social Care health professionals.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Patient Data

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 28357/11-15, to outline the impact on the integrity of patient data following the changes which have made a large volume of past patient data incomparable with current data; and for his assessment on the ability to gauge the current and past performance of local Health and Social Care Trusts in this area following these changes.
(AQW 29538/11-15)

Mr Poots: Details of outpatient activity during 2012/13, are available online in the Northern Ireland Hospital Statistics: Outpatient Activity Statistics, available at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2012-13.pdf

The following measurements are included within the Outpatient Activity Statistics:

- Total Attendances
- New Attendances
- Review Attendances
- Missed Appointments (Did not Attend/DNAs)

- Patient Cancellations (Could not Attend/CNAs)
- Hospital Cancellations
- DNA Rates
- CNA Rates
- Hospital Cancellation Rates

This data is presented at a Northern Ireland, HSC Trust and hospital level as well as by specialty of consultant. This data is comparable over time, since the collection was introduced in 2008/09, and is unaffected by the recent review initiated by Health Committee. This data continues to be used by the Health Service to gauge current and past performance of HSC Trusts.

The issue of comparability is with the reasons recorded for hospital cancelled outpatient appointments only. This is only one measurement within the suite of data available to the health service to assess performance.

Hospitals: Outpatient Appointments

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 28357/11-15, irrespective of any issues of incomparability of data, to provide the data requested for (i) 2010; (ii) 2011; (iii) 2012.
(AQW 29540/11-15)

Mr Poots: As previously explained in AQW 28357/11-15, the methodology used to collect information on reasons for hospital cancelled outpatient appointments was reviewed in 2013/14 and a new process has since been established.

The number of consultant-led appointments cancelled by hospitals due to annual leave is not routinely collected by the Department and would require a manual exercise by Trusts at disproportionate costs.

Details of reasons for hospital cancelled outpatient appointments are available online in the Northern Ireland Hospital Statistics: Outpatient Activity Statistics, available at:

- http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2012-13.pdf
- http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2011_12.pdf
- http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2010_11.pdf

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by his Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29543/11-15)

Mr Poots: Funding provided by my Department to the voluntary and community sector is by grant rather than procured contract. In total £6.6m is provided to the sector. Grant funding is utilised for a variety of purposes by organisations and it is not always possible to distinguish funds specifically used for service provision from those used to support policy development and implementation. It has been estimated that around £4.6m of the grant funding provided by DHSSPS is used to support services delivered to the public.

A list organisations in receipt of grant funding from the department is shown below. Organisations listed deliver both service and policy functions from the grant funding that they receive.

- Accord
- Action Mental Health
- Action on Hearing Loss
- ADD NI
- Addiction NI
- Adopt
- Adoption UK
- Age NI
- Aids Care Education & Training
- Alzheimer Society
- Autism NI
- Aware Defeat Depression
- British Association for Adoption Fostering NI
- British Red Cross
- Cara-friend
- Carers NI
- Cause
- Cedar Foundation
- Childline Children in Northern Ireland
- Childcare in Practice
- Children's Law Centre
- Church of Ireland Board for Social Responsibility
- Contact a Family
- Community Development Health Network Crossroads
- Cruse
- Disability Action
- Down's Syndrome Association
- Eating Disorders Association
- Epilepsy Action
- Family Care Society
- Family Planning Association
- Fostering Network
- Gingerbread
- Harmony Community Trust
- Homestart
- Include Youth
- Life (NI)
- Lighthouse
- MENCAP

- Meningitis Research Foundation
- Mindwise
- Nexus
- Northern Ireland Association Mental Health
- Northern Ireland Childminding Association
- Northern Ireland Hospice
- Northern Ireland Music Therapy Trust
- Northern Ireland Women's Aid Federation
- Northlands
- Parenting NI
- Positive Life
- Presbyterian Board of Social Witness
- Rainbow
- Relate NI
- Royal Society Prevention Accidents
- Royal National Institute of the Blind
- Samaritans
- SENSE
- Signature
- Society for Muccopolysaccharide Diseases
- Stroke Association
- St Vincent de Paul
- Threshold
- Training Support Programme
- Twins and Multiple Births Association
- Volunteer Now
- VOYPIC
- Women Information Northern Ireland
- Woman's Resource and Development Agency

Downe Hospital: Radiology

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he can give an assurance that the radiology service at Downe Hospital will be maintained at the current operating level.
(AQW 29545/11-15)

Mr Poots: The operating times of the Emergency Department have recently been reduced at night and at weekends. I am advised that no significant changes have been made to the radiology service in the Downe Hospital.

Enzalutamide

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his Department's position on the use of Enzalatamide.
(AQW 29555/11-15)

Mr Poots: Enzalutamide is currently under appraisal by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE). My Department has formal links with NICE whereby all Clinical Guidelines and Technology Appraisals published by the Institute are reviewed locally for their applicability to NI and, where appropriate, endorsed here. My Department does not challenge the robustness of the NICE guidance but rather its applicability in the legal and policy context of NI. This arrangement has ensured access to up-to-date, independent, professional, evidence-based guidance on the value of health care interventions. My Department's review of NICE Technology Appraisals is expected to be complete within 4 weeks of the final publication by NICE. As soon as the local review is complete, endorsement decisions will be published on the Department's website.

Hospitals: Outpatient Appointments

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 28357/11-15, (i) to outline the rationale for the review; (ii) why this review resulted in patient data becoming incomparable with previous data; and (iii) to detail any resultant action emanating from any previous reviews in this area.
(AQW 29559/11-15)

Mr Poots:

(i) The review was initiated as a result of the Health Committee debate on 6th February 2013 on hospital cancelled outpatient appointments.

(ii) As detailed in AQW 29538/11-15, the majority of information collected on outpatient activity remains comparable with previous years. The issue of comparability is with the reasons recorded for hospital cancelled appointments only. This is only one measurement within the suite of data available to the health service to assess performance.

The variables used to collect the reasons for cancelled outpatient appointments were not previously mandatory on the Patient Administrative System and as such coverage varied across HSC Trusts as did the adherence to the regional guidance issued at the beginning of its collection in 2008/09. The Department has been transparent on this issue, including notes in the technical guidance of publications.

The review facilitated the development of new guidance with an agreed list of regional and sub-regional codes for the reasons for cancellation. This new guidance was issued to HSC Trusts for implementation from 1st July 2013. In addition, the variable 'reason for cancellation' on the Patient Administrative System is now mandatory which will improve the coverage of the relevant data.

(iii) The Quarterly Outpatient Activity Return (QOAR), which is the present methodology for the collection of consultant-led outpatient activity, was introduced by the Department from the beginning of 2008/09, as a direct result of a

comprehensive review of collection of outpatient activity undertaken in 2007/08. Primarily, the methodology changed from the reporting of the number of clinics held and cancelled to the reporting of the number of appointments held and cancelled.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Complaints

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a broad classification by type of medical complaint for those patients who attended Accident and Emergency departments (i) between 30 and 39 times; (ii) between 40 and 49 times; and (iii) more than 50 times a year, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29570/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available at a regional level.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Attendance

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for the total number of attendances at each Accident and Emergency department in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29571/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on attendances (new, unplanned and/or planned reviews) at emergency care departments is published on an annual basis and is available to view or download from:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/emergency_care-3/emergency-care-stats.htm

Alternatively, information on waiting times at emergency care departments (excluding planned review attendances) is published on a monthly basis, and is available to view or download from:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/emergency_care-3/emergency_care-monthly_waiting_times.htm

Young People: Definition

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 29502/11-15, whether the legal definition of young people in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, the definition of young people in the Commissioner for Children and Young People Order 2003 or the definition of young people in disability legislation is applicable to the functions of the Children's and Young People's strategic partnership, as outlined in The NI Children and Young People's Plan 2011-14, Appendix 2, Section 2.2.
(AQW 29600/11-15)

Mr Poots: Section 2.2 (e) of Appendix 2 to The Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Plan 2011-14 specifies that the age group of children and young people addressed by the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) and its planning groups is 0-18 years, extended for young people who have been Looked After, those who are homeless and those who have a disability.

While section 2.2(e) of the Plan does not specify an upper age limit, it is clear that the CYPSP can and does act on behalf of disabled children, looked after children and those who are homeless beyond age 18. It is possible, therefore, that this is in keeping with the definitions of a young person contained in the legislation cited above, which extend the definition of young person to age 21.

Alcohol: Minimum Pricing

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on his proposal for minimum pricing of alcohol.
(AQW 29618/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have commissioned research to model the impact of the introduction of minimum pricing for alcohol in Northern Ireland, and it is anticipated that this will be completed within the next few months. When this report is analysed I will take a decision, jointly with the Minister for Social Development, whether or not to proceed with appropriate legislation.

The research that has been commissioned is essential, firstly for demonstrating any legislation that may be brought forward will have the desired impact and secondly to determine if minimum unit pricing is a proportionate response to addressing alcohol related harm. If a decision is made to proceed, we will endeavour to introduce a bill to the Assembly within the current mandate.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Funding to Treat Depression

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any funding provided to the community and voluntary sector within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust for services to help people with depression, in each of the last five years, including to whom this funding was awarded and for the provision of which services.
(AQW 29619/11-15)

Mr Poots: Funding is provided by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and the Public Health Agency to voluntary and community groups for services to help people with a range

of mental health problems, including depression, in the Northern Trust area. It is not possible to separate out the funding used solely for services for people with depression from other services provided.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for his assessment of the current pressures being placed on the Accident and Emergency facilities at Craigavon Area Hospital; (ii) when these pressures will be relieved; and (iii) what action he is taking to ensure that the Southern Health and Social Care Trust is adequately resourced and funded to avoid any future patient backlogs and their associated risks to public health.
(AQW 29649/11-15)

Mr Poots: Emergency departments are busy all year round, but particularly so during the winter months. Ambulances were diverted to other hospitals for a time last week in response to the situation at Craigavon Hospital which was significantly busier than usual. This is a routine part of the operational management of pressures across the system. During the period 1-8 January 2014 there were no breaches of the 12-hour target at Craigavon Area Hospital emergency department, and the Southern Trust continues to treat more than 73% of emergency department patients within 4 hours. The Southern Trust has an escalation plan in place to respond to pressures in the system as required.

Belfast City Hospital: Medical Assessment Unit

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 28124/11-15 to detail (i) if the Medical Assessment Unit at Belfast City Hospital is now fully operational from 6N; (ii) the enhancements that have been made to the service; and (iii) the impact this has had upon Accident and Emergency services at the Royal Victoria Hospital.
(AQW 29664/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust that the Medical Assessment Unit is now operational from Belfast City Hospital's Ward 6 North.

Patients are being directly admitted to the Belfast City Hospital but direct admission to the Royal Victoria Hospital site has not yet been fully implemented. The Trust is working to deliver this. The service provides telephone advice for GPs as well as a route for assessment/admission of patients, potentially avoiding the need for some patients having to attend an emergency department.

Craigavon Area Hospital: CT Scanners

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the business case for the purchase of a second CT scanner at Craigavon Area Hospital; and who is responsible for making the final decision of the purchase of the scanner.
(AQW 29698/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is currently finalising a business case for a second CT Scanner at Craigavon.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible for appraising and approving the business case and for allocation of capital funding. The timing of the purchase will be subject to availability of funding.

There is a range of decision makers in the process of purchasing the scanner with various delegations in place from the Executive to the Minister to the Department to the HSC Board and Trust.

The decision to purchase will be made by the Trust Board once all the necessary approvals are in place and the funding has been secured, both capital and revenue and will be subject to procurement guidelines and rules.

Organ Donation: Public Health Agency Report

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) when he will complete his consideration of the findings of the Public Health Agency's report on its work to establish attitudes towards organ donation; and (ii) whether he intends to make a statement to the Assembly on this matter.
(AQW 29705/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am giving careful consideration to the findings in the Public Health Agency's report and the implications for the future development of my Department's policy on organ donation. This is an important matter and requires thorough consideration to ensure that the future policy is the right policy for the people of Northern Ireland. When I have concluded this consideration, I will make a statement to the Assembly as soon as possible.

Special Educational Needs: Review of Support for Children and Young People

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the scope of the Review of the Allied Health Professional Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education.
(AQW 29707/11-15)

Mr Poots: The initial phase of the review is a scoping exercise which will establish the level of Allied Health Professions (AHP) provision and support for children with special educational needs in special schools and mainstream education. The focus in the first year of the review will be on establishing a baseline of current arrangements, identification of themes and agreeing recommendations for further action. Thereafter, the review will agree a regional model, in partnership with key stakeholders, to ensure that the AHP assessed needs of children are met, irrespective of what school they attend.

The AHPs to be considered by this review will include:

- Physiotherapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Speech and Language Therapy
- Dietetics
- Orthoptics; and
- Podiatry

There will also be an opportunity for engagement with representatives from other Allied Health Professions, including those providing music therapy.

Special Educational Needs: Music Therapy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether music therapy is being considered as part of the Review of the Allied Health Professional Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education.
(AQW 29708/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Review's focus is primarily on the services provided by Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, Dietetics, Orthoptics and Podiatry for children with Statements of Special Educational Needs. In addition, it has been agreed that there will be an opportunity for engagement with representatives from other Allied Health Professions, including those providing music therapy, who work with children with SEN Statements.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he would consider introducing automatic referrals for a CA125 blood test for women diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Syndrome symptoms and a family history of ovarian cancer.
(AQW 29739/11-15)

Mr Poots: The CA125 blood test is one of a number of tests routinely available in Northern Ireland. The decision as to which test is appropriate for an individual patient is a clinical matter.

In January 2009 my department endorsed the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidance for irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) in adults (CG61) wherein clinicians are advised to ask patients who present with possible IBS symptoms if there is any family history of ovarian cancer and if so they should be referred for further investigation.

My department has formally endorsed (NICE) guidance for ovarian cancer (CG122) in May 2012, which can be viewed at: http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/phealth/sqs/sqsd-guidance/sqsd-guidance-nice-guidance/clinical_guidelines/endorsed_nice_clinical_guidelines_2012-2013.htm. This guidance refers to women over 50 who present with symptoms suggestive of IBS, and advise GPs to carry out appropriate tests one of which is CA125.

Family Fund

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the demand for support from the Family Fund, what plans he has to increase the funding avaialble.
(AQW 29741/11-15)

Mr Poots: Through funding support of £1.57m provided by my Department to the Family Fund in 2012/13, almost 3000 families in Northern Ireland with disabled children were helped.

Due to the ongoing financial challenges facing my Department I am currently unable to increase their funding provision. However, DHSSPS officials will be meeting with the Family Fund in the near future to further discuss this issue and how best it can help support families in NI.

Family Fund

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what assurances he can give that the Family Fund has sufficient capital to service the applications for funding.
(AQW 29815/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department provides funding of £1.57m to the Family Fund and in 2012/13 this allowed the Fund to help almost 3000 families in Northern Ireland with disabled children. My Department's allocation includes an amount to cover the administrative costs of processing applications for assistance.

Due to the ongoing financial challenges facing my Department and the finite resources available to me, I am unable to increase their funding provision. However, DHSSPS officials will be meeting with the Family Fund in the near future to further discuss this issue and how best it can help support families in NI.

Department of Justice

Community Restorative Justice Ireland: Funding for Belfast Office

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the public funding provided to the Belfast office of Community Restorative Justice Ireland, which is chaired by Harry Maguire, a person convicted of the murder of Corporals Howes and Woods.
(AQW 29521/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The grant funding committed through the Department of Justice to the Headquarters of Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) for 2013-14 is as follows:

- £50,000 for strategic capacity building in the development of restorative practices across the organisation's network of accredited community-based restorative justice schemes; and
- £40,000 for community restorative interventions involving adjudicated offenders.

Domestic Abuse Bill

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will bring Northern Ireland in line with the UK in relation to the proposed Domestic Abuse Bill, and if so, when and by what legislation he intends to progress this.
(AQW 29525/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am aware of a proposed Domestic Abuse bill which, if introduced, would make domestic abuse a specific offence in England and Wales carrying a sentence of up to 14 years in prison.

My officials will liaise with colleagues in the Home Office throughout the passage of the Bill in Westminster and will share developments with the Regional Strategy Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence. The Regional Strategy Group's views will then inform any decision by me on the introduction of similar legislation into Northern Ireland.

Prison Service: Code of Conduct and Discipline

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the new Northern Ireland Prison Service Code of Conduct and Discipline is interim in nature; and if so, to detail the reasons for this.
(AQW 29526/11-15)

Mr Ford: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to AQW/29366/11-15.

Cruelty to Animals: Tariffs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department plans to re-examine the effectiveness of tariffs for offences concerning cruelty to animals, given the low rate of custodial sentences for such crimes.
(AQW 29560/11-15)

Mr Ford: As Minister of Justice my role is to ensure that any proposals from Departments for new offences or penalties sit appropriately within the existing framework of criminal sanctions. In that context it is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to assess the efficacy of animal welfare legislation.

Within the legislative framework, sentencing in individual cases is a matter for the judiciary. I am aware, however, that sentencing guidelines in respect of animal welfare, including cruelty to animals, were issued in December 2012 for cases being heard in the Magistrates' Courts.

Policing Board: Informed Warnings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of why it is appropriate that someone who is subject to a concurrent informed warning should continue to serve on the Policing Board.
(AQW 29580/11-15)

Mr Ford: Paragraph 9(1)(b) of Schedule 1 to the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000 states that the Minister of Justice may remove a person from office as an independent or political member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board if satisfied they have been convicted of a criminal offence in Northern Ireland or elsewhere committed after the date of their appointment. As an informed warning is not a conviction, the legislation is not applicable.

The Code of Conduct for members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board states that members must not conduct themselves in such a manner that will bring the Board into disrepute. Therefore it is for the Northern Ireland Policing Board to determine whether a member who is subject to a concurrent informed warning is in breach of the code.

Legal Aid: Proposals

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) representations he has received from legal practitioners opposing his civil and family Legal Aid proposals; and (ii) meetings he has held with such concerned practitioners.
(AQW 29631/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have undertaken four public consultations on Civil Legal Aid reform, the first in November 2012. My Department has received 49 representations from legal practitioners opposing Civil Legal Aid reforms. I have held nine meetings with legal practitioners to discuss the totality of legal aid reform. My officials continue to engage with representative bodies of the legal professions on the current proposals for reform.

Prison Service: Dogs

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of prison dogs that have been put down in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29635/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has humanely put down five dogs in the last five years. Two dogs were put down in 2011, two in 2012 and one in 2013. NIPS only put down dogs when advised to do so by a veterinary surgeon for reasons of chronic ill health. NIPS also re-home any dog found not suitable for prison work.

Department for Regional Development

Translink: Ulsterbus and Metro Routes

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the punctuality problems experienced by Ulsterbus and Metro routes that Translink are seeking to address.
(AQW 27368/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Translink has informed officials that there are two specific issues that impact on the punctuality of their Ulsterbus and Metro routes but in particular their urban services.

The first is the one-off or unexpected events, such as road traffic accidents or extreme weather conditions, which will inevitably impact on the ability of public transport to operate as per scheduled timetables.

The second, which is more prevalent in urban areas, is traffic congestion, leading to reduced average speeds, variable and unpredictable journey times.

Translink is pursuing practical solutions in liaison with Roads Service, in respect of the expansion of Park & Ride facilities and improved bus priority measures.

It is also of note that recent Spring 2013 Passenger Charter results were published on 1 October. These results based on an independent survey against charter criteria suggests that 98% of Metro services and 96% of Ulsterbus services arrive no more than 7 minutes late.

A5: Screening

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the A5 Western Transport Corridor dualling project (A5WTC) and the River Foyle and tributaries and River Finn Special Area of Conservation (SAC), (i) who provided the advice that the screening exercise concluded that it was unlikely that the proposed A5WTC scheme would have an adverse effect on the integrity of this SAC and consequently a full Appropriate Assessment was not required; (ii) to whom this advice was provided; (iii) whether this advice has since proven to be inaccurate; (iv) what action, including disciplinary, has been taken as a result; and (v) who carried out the screening exercise.
(AQW 28743/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: During the tenure of my predecessor, a screening exercise, rather than a report to inform an Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Directive, was carried out on behalf of the Department by Mouchel, the consultants for the A5WTC project.

For the roads which have progressed past this point during my tenure, where the Habitats Directive is relevant, these being, A31 (Magherafelt Bypass), A26 (Frosses Road) and A6, an Appropriate Assessment either has been or will be carried out.

I have asked for an independent review of the project consultant's work in respect of the completion of the Appropriate Assessment process. An independent review of the methodology proposed to address the Court's Ruling is substantially complete and a review of the Appropriate Assessment and Environmental Statement processes is ongoing. When these

urgent aspects of the review are finalised, the focus of the independent review will switch to the adequacy of the screening work previously carried out by Mouchel.

Public Transport: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the increase in public transport useage in North Down over the last five years.
(AQW 29285/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In overall terms public transport usage has grown over the last five years, with an additional 210,000 journeys at the end of 2012/13. In the last three years the increase has been 235,000 journeys.

Strathmore Park

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister for Regional Development what work his Department, or the Roads Service, has carried out in the Strathmore Park area of North Belfast in the last five years; and (ii) what plans his Department has to undertake drainage work in this area over the next five years.
(AQW 29290/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There is a lot of surface scarring of the roads in the Strathmore Park area due to utility installations. Whilst this may not be aesthetically pleasing, the roads are considered to be safe and structurally sound and there are no recorded instances of road drainage problems. For this reason there has been no major expenditure on resurfacing or drainage work in the Strathmore Park area in the last five years.

In accordance with road maintenance policy, safety inspections are carried out on a two monthly cyclical basis and any defects will be identified for repair.

NI Water has advised that water infrastructure work has been carried out within the NI Water Mains Rehabilitation Programme between September and December 2011. The work included 1,131 metres of mains replacement/renewal through open cut and pipe bursting techniques along with 190 service replacements.

Translink: Report of Investigation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will undertake to provide a report on the outcome of a Translink investigation in which it is alleged that a visually impaired man with a guide dog was refused access to a bus by a driver.
(AQW 29329/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My officials have contacted Translink about this matter and it has investigated this incident. The driver in question has been interviewed and it is my understanding that the bus didn't stop at the relevant bus stop.

Translink has assured me that the failure to uplift this passenger was a genuine mistake.

I would suggest the individual involved contacts Translink and if you can contact the individual I would ask that you pass this invite on. Translink senior management would be happy to meet him, to further discuss the matter and take the opportunity to extend both the Company's and the driver's personal apologies.

Towerview, Bangor: Footpaths

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to resurface the footpaths in the Towerview area of Bangor.
(AQW 29331/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The footways at Towerview Avenue and Towerview Crescent, Bangor are being considered for possible inclusion in the Roads Service 2014-2016 footway reconstruction programme for North Down, subject to funding availability and other priorities.

Enterprise Project: Funding

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the Enterprise project to which he is considering allocating EU funding.
(AQW 29361/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is both active and successful in bidding for EU funding across a range of Programmes and is a major contributor to the achievement of the 2011-15 Programme for Government commitment to increase drawdown of competitive EU funds. The allocation of EU funding is the primary responsibility of organisations and Departments other than my own.

In the case of the Enterprise project, allocation of INTERREG IV(a) monies is the responsibility of the Special European Programmes Body (SEUPB). As stated in my answer to Oral Question 5221/11-15 on December 10th, my Department has been approached by the SEUPB which is now urgently seeking to divert the unspent Narrow Water Bridge funds into

contingency projects. In this respect, officials from my Department have, in co-operation with the Department for Transport, Tourism and Sport and Translink, identified the upgrading of the Enterprise Service's rolling stock as a suitable alternative.

The cross border coaches are now 16 years old; their design life is 30 years. Having reached half-life, the project will deal with system obsolescence and compliance with standards including those relating to Persons of Reduced Mobility and general safety as well as aesthetic refurbishment. A new electronic system to enable seat booking in real time for all carriages up to the boarding time for that particular service forms part of the project with the system being fully integrated into the booking service. I believe, in order to futher increase passenger numbers, there should be an enhanced environment with increased functionality.

I am pleased that in bringing this project forward for consideration by the SEUPB, my Department can make an active contribution to help ensure that the INTERREG funds are not lost to the people of Northern Ireland.

A6, Dungiven: Park-and-ride Facilities

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the provision of the Park and Ride sites on the A6 at Dungiven.
(AQW 29446/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My officials recently examined five suggested sites along the A6, in and around Dungiven, and will consider if any can be progressed ahead of the dualling of the A6, between Londonderry and Dungiven.

Ards Peninsula: Roads Budget

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will allocate additional resource to the Ards Peninsula roads budget to address subsidence and the weakening of road infrastructure as a result of the recent tidal surge,
(AQW 29511/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has begun the process of assessing the damage caused by the recent tidal surge which affected not only the Ards Peninsula, but other parts of the coastline and adjoining roads. It may be some time before the full impact is known, necessary repairs are implemented and the full cost is realised. However, remedial works have already begun at some locations on the Ards Peninsula, with additional preparatory work being undertaken in advance of the commencement of works at other locations.

My Department has already submitted additional funding bids as part of January Monitoring. If successful, any additional funding will be allocated on a needs basis.

In addition, officials are still assessing the extent of the damage caused and specific bids for further funding may be required, which would hopefully be considered sympathetically at a later date, if repairs cannot be funded from within existing budgets.

Department for Social Development

Benefits: Universal Credit

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost to his Department to date, of preparing for the introduction of Universal Credit.
(AQW 29478/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Northern Ireland Universal Credit Programme was established in May 2011. The costs incurred in running this Programme are set out below (to the nearest £100k):

- £1.9m in 2011/12 financial year.
- £4.5m in 2012/13 financial year.
- £4m to 30 November in the 2013/14 financial year.

Benefits: Employment and Support Allowance/Incapacity Benefit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to people who were in receipt of Incapacity Benefit and/or Employment Support Allowance, who were examined by Atos Healthcare and deemed fit for work and either accepted this ruling or proceeded to Appeal but were over-ruled, where liability rests if people become ill as a result of work, particularly in instances of an exacerbation of an existing condition which was made known at examination or death.
(AQW 29529/11-15)

Mr McCausland: All claimants of Employment and Support Allowance, along with those who are undergoing Incapacity Benefit Reassessment, are subject to the Work Capability Assessment process to determine their ability to work and carry out everyday tasks. This is a functional assessment based on the premise that eligibility should not be determined by a person's disability or health condition, but rather how their ability to function is affected. The responsibility of the approved Health Care Professional, who carries out the assessment, therefore differs from that of a GP needing to make a diagnosis and plan treatment.

In addition claimants do not need to be fully fit to go back to work and should discuss options available to them with their employer who may be able to facilitate reasonable adjustments in the workplace.

The question of where legal liability (if any) rests -should a claimant become ill as a result of work- can only be authoritatively determined by a court of competent jurisdiction, upon examination of all the relevant facts of each particular case.

Housing Executive: Contracts

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the name of the contractor that was appointed to the All-Trades contract at the last tender date in each district of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.
(AQW 29535/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that at the last tender date, which was August/September 2012, the following contractors were appointed to the NIHE Response Maintenance Repairs Contract.

District	Contractor
Belfast 1& 3 (West)	Mel Davison Construction*
Belfast District 2 East	Garrivan O'Rourke*
Belfast Dist 4	Direct Labour Organisation
Belfast Dist 5 Shankill	Mel Davison Construction*
Belfast Dist 6 North	Garrivan O'Rourke*
Belfast Dist 7 South	Mel Davison Construction*
Castlereagh	ESE Ltd
Lisburn Antrim Street	Garrivan O'Rourke*
Lisburn Dairy Farm	Mel Davison Construction*
Bangor, Newtownards **	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd
Downpatrick	ESE Ltd
Armagh / Banbridge	PK Murphy
Lurgan/Brownlow/Portadown	Mel Davison Construction*
Fermanagh(4&5)	PK Murphy
Dungannon	PK Murphy
Newry (1-5)	Bayview Contracts
Newtownabbey 1 & 2	CFM
Ballymena, Carrick, Larne **	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd
Antrim **	PK Murphy Construction Limited
Ballycastle/Ballymoney	CFM
Coleraine	Direct Labour Organisation
Larne **	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd
Magherafelt/Limavady	CFM
Omagh / Cookstown	CFM
Strabane	Robinson Ferry Construction Ltd
Londonderry 1,2,3 **	Omega Mechanical Services Ltd

* These contractors have subsequently entered into Administration and alternative arrangements have been made.

** The contracts for these Districts were awarded in 2010 and they will be the subject of a secondary competition during early 2014 from the new framework.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Housing Executive: Contracts

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to contracts that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Direct Labour Organisation have taken over, to detail each contract and whether (i) each has decreased or increased the labour force; and (ii) all rights under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations have been protected.
(AQW 29537/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that their Direct Labour Organisation initially provided cover for all eight contracts vacated by contractors who had gone into administration. The contracts were: -

- West Belfast
- South Belfast
- East Belfast
- North Belfast
- Shankill
- Lisburn Antrim Street
- Lisburn Dairy Farm
- Craigavon

The Housing Executive confirms that, in taking this action, the Direct Labour Organisation acted in accordance with the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) Regulations 2006, and that any employees from those previous contractors who met the requirements of the TUPE Regulations were transferred to their Direct Labour Organisation, as follows: -

West Belfast (MDC)	41
South Belfast (MDC)	39
East Belfast (Garrivan & O'Rourke)	8
North Belfast District 6 (Garrivan & O'Rourke)	12
Shankill (MDC)	38
Lisburn Antrim Street (Garrivan & O'Rourke)	9
Lisburn Dairy Farm (MDC)	15
Portadown (MDC)	57

The Housing Executive advises that a small number of these staff have subsequently left. They further explain that as neither MDC nor Garrivan & O'Rourke employed electricians, they engaged electricians to supplement the workforce on these contracts.

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by his Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29542/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A list of third sector organisations funded by the Department for Social Development and the value of each contract for 2013/2014 is attached at Annex A.

Annex A

Table below sets out the third sector organisations which receive grant assistance from the Department for Social Development to assist them in the provision of services to the public.

The awarded amount represents funding for the 2013/2014 financial year.

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
174 Trust	£655.00
174 Trust	£705.00
174 Trust	£11,191.20
23rd Antrim Scout Group	£500.00
ABC Community Network	£66,538.89
Advice NI	£1,406,999.80

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Age Concern Derry	£74,021.16
Age Concern North Down	£40,628.00
AgeNI	£75,501.00
Alpha	£277,535.00
An Droichead	£47,440.80
An Gaeláras Cultúrlann uí chanáin	£25,262.06
An Gaeláras Cultúrlann uí chanáin	£36,021.04
An Munia Tober	£42,420.00
An Munia Tober	88,519.64
An Tearmann Project Ltd	£633.00
Andersonstown Traditional & Contemporary Music School	£42,400.96
Apex Housing Association	£3,390,661.00
Ardavon Trust	£30,202.00
Ardinariff Historical and Cultural Society	£125.00
Ardoyne Womens Group	£66,237.94
Ardoyne Youth Providers Forum	£194,845.42
Ards Community Network	£61,786.00
Ardstraw & District Community Development Association	£510.00
Ark Housing Association Northern Ireland Ltd	£318,539.00
Arts for All	£10,893.95
ArtsEkta	£6,200.00
Ashton Community Trust	£38,868.98
Ashton Community Trust	£47,528.00
Ashton Community Trust	£65,696.69
Ashton Community Trust	£94,360.35
Ashton Community Trust	£127,181.08
Association of Charitable Foundations	£10,000.00
Atlas Womens Centre	£47,865.80
Atlas Womens Centre	£66,538.00
Autism Initiative NI	£806,587.00
Ballee & Harryville Community Enterprises	£1,193.07
Ballee Community Childcare	£27,340.20
Ballybeen Men's Motivational Group	£500.00
Ballybeen Womens Centre	£71,292.00
Ballybeen Womens Centre	£179,564.30
Ballykeel Together Development Association	£633.00
Ballykeel Together Development Association	£7,990.00
Ballymagroarty & Hazelbank Community Partnership	£121,692.86
Ballymena Borough Council	£12,694.45
Ballymena Borough Council	£17,845.58
Ballymena Business Centre Limited	£1,870.00
Ballymena Business Centre Limited	£2,099.74

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Ballymoney Community Resource Centre	£65,564.00
Ballynafeigh Community Development Association	£40,374.63
Ballynafeigh Community Development Association	£66,405.24
Ballysillan Community Forum	£95,923.00
BANBRIDGE AMATEUR BOXING CLUB	£550.00
Barnardos NI	£94,173.49
Barnardos NI	£309,038.00
BEAT NI Limited	£37,109.80
Belfast & Lisburn Womens Aid	£1,360,532.00
Belfast Activity Centre	£126,292.43
Belfast Central Mission	£450.00
Belfast Central Mission	£977,865.00
Belfast Charitable Society	£51,366.00
Belfast Community Sports Development Network	£24,079.37
Belfast International Comedy Festival	£4,500.00
Belfast Lough Sailability	£500.00
Belfast Photo Festival	£7,000.00
Belfast Print Workshop	£960.00
Benedy Community Association	£125.00
Beragh Youth Club	£375.00
Blackie River Community Centre	£129,556.49
Blackmountain Action Group	£22,459.60
Blackmountain Action Group	£61,917.96
Bloody Sunday Trust	£21,087.02
Bogside & Brandywell Initiative	£67,417.26
Bogside & Brandywell Initiative	£149,278.29
Bovalley Community Asociation	£333.33
Broughshane & District Community Assoc Ltd	£500.00
Bryson Lagansports	£14,800.00
Building Ballysally Together	£40,607.76
Cairde Teo	£633.00
Camphill Communities Trust NI	£117,855.00
Camphill Community Clanabogan	£551,906.00
Camphill Community Mourne Grange	£716,435.00
Cancer Lifeline	£59,041.10
Care For The Family	£43,522.42
Carnlough Community Association	£500.00
Carrick Hill Residents Association	£41,429.20
Carrickfergus Community Forum	£60,642.00
Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival	£12,000.00
Cathedral Quarter Trust	£12,000.00
Cathedral Youth Club	£42,978.64

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Causeway Enterprise Agency	£11,626.10
Causeway Enterprise Agency	£29,303.00
Causeway Rural & Urban Network	£70,828.00
Causeway Volunteer Centre	£25,000.00
Causeway Volunteer Centre	£34,854.70
Causeway Womens Aid	£267,280.00
Caw/Nelson Drive Action Group	£64,779.39
Celtic Bhoys FC	£500.00
Charter for Northern Ireland	£43,460.38
Chrysalis Womens Centre	£21,818.62
Chrysalis Womens Centre	£52,177.95
Church of Ireland Diocese for Derry and Raphoe	£23,424.00
Churches Community Work Alliance	£124,006.52
City Centre Initiative	£15,294.59
City Centre Initiative	£67,607.76
Clann Eireann Youth Club	£15,600.00
Clarendon Shelter	£236,134.00
Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum	£249,833.78
Clonoe Rural Development Agency	£500.00
Clooney Estate Residents Association	£43,900.66
Coach House Regeneration Limited	£500.00
Coalisland Training Services	£59,012.87
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£25,038.00
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£52,491.84
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£69,439.28
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£133,070.99
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£135,378.26
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£139,952.26
Colin Neighbourhood Partnership	£141,349.56
Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	£38,904.15
Community Restorative Justice (Ireland) NW Region	£159,991.66
Community Restorative Justice Ireland	£217,016.35
Community Restorative Justice Newry/Armagh	£53,840.85
Confederation of Community Groups Newry & Mourne	£66,539.00
Conservation Volunteers Northern Ireland	£26,772.04
Conway Education Centre	£256,146.67
Cookstown & Magherafelt Volunteer Centre	£21,062.00
Cookstown & Magherafelt Volunteer Centre	£33,357.00
Co-operation Ireland	£342,155.00
Corpus Christi Youth Centre	£633.00
County Antrim Boxing IABA	£3,100.00
County Armagh Community Development	£71,000.00

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Craigavon Amateur Boxing Club	£6,000.00
Craigavon and Banbridge Volunteer Centre	£20,412.82
Craigavon and Banbridge Volunteer Centre	£32,697.00
Craigavon City Football Club	£386,737.83
Creating Space	£580.00
Creggan Country Park Enterprises Ltd	£63,056.64
Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership	£47,528.00
Creggan Pre-School & Training Trust Limited	£112,659.63
Cuan Mhuire (NI) Limited	£273,639.00
Cullybackey Development Agency	£500.00
Currynierin Community Association	£59,432.74
Daddy Promotions Ltd	£5,000.00
Depaul Trust NI	£1,778,302.00
Derry & District Youth Football Association	£16,000.00
Desertmartin Accordion Band	£375.00
Development Trusts NI	£121,441.28
Devenish Partnership Forum	£36,925.00
Devenish Partnership Forum	£61,461.02
Devenish Partnership Forum	£61,929.06
Devenish Partnership Forum	£111,841.48
Divis Joint Development Committee	£101,673.38
Dockers Amateur Boxing club	£633.00
Donaghadee Lifeboat	£475.00
Donegall Pass Community Forum	£53,954.76
Donegall Pass Community Forum	£100,353.26
Donemana Cricket Club	£510.00
Donemana Haven	£480.00
Dove House Community Trust	£18,111.46
Dove House Community Trust	£76,486.28
Dr B's Kitchen (Barnardo's)	£850.00
Drumellan Community Association	£400.00
Drumsurn Community Association	£125.00
Dunclug Partnership Group	£58,210.10
Dungannon Youth Resource Centre	£633.00
Dungiven Retirement Association	£125.00
Dunluce Family Centre	£17,400.00
Dunluce Family Centre	£53,525.77
Dunluce Family Centre	£79,083.56
East Belfast Community Development Agency	£45,887.00
East Belfast Community Development Agency	£50,624.61
East Belfast Community Development Agency	£159,515.40
East Belfast Community Development Agency	£330,031.56

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
East Belfast Mission	£366,073.00
East Belfast Partnership	£13,400.80
East Belfast Partnership	£20,000.00
East Belfast Partnership	£174,008.68
EDGE	£500.00
Embrace Ballysillan	£500.00
Enterprise North West	£14,952.00
Ex Prisoners Interpretative Centre	£186,207.96
EXTERN	£1,905,588.00
Extra Care	£23,862.00
FACT	£60,401.00
Falls Community Council	£66,539.00
Falls Community Council	£320,414.63
Falls Women's Centre	£53,742.01
Falls Women's Centre	£151,723.95
Farset Youth & Community Development Ltd	£148,401.16
FASA	£325,849.52
Feeny Community Association	£125.00
Fermanagh Womens Aid	£197,914.00
First Housing Aid & Support Services	£2,257,287.00
First Steps Womens Group	£40,526.34
First Steps Womens Group	£62,899.00
Flax Housing Association Ltd	£286,135.00
FOCUS	£52,098.75
Focus on Family	£23,652.51
Focus on Family	£66,009.99
Focus on Family	£169,378.91
Footprints Womens Centre	£50,566.80
Footprints Womens Centre	£71,292.00
Footprints Womens Centre	£109,562.14
Fountain Street Community Development Association	£43,070.51
Foyle Parents and Friends Association	£600.00
Foyle Womens Aid	£22,762.16
Foyle Womens Aid	£692,682.00
Foyle Womens Information Network	£47,528.00
Friends Of Mullan Mews	£210.00
Galbally Youth & Community Association Ltd	£500.00
Galliagh Community Development Group	£39,354.88
Gasyard Wall Feile	£25,542.91
GEMS Northern Ireland Ltd	£60,586.47
GEMS Northern Ireland Ltd	£81,169.06
Gingerbread Derry	£42,572.92

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Glen Community Parent/Youth Group	£66,167.08
Glen Development Initiative	£88,172.90
Glenbank Community Association	£17,663.36
Glens Community Association	£333.33
Glens Community Association	£23,395.34
Glens Community Association	£36,305.55
Goal Line Youth Trust Portadown	£800.00
Gosford Housing Association	£9,641.00
Grace Women's Development Ltd	£850.00
Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland	£5,100.00
Grange Youth and Community Group	£633.00
Grange Youth and Community Group	£6,366.26
Greater Shankill Partnership Board	£18,360.00
Greater Shankill Partnership Board	£180,607.68
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£29,173.88
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£31,154.28
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£44,078.72
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£46,391.22
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£66,295.00
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£84,600.52
Greater Shantallow Area Partnership	£146,767.24
Greater Turf Lodge Residents Association	£633.00
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£9,159.56
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£57,090.47
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£73,803.63
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£75,254.49
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£114,007.38
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£130,403.00
Greater Village Regeneration Trust	£161,840.58
Green Shoot Productions	£2,000.00
Greencastle Youth Club	£375.00
Greenway Womens Group	£66,108.69
Greenway Womens Group	£71,292.00
Greysteel Community Association	£125.00
Growing Connections N1	£500.00
Habinteg Housing Association (Ulster) Ltd	£11,447.00
Hannahstown Community Association	£633.00
Happy Faces NI	£500.00
Harmony Homes (NI)	£28,731.00
Harryville Partnership Initiative	£12,884.33
Helm Housing	£336,880.00
Hillcrest House Ltd	£49,156.46

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Hillstown Rural Community Group	£500.00
Hobby Horse Playgroup	£66,066.28
Holy Cross College	£20,650.74
Holywood Family Trust	£61,786.00
Holywood Shared Town	£500.00
HURT	£9,510.00
Impact Training	£850.00
Indian Senior Citizens Club	£500.00
Ionad Uibh Eachach	£87,828.47
Irish Football Association	£59,324.52
Irish Rugby Football Union Ulster Branch	£59,449.52
Irish Street Community Association	£64,661.00
Irvinestown Lady of the Lake Festival	£500.00
John Paul II Youth Club	£633.00
Kilcooley Community Forum	£48,100.43
Kilcooley Community Forum	£87,115.00
Kilcooley Womens Centre	£38,900.00
Kilcooley Womens Education & Development Group	£44,309.34
Kilcreggan Homes	£238,979.00
Kilcronaghan Community Association	£375.00
Killycurragh Youth Club	£375.00
Kingdom Youth Club	£500.00
Lagan Legacy	£5,700.00
L'Arche Belfast	£58,791.00
Larne Community Care Centre	£32,677.00
Larne Community Development Project	£50,379.00
Larne Enterprise Development Company Ltd	£47,924.56
Laurencetown Summer Scheme	£475.00
Leafair Community Association	£5,149.70
Leafair Community Association	£27,708.95
Legion of Mary Morning Star	£557,034.00
Lenadoon Community Forum	£30,787.86
Lenadoon Community Forum	£87,792.80
Lenadoon Womens Group	£48,611.00
Leonard Cheshire NI Regional Office	£1,028,752.00
Liberty Consortium	£50,199.25
Life NI	£79,307.00
Ligoniel Improvement Association	£143,920.44
Lilac Cancer Support Group	£500.00
Limavady Senior Citizens	£125.00
Limavady Volunteer Centre	£22,956.65
Limavady Volunteer Centre	£30,084.50

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Lisanelly Regeneration Group	£375.00
Lisburn North Community Association	£400.00
Lisnafin / Ardnalee Trust Cross Community Development Association	£510.00
Lisnafin / Ardnalee Trust Cross Community Development Association	£30,017.55
Living Rivers Lighthouse Hostel	£340,080.00
Loreto Grammar School	£67,509.48
Loughgall Football Club	£500.00
Loughgiel Community Association Ltd	£178,835.00
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group	£100,876.55
Lower Shankill Community Association	£65,005.56
Lurgan - Pheonix Amateur Boxing Club	£16,723.01
Lurgan Golf Club	£288,249.80
MACS Supporting Young People	£752,059.00
Maghera Sons of William Flute Band	£400.00
Magherafelt Womens Group	£47,865.80
Magherafelt Womens Group	£66,519.00
Maiden City Motor Club Ltd	£11,532.35
Mainstay DRP	£561,868.00
Markets Development Association	£13,107.74
Markets Development Association	£60,431.36
Mayfair Business Centre Ltd	£5,000.00
Mayobridge GAC	£500.00
Melmount & East Banks Estates Community Associations Forum	£42,154.60
Memory Making Ltd	£500.00
Methodist Mission	£558,717.00
Michael Donald Photography	£1,000.00
Mid-Ulster & South Tyrone Association for the Single Homeless	£333,406.00
Milford Buildings Preservation Trust	£500.00
Millisle Youth Forum	£500.00
Milltown Super Adults	£5,064.00
Mindwise New Vision	£717,663.00
Mount Vernon Community Development Forum	£35,894.61
Mount Vernon Community Development Forum	£129,382.00
Naionra an Droichid	£1,000.00
Naionra an Droichid	£1,000.00
Naiscoil Neachtain	£125.00
NCH Northern Ireland	£257,718.00
New Life Counselling	£165,216.31
New Mossley Presbyterian Youth Club	£500.00
Newington Housing Association Ltd	£12,961.00
Newry & Mourne Co-op Ltd	£ 43,439.56
Newtownabbey Methodist Mission	£27,975.00

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Newtownards Road Womens Group Ltd	£89,945.64
NI Association For Mental Health Belfast	£2,614,802.00
NI Childrens Hospice	£2,520.00
NI Deaf Youth Association	£633.00
NIACRO	£176,488.00
NICVA	£998,104.99
North Belfast Employment Centre	£56,915.40
North Belfast Employment Centre	£57,152.55
North Belfast Partnership Board	£42,268.10
North Belfast Partnership Board	£167,587.59
North Belfast Womens Initiative & Support Project	£33,736.88
North Down & Ards Womens Aid	£238,811.00
North Down Community Network	£49,890.74
North West Community Network	£58,495.00
North West Play Resource Centre Ltd	£42,611.16
North West Tongues, Tones & Tappin	£125.00
Northern Ireland Alternatives	£353,754.44
Northern Ireland Institute for the Disabled	£589,158.00
Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network	£37,500.00
Northern Regional College	£34,057.64
Northern Regional College	£144,972.26
Oasis - Caring in Action	£13,361.64
Ocean Youth Trust Ireland	£500.00
Ogras Youth Club	£708.00
Ogras Youth Club	£48,119.17
Old Library Trust	£62,179.15
Omagh Volunteer Centre	£19,385.52
Omagh Volunteer Centre	£29,116.60
Omagh Womens Aid	£188,655.00
On Guard Gym	£28,506.06
Open Door	£375.00
Open Door Housing Association	£280,904.00
Orchard Grove	£30,574.00
Our Lady of Mercy Girls college	£4,000.00
Outburst Arts Festival	£4,500.00
Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland	£36,000.00
Outer West Partnership	£59,341.51
Over The Hill Music Collective	£1,000.00
Portadown - Dialogue for Diversity	£4,805.76
Positive Futures for People With A Learning Disability	£2,014,863.00
Praxis Care Belfast	£4,298,609.00
Prospects Newtownards	£290,868.00

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Queerspace Belfast	£850.00
Randalstown ARCHES Association Ltd	£52,281.00
Rathcoole Churches Community Group	£21,731.26
Rathcoole Primary School	£70,458.52
Redburn/Loughview Community Forum	£500.00
Resource Centre Derry	£41,770.90
Resource Centre Derry	£57,916.65
Resource Centre Derry	£87,643.48
Roden Street Community Development Group	£120,892.46
Roe Valley Residents Association	£333.33
Roe Valley Residents Association	£40,192.54
Rosemount & District Welfare Rights Group	£87,961.70
Rosemount House Limited	£298,771.00
RSUA PLACE Built Environment Centre	£3,200.00
Sailortown Mothers and Toddlers	£633.00
Saints Youth Centre	£633.00
Scotch Street Youth Club	£600.00
SENSE NI	£23,524.00
Shankill Womens Centre	£49,021.00
Shankill Womens Centre	£54,546.80
Shankill Womens Centre	£168,805.54
Shantallow Men's Support Group	£400.00
Shantallow Social Support Group	£400.00
Shantallow Womens Group	£400.00
Shared History Interpretive Project	£633.00
Shelter NI	£312,724.00
Shopmobility Cookstown	£375.00
Simon Community NI	£5,300,635.00
Sion Mills Community Association	£510.00
Sirocco Youth Football Club	£633.00
SOS Bus Ltd	£900.00
South Belfast Partnership Board	£155,235.44
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme	£66,538.89
Speedwell Trust	£500.00
Springhill Park Community Development Association	£49,205.15
Springvale Tenants Association	£850.00
St Andrews Church of Ireland	£31,787.38
St Columbs Cathedral	£28,854.96
St Kevin's Senior Citizens	£633.00
St Malachys Youth Centre	£38,000.00
St Mary's Community Group	£980.00
St Patrick's GAC	£500.00

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
St Rose's Dominican College	£4,000.00
Stadium Youth & Community Project	£89,298.53
Star Neighbourhood Centre	£141,167.33
Steelstown Brian Og's G.A.A. Club	£510.00
Strabane & Lifford LGBT Group	£510.00
Strabane & Lifford LGBT Group	£42,120.19
Strabane Community Project	£29,896.64
Strabane Ethnic Community Association	£33,742.30
Strabane Local Strategy Partnership	£38,817.56
Strabane Sigersons GAA	£29,763.80
Strategic Investment Board	£18,053.34
Strathfoyle Community Association Ltd	£20,055.00
Strathfoyle Womens Group	£14,069.44
Strathfoyle Womens Group	£66,533.00
STRATHROY AFTER SCHOOL CLUB	£40,049.33
Stravaganza Productions	£510.00
Streetbeat Youth Project	£82,919.78
Suffolk Community Forum	£27,401.70
Suffolk Community Forum	£65,786.46
Supporting Communities NI	£5,000.00
Supporting Communities NI	£20,845.85
Synergy@JVC	£74,078.92
Tanglewood Music	£500.00
The Abbeyfield Belfast Society Limited	£194,443.00
The Abbeyfield UK NI	£402,961.00
The Beeches Professional and Therapeutic Services	£63,068.00
The Black Box Trust	£8,000.00
The Cedar Foundation	£850.00
The Cedar Foundation	£1,351,241.00
The Churches Voluntary Work Bureau Ltd	£28,334.00
The Churches Voluntary Work Bureau Ltd	£32,525.00
The Churches Voluntary Work Bureau Ltd	£57,352.00
The Cithrah Foundation	£84,763.00
The Drummond Centre Project Limited	£ 460.00
The Fermanagh Trust	£55,526.00
The Fountain Primary School	£15,984.77
The Gasyard Development Trust	£46,668.41
The Legion of Mary - Regina Coeli Hostel	£106,527.00
The Link Family & Community Centre	£70,334.00
The Lively Bunch	£633.00
The Open Door Centre	£500.00
The Pink Ladies Breast Cancer Support Group	£39,291.16

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
The Rainbow Project	£850.00
The Resurgam Community Development Trust Ltd	£169,224.48
The Rivers Community Project	£500.00
The Rotary Club of Dungannon	£500.00
The Salvation Army HQ	£1,364,036.00
The Villages Together	£600.00
The warehouse Project	£633.00
The Welcome Organisation	£63,403.00
The Whistle Project	£510.00
The Womens Centre Derry	£20,173.72
The Womens Centre Derry	£31,211.78
The Womens Centre Derry	£71,288.62
Thirst For Ltd	£3,000.00
Threshold	£1,256,223.00
Top of the Hill 2010	£65,021.24
Tots at the Bridge	£42,468.53
Training For Women Network Ltd	£184,324.35
Triangle Housing Association	£2,618,602.00
Triax Ltd	£64,895.64
Triax Ltd	£258,891.30
Trinity Housing Association	£60,528.00
Tullycarnet Community Support Services LTD	£81,485.38
Tullycarnet Primary School	£110,211.00
Tyrone Donegal Partnership	£99,968.47
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association	£58,699.52
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum	£60,573.00
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum	£72,182.76
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum	£120,419.16
Upper Ardoyne Community Partnership	£42,795.28
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£1,000.00
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£16,423.83
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£53,315.00
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£95,173.88
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£140,605.79
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£227,766.09
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£251,216.49
Upper Springfield Development Company Limited	£292,975.08
Vine Centre Limited	£121,773.77
Vine Centre Limited	£153,503.78
Volunteer Now	£1,000.00
Volunteer Now	£8,085.00
Volunteer Now	£111,350.00

Organisation Name	Awarded Amount
Volunteer Now	£187,208.97
Volunteer Now	£340,700.00
Walkway Community Association	£500.00
Waterside Area Partnership	£79,523.50
Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership	£14,459.18
Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership	£28,823.78
Waterside Neighbourhood Partnership	£57,668.20
Waterside Women's Centre	£36,628.23
Waterside Women's Centre	50,379.00
WEA NI	£63,112.00
Welcome Trust Disabled Care Group	£633.00
West Bann Development	£2,800.00
West Bann Development	£50,628.22
West Bann Development	£60,753.69
West Belfast Parent Youth Support Group	£89,572.69
West Belfast Partnership Board	£181,658.41
West Belfast Traders Forum	£28,020.00
West Kirk Community Project	£22,379.91
Willowfield Parish Community Association	£12,931.25
Windsor Womens Centre	£66,538.89
Windsor Womens Centre	£112,022.76
Wishing Well Family Centre	£49,579.16
Womens Aid Ballymena	£569,675.00
Womens Aid Newry	£384,087.00
Womens Common Path Network	£633.00
Women's Resource & Development Agency	£46,368.70
Womens Support Network	£78,930.70
Womens TEC	£78,918.00
Woodstock Rhythm And Blues Festival	£1,000.00
YMCA North Down	£685,673.00

Welfare Reform: Oversight Board

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the work of the Welfare Reform Oversight Board; and whether the Board will produce a report on the Welfare Reform Bill.
(AQW 29594/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Following my statement to the Assembly on the flexibilities which were secured from Lord Freud on how Universal Credit would be paid in Northern Ireland, I announced the establishment of an Oversight Board chaired by my Department's Permanent Secretary with members from a cross section of representatives from the voluntary and community sector. The Board provides support in developing the criteria to enable the implementation of the different payment flexibilities.

The Board has met on three occasions and considered papers produced by the Universal Credit Programme Team on payment flexibilities policy and implementation issues. The Board has also received feedback from public consultation events which were organised across Northern Ireland to facilitate input from organisations not represented on the Oversight Board as well as political parties and individuals.

At the next meeting it is planned to present the Board with the latest policy and operational thinking taking into account political discussions.

The Board will then produce a final report on the criteria for payment flexibilities in Universal Credit.

Gambling Legislation

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the current gambling legislation applicable locally; (ii) any proposed amendment to current gambling legislation; and (iii) whether there are plans to harmonise gambling legislation within the UK.
(AQW 29642/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

(i) Gambling in Northern Ireland is primarily regulated by the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Other legislation, such as the National Lottery etc. Act 1993, the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 and the Gambling Act 2005 also contain provisions which are applicable to Northern Ireland.

(ii) Following a review of the current legislation early last year I announced my intention to update the law in order to address the rapidly changing gambling environment that exists today, ensure fairness within the gambling industry, protect the young and vulnerable and keep crime out of gambling. My Department is currently working on the drafting of new legislation.

In addition, the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Bill, currently progressing through the UK Parliament, contains provisions which will ensure that Northern Ireland consumers continue to have the same protection as other British consumers in relation to the advertising of remote gambling. The Assembly approved a Legislative Consent Motion in respect of this Bill on 17 June 2013.

(iii) The introduction of new legislation may bring Northern Ireland gambling laws into closer harmony with those of the rest of the United Kingdom, there will, however, remain areas where differences exist. For example, while it is intended that Gaming Machine categories and standards currently used in Great Britain will be adopted here; there is no intention to introduce harder forms of gambling such as Casinos.

North West Regional Science Park

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development to detail when the construction of the North West Regional Science Park is due to be completed.
(AQW 29662/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Work began on the construction of the North West Regional Science Park on 29 July 2013 and is due to be completed by 28 July 2014.

Benefits: Universal Credit

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social, pursuant to AQW 29478/11-15, for a breakdown on the nature of costs incurred.
(AQW 29663/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Universal Credit Programme was established in May 2011. The costs incurred in running the Programme are set out below (to the nearest £100k):

	2011/12	**2012/13**	**2013/14**
Staff Salaries & GAE	1,588,402	3,476,280	3,046,742
Computer Charges	45,881	53,000	270,000
Consulting/Research	311,376	389,500	138,000
Estates Work	-	30,000	24,000
Capital Expenditure	-	600,000	500,000
Total	**1,915,659**	**4,548,780**	**3,978,742***

Up to 30 November 2013

South Tyrone: Social and Affordable Homes

Ms McGahan asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the Programme for Government target to deliver 8,000 new social and affordable homes by 2015, how many of these homes are anticipated for South Tyrone.
(AQW 29686/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Programme for Government (PfG) set a target to deliver 6,000 social and 2,000 affordable homes over the period 2011/12 to 2014/15.

All new social housing is developed by registered housing associations through the social housing development programme. During the PfG period, 135 new social houses are planned for the South Tyrone area. 75 houses have started and a further 60 are scheduled to start during the next financial year.

Affordable homes are currently delivered through the co-ownership scheme with the areas in which properties are purchased being determined by the demands of applicants of the scheme. A total of 37 homes have been delivered in the South Tyrone area through co-ownership as at March 2013. The figures of the 2013/14 financial period are not currently available.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Assembly Commission: Paid Councillors

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission to detail how many people paid by the Commission also hold a role as a local councillor.
(AQW 29583/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission is responsible for processing remuneration payments to four distinct groups of people namely:

(i) Members;

(ii) Permanent Assembly Commission employees;

(iii) Members of statutory and advisory bodies (for example, Members of the Independent Financial Review Panel, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards and the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee); and

(iv) Members' and Parties' support staff.

For categories (i) to (iii) above, there is currently no-one receiving payment from the Commission while holding an office as a local councillor. For category (iv), the Commission does not hold information on whether these staff have a role as a local councillor as they are employed by a Member or Party.

Northern Ireland
Assembly

Friday 24 January 2014

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Ballykelly Site: Soft Market Testing

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the recent announcement of the 'soft market testing' exercise in relation to Ballykelly Camp, whether any private sector interest will be distinct and separate from the ongoing Department of Agriculture and Rural Development preparation to move onto the site in 2015.
(AQW 28669/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The soft market testing of the Shackleton site, currently being undertaken by BTW Shiells on behalf of OFMDFM, takes into account the commitment of DARD to use approximately 10 acres of the site to accommodate its new headquarters.

Victims and Survivors' Groups: Funding

Mr McCallister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much funding Victims and Survivor groups have received since 2011.
(AQW 29394/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Letters of offer totalling £24,588,922.00 have been issued to Victims and Survivors groups for the period 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2015.

Economic Pact: Shared Housing and Education

Mr P Ramsey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what projects will be funded from the further £100 million RRI borrowing available across 2014-15 and 2015-16 for shared housing and shared education projects as part of the Economic Pact.
(AQW 29408/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM is currently co-ordinating a bids exercise to identify suitable projects for RRI funding under the Economic Pact.

The Lisanelly Shared Educational Campus, which will bring together six schools serving almost 4,000 pupils in the Omagh area has been agreed. The Department of Education will shortly be launching a programme aimed at identifying further projects suitable for support.

In addition, officials are currently assessing a number of proposals for shared neighbourhood schemes that have been identified by the Department for Social Development.

Assembly Questions: Response Times

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the average time it has taken their Department to answer an Assembly (i) Written Question; (ii) Priority Written Question; and (iii) 2 day Priority Written Question.
(AQW 29588/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The information is not held by the Department in the format requested and could not be provided without incurring disproportionate costs.

Ebrington Master Plan

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why a proposal in Ilex's Ebrington Masterplan, which was subsequently the focus of a feasibility study, to develop Ebrington Clock Tower as the core of a major art gallery did not proceed.
(AQW 29625/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The 2006 draft Ebrington Master Plan identified possible uses for buildings on the site, including the potential for an Arts Gallery at the Clock Tower. A Strategic Outline Case for the development of an Art Gallery, undertaken in 2011, was reviewed and it was unable to demonstrate the necessary support of stakeholders and funders required to generate the £21 million to enable the project to proceed.

Ilex and its strategic partners will continue to explore the potential of developing the Clock Tower for viable projects within the current Ebrington Development Framework consultation process.

Delivering Social Change: Update

Mrs Hale asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of Delivering Social Change.
(AQO 5259/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Delivering Social Change framework was set up by the Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It represents a new level of joined-up working across Government departments to drive through initiatives which have a genuine impact on the ground and achieve real, long lasting benefits.

Implementation of the initial 6 Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes, announced in October 2012, is progressing well.

The Department of Education is leading on the Signature Programme to improve literacy and numeracy levels within schools. This programme will see 233 additional teachers placed in 267 primary and post- primary schools to deliver tuition to children who are currently struggling to achieve even basic educational standards.

Over 200 of the posts are now filled and recruitment of the remaining teachers is ongoing.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has lead responsibility for 2 of the signature programmes – the provision of additional Family Support Hubs and Support for Parents.

The Family Support Hubs Programme will see 16 existing Family Support Hubs being maintained and 10 new Family Support Hubs being established.

In the Northern Trust Area, 2 new Hubs have been established and a third is at an advanced stage of implementation. Work is ongoing to identify potential locations for the 7 Family Support Hubs in the Belfast area. It is anticipated that all 10 new Hubs will be online by April 2014.

In respect of the Support for Parents Signature Programme, a suite of programmes have been developed which will see guidance, training and information being provided for up to 1,200 families.

The Department for Social Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment are jointly taking forward the Social Enterprise Incubation Hubs Signature Programme. Eleven Hubs will be established in currently vacant commercial premises and will offer a range of business advice and practical support to social enterprise entrepreneurs.

Good progress has been made with leases for 9 of the Hubs having been agreed; the remaining 2 hubs will be agreed this month. It is envisaged that providers of supporting services will be appointed in March 2014 in preparation for the majority of the Hubs being operational in April 2014.

The Department for Social Development in collaboration with the Department of Education have established 20 new nurture units within school settings. The establishment of these additional nurture units allows us to play a key role in improving the lives and educational attainment of our most vulnerable children by targeting support where it is most needed. One hundred and sixteen children have now undergone observation and assessment and are currently attending the units.

The Department for Employment and Learning is taking forward the Community Family Support Signature Programme which aims to support parents and prevent younger family members from falling into the Not in Employment, Education or Training category.

The programme was successfully piloted earlier this year and the upscaled programme was launched in November. This will reach up to 720 disadvantaged families.

In addition to the initial Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes, on 8 October 2013 Junior Ministers Jennifer McCann and Jonathan Bell announced the Play and Leisure Signature Programme. This will support initiatives in championing play, greater local access to space for play; and planning and support for play at a community level.

Delivering Social Change is about focusing on a smaller number of actions which can really make a difference. Departments are now working together on priority issues to maximise outcomes and improve the lives of everyone living here, and particularly those who need help the most.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Animal Cruelty: Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether there are any plans to review animal cruelty legislation in light of the statistics revealing the low number of custodial sentences imposed for such offences.
(AQW 29561/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department brought forward a new Welfare of Animals Act in 2011 to replace the Welfare of Animals Act 1972. The 2011 Act recognises that causing unnecessary suffering to any animal is a very serious offence and the penalties contained in it reflect this. It significantly increased the penalties for animal welfare offences to a maximum of 6 months imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of £5,000 on summary conviction; and on conviction by indictment to a maximum of 2 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

These new penalties provide the Courts with a range of sentencing options to ensure that the perpetrators receive a punishment that fits the crime. However, sentencing within the legislative framework is a matter for the Judiciary and I understand that in making sentencing decisions Judges take into account the law, the seriousness of the offence, any aggravating or mitigating factors, sentencing guidelines and all the relevant circumstances in each case.

Following the introduction of the new Act I met the Minister of Justice to discuss the possibility of encouraging the Courts to use the maximum sentences available. He informed me that the Lord Chief Justice, in his Programme of Action on Sentencing, was enhancing the structures by which the Judiciary ensure consistent and appropriate sentencing. I am advised that new sentencing guidelines for Magistrates' Courts, on offences of animal cruelty, tail docking of dogs' tails and animal fighting were published in December 2013.

Whilst I fully support tough sentences for serious animal welfare offences, changing legislation will not increase the low number of custodial sentences imposed by the Courts for such offences. I therefore have no plans to review animal welfare legislation.

Coastal Defences: Spend

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the (i) capital; and (ii) resource spend on coastal defences, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29564/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency's estimate of the annual capital and resource spend on designated coastal defences in the last 5 years is shown below.

Year	Capital £k	Resource £k
2013/14 Projected spend	50	279
2012/13	118	224
2011/12	111	218
2010/11	85	213
2009/10	47	208

Coastal Defences and Emergency Planning

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the recent extreme weather conditions, whether she has any plans to review the effectiveness of coastal defences and emergency planning.
(AQW 29565/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency is responsible for some 26 km of designated coastal flood defences which are subject to a rolling programme of inspection and maintenance. Rivers Agency's initial assessment following the coastal storms in early January suggests that these defences performed well. A more extensive inspection of these defences is now underway and should this identify the need for works, these will be given appropriate priority.

Rivers Agency organised and led a recent emergency planning exercise on coastal flooding. That exercise was held at the end of November and involved over 70 organisations. There is no doubt that the learning from the exercise meant that when the threat materialised, organisations were well prepared for the co-ordinated response required. I am very pleased with the collective response by Government and the public in preparing for and responding to the storms, and there will be, as with all serious incidents of this nature, a review of the preparations and response to identify any further lessons to be learnt.

Horse Meat Scandal: Elliott Report

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the steps taken as a result of the Elliott Report into the horsemeat scandal.
(AQW 29614/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I welcome the publication of the interim report of the Elliott Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks.

In his interim report Professor Elliott has made recommendations, including a number for Government, about action that can be taken now to improve the assurance and integrity of food supply networks. None of the recommendations in this interim report were specifically targeted for action by DARD.

My Department already has legislation in place to meet EU requirements on the identification, movement and traceability of animals. Implementation and enforcement of this legislation is supported by our Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) which enables stringent controls and checks to be undertaken to confirm the traceability of food producing animals. DARD also enforces the Beef Labelling legislation, which provides customers with assurance about the origin of beef, in abattoirs and approved cutting plants insofar as they pertain to fresh & frozen cuts of beef and veal.

The report recognises that our consumers have some of the safest food in the world but it is vital to maintain and enhance this reputation. I have always championed our local food and in November my Department hosted a red meat stakeholder meeting along with the Livestock and Meat Commission to promote the integrity, quality and traceability of our local food chain.

Professor Elliott's recommendations will undoubtedly make a significant contribution to the safety and integrity of the food chain and I look forward to taking receipt of the final report, due in Spring 2014, which will set out in more detail what Professor Elliot believes is required of Government as well as the wider industry.

While food authenticity is primarily an FSA responsibility here, it is clearly an issue that will impact on the future sustainability of our entire agri-food sector. I have a fundamental interest in all issues which impact upon the resilience and sustainability of agricultural production, including consumer confidence in the food industry. Once the final report is published, my Department will work closely with the FSA to identify where they can work together for the integrity of our agri-food industry.

Coastal and Flood Defences: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the recent tidal surges, what assessment is being carried out of the coastal and flood defences in North Down.
(AQW 29639/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The only coastal defence in North Down for which Rivers Agency has responsibility is located at Kinnegar. Responsibility for the defence is shared with 2 other public authorities. Whilst it was not overtopped during the recent storms, there was some minor ponding of water behind it and the Agency is liaising with the other authorities to clarify responsibilities for any necessary maintenance and repair.

Coastal Defences: North Down

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what work is planned, in conjunction with other agencies, to upgrade sea defences along the North Down coast at (i) Holywood; (ii) Groomsport; and (iii) Donaghadee.
(AQW 29641/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In relation to Holywood, during the recent coastal storms there was some relatively minor ponding of water behind the sea defence. Rivers Agency shares responsibility for sections of this defence with two other public authorities and discussions are currently ongoing to establish where responsibility for maintenance and repair lies.

Whilst Rivers Agency has no responsibility for sea defences at Groomsport or Donaghadee, it has developed detailed mapping of coastal flood risk for the whole of the north of Ireland which it is already sharing with key infrastructure owners and the public.

The Agency is willing to provide whatever additional support is required by other organisations in their assessment of the infrastructure and coastal defences for which they are responsible.

Common Agricultural Policy: Active Farmer

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the definition of active farmer which will apply under the new Common Agricultural Policy arrangements.
(AQW 29728/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are a number of provisions in the EU Regulations on CAP Reform which relate to active farmer.

The Basic Act provides for no direct payments to be granted to applicants whose agricultural areas are mainly areas naturally kept in a state suitable for grazing or cultivation and the minimum activity defined by Member States/regions is not carried out on that area.

The Basic Act also provides for no direct payments to be granted to applicants who operate airports, railway services, water-works, real estate services, and permanent sport and recreational grounds unless they can meet one of the following criteria:

- Their annual amount of direct payments is at least 5% of the total receipts from non agricultural activities in the most recent fiscal year for which evidence is available,
- Their agricultural activities are not insignificant,
- Their principal business or company objects consist of exercising an agricultural activity.

It is possible for Member States/regions to add similar types of non agricultural businesses or activities to the list referred to above.

The draft Delegated Act which, has not yet been adopted, states that the in line with the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union, payment entitlements should be allocated to the person enjoying decision making power, benefits and financial risks in relation to the agricultural activity on the land for which such allocation is requested.

The provision in the draft Delegated Act has particular relevance for land let under conacre arrangements.

I hope you find this helpful.

Broadband: Rural Areas

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 4130/11-15 and given her commitment to provide high speed broadband to rural dwellers, for an update on the progress made during the last six months on this objective.
(AQW 29826/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department through the 'Next Generation Broadband' project has already invested £2.5m in rural broadband and this has lead to almost 14,500 rural dwellers and businesses now having a connection to broadband.

In addition to this funding my Department is also contributing £5m to the NI Broadband Improvement Project which is being taken forward by DETI. The tender process for this project has completed and the response is being carefully evaluated to ensure best value for money. Assuming a satisfactory conclusion to the evaluation process and, pending necessary approvals, it is anticipated that a contract will be awarded in the next few weeks with implementation commencing shortly thereafter and completing in 2015.

Animal Cruelty: Sentencing

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the sentencing framework and maximum sentence available for animal cruelty.
(AQW 30023/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department brought forward a new Welfare of Animals Act in 2011, which significantly increased the penalties for animal welfare offences to a maximum of 6 months imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of £5,000 on summary conviction; and on conviction by indictment to a maximum of 2 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. These penalties reflect the fact that causing unnecessary suffering to any animal is a very serious offence.

Sentencing within the legislative framework is a matter for the Judiciary. I am advised that the Lord Chief Justice, in his Programme of Action on Sentencing, published new sentencing guidelines for Magistrates' Courts in December 2013. The guidelines cover offences of animal cruelty, tail docking of dogs' tails and animal fighting and are available on the Judicial Studies Board website.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Capital Projects: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the major capital projects in the North Down constituency that will be funded by her Department in (i) 2014; and (ii) 2015.
(AQW 29510/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Thank you for clarifying the meaning of major in this context to be capital investments in excess of £50k.

Budgets are allocated according to financial years. I can report that no capital investment meeting your definition has yet been allocated to the North Down constituency for the financial year 2014/15.

The Executive has not yet set budgets for 2015/16 so no allocations have been made in any constituency.

I am able to draw the member's attention to capital investment in his constituency in previous years. From 2008/09 to 2012/13, Sport NI invested £14.439m in partnership with North Down Borough Council to fund the Olympic Standard 50m pool.

In addition to this, resource projects with a total value of £1.081m were funded by the Department and its sponsored bodies in the North Down constituency during this period.

Loughside Playing Fields

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail what information she or her Department has on the proposal by Crusaders Football Club to develop a new stadium at Loughside Playing Fields.
(AQW 29651/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not have any information regarding development proposals by Crusaders Football Club.

Furthermore, as funding for the development of sub-regional association football stadiums has yet to be secured, no decision of any kind on funding to assist the development of any sub-regional stadiums has been taken.

Brandywell Stadium: Redevelopment

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the funding awarded to Derry City Council for the redevelopment of Brandywell Stadium; and (ii) how this funding will be allocated.
(AQW 29690/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has awarded no funding to Derry City Council for the redevelopment of Brandywell Stadium.

On 23 October 2013, I announced that my Department will invest at least £2million towards the Daisyfield/Showgrounds as part of City of Culture capital legacy projects in 2014/15.

My officials are working with Derry City Council as they take forward this project.

City of Culture 2013: Legacy

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in relation to the legacy of the funding provided for the City of Culture 2013, to detail (i) the projects that will receive funding between January and March 2014; (ii) when the project list was prepared prior to her announcement; (iii) how the list was prepared; and (iv) if these projects were put out to tender.
(AQW 29873/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have secured over £2m for the January to March 2014 period to support continuation of key projects from the City of Culture's cultural programme and to prevent the loss of key benefits, partnerships and momentum after December 2013. This will also include strategic investment to sports facility development.

Supported projects will include:

- Music projects, for example key elements of the Music Promise project and the return of Other Voices to Derry in February 2014;
- Digital projects, for example continuation of the Portrait of a City project and digital skills provision;
- Literacy skills projects, for example the Disobey Gravity programme;
- Community projects delivered under Community Cultural Strategies developed for neighbourhood renewal areas;
- A pilot creative voucher scheme, which includes a focus on the North West, designed to stimulate new collaborations between creative enterprises and businesses from a diverse range of other sectors;
- Expansion of the Nerve Centre's Fab Lab with a wider North West emphasis; and
- Sports facility development in Coleraine and Dungiven.

In addition I have made funding available for the purchase of Eamonn O'Doherty's Armoured Pram, Lumiere's Stitch in Time piece and a portable community venue, subject to appropriate contractual agreements.

Legacy funding has been allocated on the basis of need to continue key projects from the 2013 cultural programme, and in the context of my Department's priorities and Business Plan. My officials worked closely with stakeholders in Derry, including Derry City Council and Culture Company, throughout 2013 to consider which Cultural Programme projects and benefits might be jeopardised if support ceased at December 2013. Final business cases were approved in November 2013.

The aim is to promote the positive continuance of key benefits, partnerships and momentum after December 2013 and to invest in the development of modern sports facilities.

It is my intention to make a bid to the Executive for funding for the 2014/ 15 financial year to support ongoing and new interventions which maximise City of Culture benefits across the North West of Ireland in tackling poverty, social exclusion and inequality.

Department of Education

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by the Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29410/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The third sector organisations funded directly by the Department are detailed in the table below.

Organisation	Grant -Aid
ChildLine	£260,000
Early Years – the Organisation for Young Children	£1,228,000
East Belfast Partnership – Easter School 2013	£9,030

Organisation	Grant -Aid
Greater Shankill Partnership – Summer Transition School 2013	£20,372
North Belfast Partnership – Easter School 2013	£20,371
North Belfast Partnership - Summer Transition School 2013	£13,525
South Belfast Partnership – Easter School 2013	£17,614
South Belfast Partnership – Summer Transition School 2013	£11,616
West Belfast Partnership – Easter School 2013	£5,906
West Belfast Partnership – Summer Transition School 2013	£35,274
The Pushkin Trust	£25,000
Business in the Community – Time to Read	£50,000

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland: Registrar

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the qualifications and ability of the Registrar of General Teaching Council Northern Ireland to make a claim that unregulated transfer selection tests are of dubious validity, reliability or comparability.
(AQW 29491/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have asked officials to check whether such a claim has been made by the Registrar and will write to the Member when I have further information, if I deem it appropriate to do so.

I am also advised that the Registrar has no published background in psychometrics.

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland: Registrar

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to provide the Registar of the General Teaching Council NI's published background in psychometrics.
(AQW 29492/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have asked officials to check whether such a claim has been made by the Registrar and will write to the Member when I have further information, if I deem it appropriate to do so.

I am also advised that the Registrar has no published background in psychometrics.

Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Enhancement Scheme

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of schools that (i) applied for; and (ii) received funding through the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) Enhancement Scheme in (a) 2012/13; and (ii) 2013/14.
(AQW 29626/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I can confirm that in 2012/13 and 2013/14, Education and Library Boards (ELBs) received the following applications for funding through the CRED Enhancement Scheme:

Year	No. of Applications Received for CRED Enhancement Scheme Funding	No. of Applications Approved to Receive CRED Enhancement Scheme Funding	No. of Schools Involved in Projects Approved to Receive CRED Enhancement Scheme Funding
2012/13	113	101	174
2013/14	142	109	181

This response provides information on the number of applications received by ELBs, some applications are for projects which involve 2 or more schools.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the legal force of a ruling of a Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal; and whether parents are compelled to comply with the rulings in relation to school choice.
(AQW 29636/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Article 23A of the Education (NI) Order 1996 places a duty on education and library boards to comply with orders made by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal. Article 23(5) of that Order provides that a person who

without reasonable excuse fails to grant discovery of documents or fails to comply with a requirement to attend as a witness commits a criminal offence.

Notwithstanding the legal redress available to any party to an appeal to the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal, Article 16 (4A) of the Education (NI) Order 1996 does not require the name of a school or institution to be specified if the child's parent has made suitable arrangements for the special education provision specified in the statement to be made for the child.

If the child's parent does not make suitable arrangements as specified above or place the child in the school as directed by the ruling of a tribunal then the parent may be in contravention of Article 45 (1) of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, that is:

> *"The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise."*

Irish Language

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education how much is spent annually on teaching the Irish language as a subject in schools.
(AQW 29752/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Modern languages are a statutory requirement at Key Stage 3, and a qualification choice at Key Stage 4 and sixth form. Schools can choose to deliver any of the languages of the 27 EU member states, including Irish.

To support primary schools wishing to deliver language learning the Primary Language Programme was introduced in 2007 to give pupils at Foundation Stage/Key Stage 1 the opportunity to learn an additional language in school. There are currently 88 primary schools learning Irish through this programme.

It is up to individual schools to decide how to deploy the resources available to them from their delegated budgets to fund the delivery of all subjects in the curriculum. The Department does not hold information on the languages schools choose to teach or how much each school spends in this area.

Teachers: Qualifications

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the recent comments by the Chief Inspector of OFSTED on the use of unqualified teachers in schools.
(AQW 29774/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware that the Ofsted Chief Inspector has commented that headteachers in England should be allowed to hire unqualified teaching staff if they consider them to be the right person for their school. However he also said that it was a headteacher's job to ensure that such staff are accredited as soon as possible. The Chief Inspector's statement should be read in the context of England where there is a significant shortage of qualified teachers.

My policy is clear. In order to be eligible to teach in schools here, all teachers should be qualified and registered with the General Teaching Council. The Department's Circular DE 2007/22 sets out the minimum qualification requirements needed to be eligible to teach in our schools.

There may occasionally be circumstances in which it is not possible to employ a qualified teacher, for example, for a short-term period. Legislation enables employing authorities to employ an unqualified teacher for up to four weeks.

My Department has been and continues to be active in challenging schools where it has been found that they are employing unqualified teachers beyond that four week period. I am pleased to say that instances where unqualified teachers are being employed in breach of the legislation are exceptionally rare.

Educational Psychologists: Education and Library Boards

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how many educational psychologists were employed in each Education and Library board in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29775/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of educational psychologists employed in each Education and Library Board, in each of the last 3 years, (headcount as at 15 January) is listed below:

	2012	2013	2014
SEELB	31	37	37
SELB	34	34	35
WELB	21	22	23
BELB	34	35	36

	2012	2013	2014
NEELB	26	30	30

Educational Psychologists: Waiting Times

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the average waiting times for a pupil to be seen by an Educational Psychologist in each Education and Library Board; and the reasons for any differences.
(AQW 29776/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have confirmed that the average waiting time between a pupil being referred to an educational psychologist and having their first appointment, during the period June 2013 to December 2013, is as follows:

BELB	18 days
NEELB	37 days
SEELB	116 days
SELB	63 days
WELB	60 days

These figures refer to Stage 3 (non-statutory assessments) as outlined in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (COP).

With regard to the waiting time for an assessment in terms of statutory requirements, at Stage 4 of the COP, the ELBs consider the need for a statutory assessment of special educational needs which will include an assessment by an educational psychologist. ELBs have 16 weeks from the date that the ELB notifies the parents that it is considering making an assessment or from the date that the request to carry out an assessment is received by the ELB from the parent or the school to complete the assessment.

The reasons for differences in average waiting times between the ELBs are largely due to natural fluctuations in staffing levels caused, for example, by illness, maternity leave or retirement.

School Properties: Disposal of

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to outline any plans he has to dispose of unused school properties; and what are the estimated value of these properties.
(AQW 29793/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not own property or land; responsibility for property is dependent on the type of school.

Voluntary Grammar, Maintained and Grant Maintained Integrated schools are the responsibility of each school's Trustees, who will make decisions on the use or sale of vacant properties.

The relevant Education and Library Board (ELB) is responsible for school properties in the Controlled Sector. In keeping with Land & Property Services' (LPS) Guidance 'Central Advisory Unit: Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland March 2013' the ELBs keep their property under continual review and release surplus property with the least possible delay. This is important as proceeds from the sale of surplus education assets are reinvested in capital works needed within the existing school estate.

The current available estimated value of ELB properties listed for disposal, between April 2014 – March 2016, is approximately £8 million.

This figure is based on the following factors:

- the total is derived from properties currently listed on the Asset Disposal register as advised by the ELBs
- open market valuations, provided by LPS, are subject to review every 6 months
- several properties are still in the process of being valued by LPS

Not all properties may have reached the final 'open market' stage of disposal which is managed by LPS.

Proceeds actually realised will depend on many factors including legal issues arising and planning permission but most notably the fluctuations in market valuations and the prevailing property market conditions.

Child Abuse or Neglect: Threshold

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Education what is the threshold for which a child abuse or child neglect allegation will be deemed serious enough by the Education and Library Boards to inform the PSNI and Gateway services.
(AQW 29798/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Referrals are made to PSNI or the Gateway teams when there is concern that a child may have been the victim of abuse. Signs and symptoms of abuse are set out in DE circular 1999/10 'Pastoral Care in Schools: Child Protection' and in the DHSSPS guidance 'Cooperating to Safeguard Children'.

Referrals are normally made by schools' staff, as the parties in direct contact with the child and the Education and Library Boards' Child Protection Support Service for Schools acts in support of schools' staff through the provision of advice and training on child protection matters.

Threats and Intimidation: Reporting of

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether he has reported to the PSNI the instances of threats and intimidation of which he claimed knowledge in the Assembly on 14 January 2014.
(AQW 29841/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No.

Special Educational Needs: North Eastern Education and Library Board

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many assessments for Special Educational Needs were conducted within the North Eastern Education and Library Board in 2013; and what was the average waiting time from referral.
(AQW 29843/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) has advised that 375 statutory assessments of pupils' special educational needs were completed in 2013.

The average waiting time for those 375 pupils' assessments, from referral to completion, was 20.32 weeks.

Preschool Applications: Administrative Errors

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in each of the last three years, how many application forms have been returned to parents of pre-school children in each Education and Library Board because of administrative errors by the local Social Security Agency office.
(AQW 29857/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: This information is not recorded. Pre-school settings are responsible for administering the admissions process and parents submit their pre-school application forms directly to their first preference setting.

Common Funding Formula: Consultation

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education for an update on the outcome of the Common Funding Formula consultation, which concluded on 25 October 2013.
(AQW 29875/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At the closing date of 25 October, nearly 15,000 consultation responses were received to the main consultation. A full analysis of those responses is currently underway and as I have previously stated, I will not be making any final decisions until a full analysis of all these consultation responses has been carried out. I will give careful consideration to the views of all those who responded.

The changes to the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) remain on track for delivery for the new financial year and I intend to make my final decisions and advise schools of their actual allocations as soon as possible.

I will arrange for a consultation summary to be published on the DE website, shared with the Education Committee and placed in the Assembly Library in due course.

Free School Meals: Provision and Uptake

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has to increase the provision and uptake of free school meals.
(AQW 29973/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Children from families on low incomes and those living in poverty face significant barriers in accessing and benefiting from a good education. The provision of healthy free school meals helps address the particular challenges that these children face in accessing and participating fully in school life, in improving their learning outcomes and ultimately their lifetime opportunities. It is a key measure, therefore, through which my Department contributes to the statutory target to eradicate child poverty here by 2020 and to the Programme for Government commitment to tackle disadvantage.

On 11 June 2013 I announced my intention to adjust the eligibility criteria for free school meals so that from September 2014, the same eligibility criteria for free school meals for both primary and postprimary pupils will apply. This will benefit an estimated additional 15,000 children from lower income households.

A number of actions are being taken forward by my Department, working with the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the School Catering Service to ensure that all those entitled to receive free school meals receive this important benefit. For

example, the Resource Allocation Plans for each of the ELBs include targets to maintain or increase the uptake of all school meals and of free school meals.

Each year the ELBs issue press releases, send out renewal applications and issue letters and posters to schools, the Social Security Agency, the Citizens Advice Bureau and libraries. The School Catering Service continuously seeks to increase uptake of school meals undertaking a range of activities including, for example, the installation of cashless catering systems in a number of post-primary schools to reduce any stigma associated with free school meals, sending menus home and placing these on school websites, providing meal deals, arranging theme days and taster sessions for parents and pupils.

My officials are also working with colleagues in the Department of Social Development to take forward a joint project to encourage the uptake of free school meals as part of the work of the Inter-Departmental Group on Benefit Uptake (IDGBU).

Department for Employment and Learning

Stranmillis University College/Queen's University Belfast: Merger

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in regard to the proposed merger of Stranmillis College with Queens University, and the issues disclosed by PRONI, whether the Catholic Church has indicated to the Department their current position in regard to a Catholic Teacher Training College.
(AQW 29528/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): You will be aware that the second stage of the review of the Initial Teacher Education Infrastructure in Northern Ireland is underway. The review panel requested submissions from interested stakeholders on relevant issues that should be taken account of in considering options for a more shared and integrated system for the delivery and funding of teacher education. The panel has received a significant number of submissions which include a number from Catholic Church representatives. The key themes from the submissions will be summarised in a report to be published on my Department's website.

Legal Professional Studies: Magee Campus, University of Ulster

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many (i) students are enrolled in this academic year, in legal professional studies, at Magee campus; and (ii) staff teach the course.
(AQW 29530/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not hold information on numbers of students enrolled in this academic year, in legal professional studies, at Magee campus, nor numbers of staff that teach the course. Officials, therefore, sought this information from the University of Ulster and their response is attached at Annex A.

Annex A

(i) In the 2013/14 academic session 16 trainees are registered on the postgraduate professional legal studies programme offered at the University of Ulster, Magee campus.

(ii) Four members of University staff contribute to teaching on the programme who are supported by legal practitioners who are specialists in their area.

Stranmillis University College/Queen's University Belfast: Merger

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in relation to a proposed merger of Stranmillis College with Queens University, to what extent do the issues disclosed by PRONI apply in the present considerations, specifically but not exclusively in the retention of St Mary's Teacher Training College as a unique establishment.
(AQW 29575/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Panel appointed to review Initial Teacher Education Infrastructure in Northern Ireland will take into account all relevant issues, including previous reports, in considering options for a more shared and integrated system for the delivery and funding of teacher education.

The panel has received a significant number of submissions on the review from the Initial Teacher Education providers and a variety of interested stakeholders.

At this stage the findings of the panel cannot be anticipated and they will be meeting with the providers and stakeholders scheduled for the coming weeks.

Further and Higher Education Colleges: Disability Discrimination Act

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 27902/11-15, for his assessment of the provision provided by Omagh Campus and it's staff, and whether he has any plans to replicate this provision across other South West College campuses.
(AQW 29589/11-15)

Dr Farry: It is my desire that all students with learning difficulties, who have the ability to participate in FE provision, can access excellent educational opportunities. I am content that all further education colleges continue to provide such opportunities.

In relation to provision at the Omagh Campus of South West College (SWC), I am aware of the range of courses offered, which are reflective of local demand and financial viability.

The scale and level of provision, available across all campuses, remains the responsibility of the College and is in line with the level of demand within the catchment areas of these campuses. Therefore, in view of your question, my officials will seek comment from SWC on any plans, which it may have, for the remaining campuses, and I will write to you again, following receipt of this response.

Steps 2 Success: Pre-qualification Quotation

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in relation to the Steps2Success Pre-Qualification Quotation, to outline the organisations which (i) applied for consideration for each of the delivery areas; and (ii) were successful in their application for each of the delivery areas.
(AQW 29608/11-15)

Dr Farry:

(i) The outcome of Stage 1 of the procurement process for Steps 2 Success was notified to all tendering organisations on Monday 18 November 2013. To protect the integrity of the procurement process of the Steps 2 Success competition it is not possible to release information relating to those organisations who applied for each of the contract areas but were not successful.

(ii) My department has published details of those organisations who were successful at Stage 1 of the Steps 2 Success Competition on its website as follows:

Contract Area 1: Andersonstown, Bangor, North Belfast, Falls, Holywood Road, Knockbreda, Lisburn, Newtownards, Shaftesbury Square, Shankill.

Successful Organisations

- Avanta Enterprise Ltd
- EOS Works Ltd
- Ingeus UK Ltd
- Pertemps People Development Group
- Reed in Partnership
- Sencia Ltd

Contract Area 2: Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Foyle, Larne, Limavady, Lisnagelvin, Newtownabbey, Strabane.

Successful Organisations

- Avanta Enterprise Ltd
- EOS Works Ltd
- Ingeus UK Ltd
- Pertemps People Development Group
- Reed in Partnership
- Sencia Ltd

Contract Area 3: Armagh, Ballynahinch, Banbridge, Cookstown, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Kilkeel, Lurgan, Magherafelt, Newcastle, Newry, Omagh, Portadown.

Successful Organisations

- Avanta Enterprise Ltd
- Reed in Partnership
- Sencia Ltd
- Maximus Employment & Training Ltd
- South West College

G4S has withdrawn from the competition for the Steps 2 Success competition for Contract Area 3.

Steps 2 Success: Pre-qualification Quotation

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to confirm that each of the organisations which were successful in the Steps2Success Pre-Qualification Quotation had applied specifically for consideration in the delivery area in which they were successful.
(AQW 29609/11-15)

Dr Farry: Each organisation was selected on the basis of being one of the top 6 ranked candidates in the area(s) that they had indicated they wished to be considered for as detailed in question CA1 of the Stage 1 published requirements as below.

Below is an extract from the Central Procurement Directorate electronic tendering system:

> *"[CA1] Contract Areas Applied For: Candidates must list which contract areas they wish to be considered for. Candidates may be invited to tender for more than one (or all) contract areas, but may only be awarded one contract area."*

European Commission: Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 28186, to detail his involvement in the work of the EU's Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs.
(AQW 29659/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs is an initiative aimed at increasing the overall supply of digitally skilled professionals and to better match supply and demand of digital skills. The European Commission is leading this multi-stakeholder partnership to tackle the lack of ICT skills and the several hundred of thousands of unfilled ICT-related vacancies throughout the European Union.

The Coalition was launched in March 2013 by President José Manuel Barroso, Vice-Presidents Neelie Kroes and Antonio Tajani, Commissioners László Andor and Androulla Vassiliou.

The Grand Coalition has received more than 40 pledges so far, including from large companies such as Google, Telefonica, SAP, Microsoft and Cisco. In addition, national coalitions are being developed in more than 10 Member States with the aim of facilitating action at the local level. For example, Lithuania, Poland and Romania have officially launched their national coalitions.

Officials in my Department are currently engaging with officials in the European Commission to explore how Northern Ireland can pledge its support to the Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs and contribute effectively to its aims and objectives.

I am committed to ensuring that local ICT employers have access to the skilled workforce they need now and in the future in order to grow and enhance the sector. The ICT Skills Working Group, which I established and Chair, utilises a multi-stakeholder approach using collaborative action to address skills mismatches in the digital/ICT sector.

I am very keen to explore how we can share the best practice approach in relation to ICT skills, developed in Northern Ireland, with the European Commission and other national and regional actors in the European Union.

Officials in my Department have also been exploring the possibility of submitting an application to a Call for Proposals under the PROGRESS funding stream which is seeking to identify effective implementation measures, good practice and innovative approaches with a special emphasis on the employment potential of ICT and the Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs.

Special Educational Needs: Post-19 Review

Ms McGahan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on (i) the review of post 19 special educational needs in respect of (a)further educational needs; (b) disability employment service; and (c) transitions; and (ii) how this is progressing in South Tyrone.
(AQW 29762/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is committed to ensuring that all students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, who have the ability to participate in further education provision, can access quality educational opportunities. I am content that all further education colleges continue to provide such opportunities, including those colleges which serve the South Tyrone catchment area.

I am aware that access to such provision can be an issue, especially in rural areas. Therefore I instructed my officials to examine access to transport for students with a learning difficulty and/or disability, aged 19 and over. My Department will consider a course of action and develop proposals, once this initial piece of work has been completed.

The Disability Employment Service is fully committed to playing its part to ensure that young people with disabilities are provided with the tailored support and assistance they need to help them achieve their employment goals.

A strategic review of my Department's Disability Employment Service (DES) is underway. To inform this review, an overarching Disability Employment Strategy is being developed with the aim of having a draft Strategy available by April 2014, which will then be subject to a public consultation.

A Working Group has been established to take forward the Strategy and membership includes a number of key representatives from the local disability sector. In addition, a number of user engagement events have been scheduled throughout Northern Ireland, to ensure that the views of people with disabilities are also considered as part of the development of the strategy.

The Health and Social Care Board commissioned a review of Day Opportunities and recently concluded a public consultation on proposals on a "Regional Learning Disability Day Opportunities Model" for consideration. DEL officials have met with Health colleagues to discuss their proposals and how we, with others, can work together to facilitate improving the Transition services across a number of key Departments' responsibilities.

My Department's Careers advisers are actively involved in the transition planning process and during the 2012/13 academic year, attended 1055 transition planning meetings. Working with multi-disciplinary teams, including teachers and educational psychologists, they contribute to the young person's Transition Plan by providing impartial careers guidance on the range of educational, training and employment opportunities available to them.

In South Tyrone the Careers Service has a partnership agreement in place with Sperrinview School and attended all transition planning, annual review meetings and parents evenings to which they were invited during the 2012/13 academic year. The Careers Service also provides services to learners attending Parkanaur College in partnership with DEL colleagues from

the Disability Employment Service. This includes supporting learners as they progress towards completion of their training to assist them in making the transition back to their home area in planning the next stage of their career.

The Careers Service has developed and implemented a social inclusion policy which focuses on addressing the needs of young people facing, or vulnerable to, social exclusion, including young people with a severe learning difficulty. It has established working relationships with the relevant statutory, voluntary and community sector bodies across Northern Ireland with a shared interest in supporting clients vulnerable to social exclusion.

I have raised the issue of transition with the Inter-Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability in November 2013. As a result, OFMDFM are co-ordinating discussions between all relevant departments under the auspices of the Executive's Disability Strategy.

Veterinary Degree: Coleraine Campus, University of Ulster

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the introduction of the Veterinary Degree at the Coleraine campus of the University of Ulster.
(AQO 5312/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster has signalled an intention to offer courses in veterinary medicine commencing in the 2015/16 academic year. My Department has requested that the university prepares a strategic business case to demonstrate that there is demand for such courses in Northern Ireland, that they are sustainable, and to outline how these will contribute to the economic growth of the region. My Department awaits the submission of the strategic business case and further more detailed analysis may be required once the strategic case has been considered by the Department.

Manufacturing: Skills Gap

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any discussions he has had with representatives of the manufacturing industry to help fill the current skills gap in the sector.
(AQO 5314/11-15)

Dr Farry: I recognise the importance of the manufacturing sector to our economy and I have established two sectoral working groups: the Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering Services Working Group, which I Chair; and the Food and Drink Manufacturing and Processing Future Skills Action Group, which I co-chair with Tony O'Neill, Director of Moy Park Limited.

These Groups bring together employers, academia, employer representative bodies and Government, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department of Education, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and Invest NI.

This ensures departments, together, can address the current and future skill needs of the sector.

Each Group has an action plan setting out what they intend to implement under three themes: Skills Provision; Sector Attractiveness; and Co-ordination and Communication.

My Department has recently commissioned research into advanced manufacturing and engineering services skill needs, and this report will be published shortly.

Currently, the Groups are taking forward a number of agreed initiatives such as:

- the commencement of the first phase of a higher level apprenticeship in engineering;
- the creation of a Computer Numerical Control Machining Conversion course;
- a Food Engineering Apprenticeship, which commenced on 6 January 2014;
- a Tasty Careers Programme led by Improve Sector Skills Council, which promotes the food and drink manufacturing industry; this is being funded for a second year by my Department; and
- Breakfast Clinics for food manufacturing employers, in conjunction with other Government Departments; these aim to raise awareness of skills provision available and how to access it.

In addition, my Department's Skills Solutions team works with individual businesses in the manufacturing sector to help employers understand and access available training provision. This service is available to local industry to enable companies to up-skill and re-skill their employees.

Unemployment

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the opportunities to reduce levels of unemployment in 2014.
(AQO 5315/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department for Enterprise Trade and Investment takes the lead in job creation with Invest NI having responsibility for promoting 25,000 new jobs by 2015. This is being achieved by supporting new business starts, encouraging locally-owned businesses to grow and develop in external markets and by winning new and follow-on investment. During this Programme for Government period, Invest NI support has already led to the promotion of over 18,000 jobs.

Delivering the actions set out within the Executive's Economy and Jobs Initiative will lead to increased job opportunities and reduced levels of unemployment in the future.

To support this excellent work, my Department offers a wide range of programmes and initiatives to equip people with the necessary knowledge and skills to find and sustain employment.

A priority for 2014 is to ensure that employers have access to appropriately skilled employees and provide people, particularly young people, with the opportunity to secure and sustain meaningful employment.

The Training for Success Programme enables participants to progress to higher level training, further education, or employment by providing opportunities to address personal and social development needs, develop occupational skills, employability skills and Essential Skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT.

The Assured Skills programme has led to the delivery of graduate academies as a short term intervention to meet the identified needs of companies.

The Employment Service has a network of offices that support employers and jobseekers. We are developing a new adult employment programme, Steps 2 Success, as a replacement for Steps to Work which will provide more flexible, individually tailored, longer- term support.

My Department is also leading on the development of an Economic Inactivity Strategy. I, together with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment, will launch the public consultation exercise this month. I encourage members to contribute to the consultation process.

Invest NI: Foreign Direct Investment

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department works with InvestNI to identify the reasons for foreign direct investors opting not to locate locally.
(AQO 5316/11-15)

Dr Farry: Northern Ireland continues to be successful in attracting high value foreign direct investment particularly in the Software and Information Technology sectors, winning a greater share of inward investment, relative to population, than other regions.

I am confident that the joint efforts of Invest Northern Ireland and my Department are making Northern Ireland one of the most attractive locations for investment.

There are a range of factors why some companies do not locate in Northern Ireland and only companies themselves can provide their very specific reasons.

What I do know is that a very substantial focus is being applied across Government to ensure that Northern Ireland is attractive to investors.

The Northern Ireland proposition is based on a combination of quality and cost competitiveness. We have a ready supply of skilled and talented people, excellent links between universities and businesses, an advanced telecommunications infrastructure and world class companies operating in key knowledge-based sectors.

Operating costs are highly competitive and can be significantly lower than many regions of the UK and Europe, including the Republic of Ireland.

My officials work closely with Invest Northern Ireland to ensure that we make the best possible proposition to potential investors, and my Department's Assured Skills programme is now a critical part of the offers made.

Assured Skills is designed to guarantee employers the skills they need to support a growing business can be found in Northern Ireland.

During the financial year 2013/14 Assured Skills has already supported the creation of 1,460 jobs across four projects, with funding of £1.306 million committed from my Department. Set alongside complementary support from Invest Northern Ireland, these results would suggest that Assured Skills support has been crucial in securing jobs for Northern Ireland.

There are regular meetings between my officials and colleagues in Invest Northern Ireland to discuss the pipeline of potential investors.

North/South Ministerial Council: Departmental Priorities

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his departmental priorities contribute to the work of the North South Ministerial Council.
(AQO 5317/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department and I are committed to working on a north-south basis and identifying and developing opportunities for co-operation and mutual benefit to both jurisdictions.

The work of my Department does not currently fall within the six areas of co-operation as originally set out in the Good Friday Agreement. I am open to this being reconsidered in the Review of the North South Ministerial Council.

Areas of ongoing co-operation include student flows and student access in both further and higher education, research, unemployment, in particular youth unemployment, employment relations, and apprenticeships.

North West Regional College: McConnell Report

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why changes were made to the agreed action plan on the implementation of the McConnell recommendations at the North West Regional College.
(AQO 5318/11-15)

Dr Farry: North West Regional College developed a plan detailing the actions required to implement the recommendations of the McConnell report. This was developed and agreed with stakeholders, including the University and College Union. I would like to note the encouraging progress which has already occurred in the implementation of the action plan.

The plan included a monitoring role, against a number of actions, for a College Improvement Team. The Governing Body had signalled that this Team would be established to lead a process of college strategy development and improvement across the College as a whole. However, there has been considerable delay in establishing this team with its wide ranging role, because the Governing Body has prioritised the implementation of the McConnell report.

The Department's role in the process is to monitor progress and ensure that the changes recommended in the report are fully implemented. The fact that the College Improvement Team was not established and therefore not performing its required function in respect of the Action Plan, was a matter of concern. As a result, it was agreed with the College to strengthen the accountability arrangements and formally transfer oversight responsibility for those actions, initially assigned to the College Improvement Team, to the full Governing Body. In practice, the Governing Body had been fulfilling this role in the absence of a College Improvement Team.

This is the only change which has been made to the Action Plan. There has been no change to any action within the plan. The change ensures that the process is robust by providing direct lines of accountability to the Governing Body, which has ultimate oversight of both the implementation of McConnell and the improvement programme in the College.

Irish-medium Courses: Further and Higher Education

Ms Ruane asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the introduction of courses at Further and Higher Education level being delivered through the medium of Irish.
(AQO 5319/11-15)

Dr Farry: Further education colleges currently deliver a range of Irish language courses, including short courses and accredited courses, such as GCSE and A-Level. In addition, four colleges list their mainstream Irish language provision on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's Líofa website.

All further education colleges remain prepared to deliver further education courses through the medium of Irish, where sufficient demand exists.

Higher Education courses are currently being delivered through the medium of Irish at Queen's University, the University of Ulster and St. Mary's University College. Courses include Diploma in Irish Language, Bachelor's Degree in Irish Language, Master's Degree in Irish Translation and an Irish Medium Postgraduate Certificate in Education.

Beyond the statutory further education sector, a pilot was established within my Department's Training for Success programme, to deliver vocational training through the medium of Irish. This was provided through a sub-contracting arrangement between one of my Department's contracted training suppliers and GaelChursaí, which was formed in February 2011, to provide training and develop employment opportunities within the Irish medium sector. Furthermore, my Department also sought to extend Steps to Work provision to support training through the medium of Irish. In both cases, there was insufficient demand.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Energy: Unconventional Oil and Gas

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail whether (i) she will introduce additional regulations and/or legislation to govern the development of unconventional oil and gas; and (ii) new regulations or legislation will be in place before unconventional oil/gas extraction is permitted to take place.
(AQW 29654/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The preparation for possible unconventional oil and gas development in Northern Ireland, and its regulation, will require input from several government departments and other bodies. Whilst DETI has the initial role in licensing and regulating of petroleum exploration, DOE would be the principal regulator for Shale Gas development through its environmental and planning responsibilities.

The Shale Gas Regulators' Forum, established as a joint initiative by myself and the former DOE Planning Minister continues to keep the legislative and regulatory requirements needed to support possible development under review; and where appropriate, will coordinate these functions and facilitate cooperation.

Trade: Island-wide Proposals

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her proposals to enhance island-wide trade.
(AQO 5328/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Through my Department Invest NI and InterTradeIreland both work on a collaborative and individual basis to progress trade and business development in Northern Ireland and Ireland. Latest figures show that the total combined cross border trade in goods increased by 10.5% in 2012, to £2.3 billion. This has largely been achieved through the delivery of a wide range of activities and programmes including InterTradeIreland's All-Island Procurement initiative and their cross border sales programme Acumen, where Invest NI and InterTradeIreland work closely. Invest NI also provides Northern Ireland businesses with a wide range of financial assistance and other support to help them sell their products and services in export markets, including the Republic of Ireland.

Along with UK Trade and Investment, Invest NI and Enterprise Ireland continue to work together to identify suitable joint initiatives to grow global trade and exports. This is in recognition of the importance of other emerging export markets that Northern Ireland needs to exploit.

Renewable Energy: Meetings

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what recent meetings she has had with the Irish and British Governments on the proposed Inter-Governmental Agreement on Renewable Energy.
(AQO 5329/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have had no meetings with either Government as the Intergovernmental Agreement is a matter between the UK and Irish Governments. However, my Department has representation on the Steering Group which has been formed by the two Governments to examine if a trading arrangement may be beneficial to both parties. This Steering Group meets on a monthly basis.

Unemployment: Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, outside of the Economic Inactivity Strategy Framework, what action her Department is taking to address unemployment rates in the Foyle constituency.
(AQO 5330/11-15)

Mrs Foster: High levels of Economic Inactivity have been a persistent feature of our economy over the past thirty years. The Executive has prioritised the development of an Economic Inactivity Strategy to tackle this key structural problem which will help increase overall levels of employment.

However, taking action to support economic growth and employment creation is the responsibility of the whole Executive.

The path we have chosen to increase employment and prosperity is to rebalance the economy by building a larger and more export-driven private sector. The Northern Ireland Economic Strategy, and the complementary Economy & Jobs Initiative, set out what the Executive is doing collectively to deliver higher levels of employment across Northern Ireland.

Energy: Costs

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given Bombardier's move to lower its energy costs, what steps she is taking to facilitate similar moves among other companies and groups of companies.
(AQO 5331/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Opportunities to lower costs by developing self-generation capability and coming off the grid are a commercial decision for companies to take and market arrangements exist to cover such decisions. I have no plans to intervene in these arrangements. Mechanisms such as the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation and the Renewable Heat Incentive are available to those companies who are considering generating their own energy.

Job Creation and Promotion: North Down

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what level of assistance her Department has provided for job promotion and creation in the North Down Constituency since 2011.
(AQO 5332/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Between 1st April 2011 and 30th September 2013, Invest NI offered financial assistance totaling £1.85 million in support of job promotion and creation in the North Down Constituency.

Tourism: Funding

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department, or its Arm's-Length Bodies, provide funding to the Regional Tourism Organisations.
(AQO 5333/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are no longer Regional Tourism Organisations.

There are a number of Regional Tourism Partnerships which include, Causeway Coast and Glens, Derry Visitor and Convention Bureau, Fermanagh Lakeland Trust and Greater Belfast Regional Tourism Partnership.

These bodies obtain finance from local authorities and membership subscription.

As you are aware there is a Review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and wider tourism structures currently being undertaken.

Renewable Energy: Business

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the role that her Department plays in supporting the development of renewable energy businesses.
(AQO 5334/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI has been proactively working with Northern Ireland companies for over five years to help them enter the renewable energy market. Northern Ireland companies have been successful in the Renewable energy market, winning an estimated £52 million in new business in 2012-2013.

A database has been developed detailing over four hundred Northern Ireland companies involved in the various Renewable supply chains. A programme of specialised workshops and supply chain events is ongoing to highlight business opportunities.

Advice is also available on the use of renewable technologies and support in the form of resource efficiency visits and interest-free loans to help businesses install these technologies.

Broadband: Rural Areas

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment at what stage are the negotiations on additional funding for the rollout of high speed rural broadband.
(AQO 5335/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The procurement for the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project has completed and the tender response is being carefully evaluated to ensure that best value for money is achieved. This project is attracting public funding of £19.3 million. It is hoped to award the contract for this project in the next few weeks with implementation commencing immediately thereafter for completion in 2015.

The UK Government announced a further £250 million of funding in 2013 to support the extension of superfast broadband services into the most challenging areas. Details are yet to emerge as to how this funding will be allocated but my officials are formulating a project aimed at accessing a share of this funding and, in doing so, are working closely with colleagues in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Department of the Environment

Flooding: Risk Assessment

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will include a statutory flood risk assessment query on all future planning application forms.
(AQW 29515/11-15)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): Planning plays an important role in managing future development that may be at risk from flooding or that may increase the risk of flooding elsewhere.

There is no statutory requirement for a flood risk assessment to be carried out in respect of any planning application however the susceptibility of all land to flooding is a material consideration in determining planning applications.

Applications are assessed having regard to Planning Policy Statement 15 (PPS15) 'Planning and Flood Risk' which sets out the Department's approach to flood risk and adopts a precautionary approach to development and the use of land. If a proposed development is likely to be affected by or impact on flooding elsewhere the Department will consult Rivers Agency for advice and a flood risk assessment may be requested in order to inform consideration of the planning application.

The Department is currently carrying out a review of PPS 15 and the public consultation period ended on 10 January 2014. The revised draft was published in order to fulfil a commitment in the original PPS that the policy would be reviewed after 5 years, in order to take account of emerging information relating to flood risk and climate change and also experience in the implementation of flood risk policy.

The Draft PPS requires the planning authority to take account of the most up to date flood risk information in carrying out its development plan and development management functions. It also refers to the role and responsibility of developers to use the publicly available flood risk information to assess the flood risk implications of their development proposals.

Currently I do not consider it necessary to include a statutory flood risk assessment on all application forms as I am satisfied the ongoing review will provide the necessary policy framework to ensure that flood risk is fully taken into account in the processing of future planning applications.

Flooding: Sustainable Development

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment what action he is taking to ensure that sustainable development happens so that detailed flood risk maps are produced under the EU Floods Directive and PPS 15.
(AQW 29516/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department seeks to promote safe and sustainable development that takes full and proper account of flood risk. This is carried out by applying the policies contained in Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 15 'Planning and Flood Risk' through the Department's development plan and development management functions. The overall aim of PPS 15 is "to prevent future development that may be at risk from flooding or that may increase the risk of flooding elsewhere."

Last October I launched Revised Draft PPS 15 for public consultation. This fulfils a commitment in the original PPS to review the policy after 5 years, in order to take account of emerging information relating to flood risk and climate change and also experience in the implementation of flood risk policy.

PPS 15 and the emerging revised draft document seek to promote sustainable development in a number of ways. These include avoiding development in flood plains in all but the most exceptional circumstances and encouraging the use of sustainable drainage for new development.

In applying the policy, Planning officials take full account of the most up to date flood risk information provided by DARD Rivers Agency, which as the competent authority for the implementation of the EU Floods Directive in Northern Ireland, is responsible for the Strategic Flood Map and its ongoing development and refinement. The Department works closely with Rivers Agency and further changes to the Strategic flood Map will be accompanied with training and guidance for planning officials where appropriate.

Waste Disposal: Radioactive and/or Toxic

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all undisclosed locations where radioactive and/or toxic waste has been disposed.
(AQW 29550/11-15)

Mr Durkan:

(i) Premises that accumulate and dispose of radioactive waste must have a certificate of authorisation issued under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 (previously 1960). Such premises in Northern Ireland include hospitals, universities, research centres and a small number of industrial sites. One of the routes for the disposal of low level solid radioactive waste historically included in the authorisations was via controlled burial in landfill sites. Two locations for controlled burial were identified in authorisations: a) Culmore Point Landfill, Derry and b) Duncrue Street Landfill, Belfast. The authorisations contained limits and conditions to help ensure the waste was disposed of without presenting a radiation risk to either people or the environment. The practice of controlled burial ceased in Northern Ireland in 2006.

2. The authorisations also allowed, subject to limitations and conditions on the radionuclide content and method of disposal, the removal of certain types of very low level solid radioactive waste to local refuse sites for disposal with large quantities of non radioactive waste.

3. Copies of authorisations issued under the Radioactive Substances Act 1993 for the disposal of radioactive waste are on public registers held in NIEA offices in Belfast and in District Council offices.

4. Prior to 1981 there was no requirement to keep separate records for the deposition of hazardous waste (previously known as Special Waste). From 1981 to 1998 local authorities in Northern Ireland were required to manage records for all movements of special waste under the Pollution Control (Special Waste) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1981. In 1998 this function transferred to my Department under the Special Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998 having since been amended by the Hazardous Waste Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005. Since late 1998 to date the Department holds records for all hazardous wastes being deposited in Northern Ireland. Following the end of landfill co-disposal of non-hazardous and hazardous waste in 2004 there was only one landfill site (Lisbane Landfill, County Armagh) accepting hazardous waste (asbestos waste only) which ceased accepting such waste in June 2013.

Minerals: Boreholes

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) what constitutes a mineral in The Planning (General Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 1993; (ii) whether this legislation allows borehole drilling as permitted development, despite being excluded under equivalent legislation in England and Scotland; (iii) whether drilling boreholes under petroleum

exploration licences qualifies as permitted development under Part 16 of the Order, and if so, whether the Order will be amended so that this can be more effectively regulated by the planning system.
(AQW 29551/11-15)

Mr Durkan: What constitutes a mineral is not specifically defined by the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993; however the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 does define minerals as "includes all minerals and substances in or under land of a kind ordinarily worked for removal by underground or surface working, except that it does not include turf cut for purposes other than sale".

There are certain permitted development rights under Part 16 of Schedule 1 to the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 for Mineral Exploration where planning permission is not required, which includes exploration for petroleum. They allow certain specified development on land in any period not exceeding four months consisting of drilling boreholes, carrying out seismic surveys or making other excavations. Any operation within an area of special scientific interest or site of archaeological interest is specifically excluded from these permitted development rights.

There are also certain limitations and conditions associated with this temporary permitted development right including pre-commencement notification to the Department of the Environment giving details of the location, target mineral, details of plant and operations and anticipated timescale which a developer, should they wish to invoke these permitted development rights, must notify the Department of in order that a decision can be taken on whether or not the permitted development right should be removed and the proposal made subject to the full planning application process..

In addition, where development is identified in either of the Schedules to the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 and Environmental Impact Assessment is applicable based on the details of the proposed development, permitted development rights do not apply (Article 3(8) of the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 refers).

In the interests of clarity, it is important to note that the temporary permitted development rights for minerals exploration do not allow the commercial extraction of minerals, including petroleum. Such activity will be subject to the full planning application process as well as relevant Environmental Impact Assessment, licensing and environmental permitting arrangements.

There are no plans at present to amend the existing legislation in N. Ireland in relation to permitted development rights for Mineral Exploration under Part 16 of Schedule 1 to the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993. The Department takes the view that the permitted development right as currently drafted strikes an appropriate balance between permitting the carrying out of legitimate exploratory activity and at the same time protecting amenity interests and the environment.

Quiet Areas

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has considered designating more quiet areas.
(AQW 29554/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Environmental Noise Directive (2002/49/EC) ("END") requires Member States to create noise maps and draft action plans, which amongst other things, "aim to protect quiet areas against an increase in noise". Such quiet areas are to be designated within the Belfast Agglomeration.

Following the production of the round one noise maps and action plans in 2008/9, the Department of the Environment designated all areas within the Belfast Agglomeration with a consolidated noise level (noise from all sources combined) of less than 55Lden as Candidate Quiet Areas. The purpose of this was to highlight these areas for further investigation once more precise policy on the designation of Quiet Areas had been developed.

The END does not define Quiet Areas. Nor does it prescribe noise limits or the features of such an area. It is for each Member State to develop this policy.

The Department is in the process of developing a Quiet Area policy taking into account issues around the form, content and legal status of the final document and will issue the draft policy for public consultation later this year.

Taxis, Belfast: Registration

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many public hire taxis were registered in Belfast, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29566/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The number of Belfast public hire taxis licensed in each of the last three years was as follows:

2012/13	437[1]
2011/12	498[1]
2010/11	548[1]

1 The figures represent totals as at 31 March each year. Please note these figures are not part of official statistics and have not been subject to data validation.

Energy: Unconventional Gas

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will seek to ensure that a representative of the local community is on the steering committee dealing with the research programme into unconventional gas exploration and exploitation.
(AQW 29584/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The primary aim of the all island research programme is to produce outcomes that will assist regulators (North and South) in fulfilling their statutory roles regarding this proposed activity. The Steering Committee is therefore composed of those regulators, as they are best placed to ensure that relevant research is carried out to provide the robust evidence base to make decisions on this controversial industry.

The extensive consultation exercise carried out on the Terms of Reference for the research programme resulted in calls for a Health Official to join the Steering Committee. As a result of this feedback a Health expert has been invited onto the Steering Committee. No other comments or concerns were received in relation to the membership of the Steering Committee.

Keeping all interested stakeholders, including representatives of the local community, abreast of the progress of the research programme will be a key part of the dissemination plan, the specific detail of which is part of the current tender process.

George Best Belfast City Airport: Car Park

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the rationale for reversing the decision on the planning approval for a private car park at George Best Belfast City Airport.
(AQW 29598/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Department did not reverse its decision in this case. A recommendation to approve was made on 21 February 2013 but was deferred by the Town Planning Committee of Belfast City Council. Following deferral, a meeting was held with the objectors who raised further legal and policy matters.

On re-assessment the Department concluded that determining weight should not have been given to the spare parking capacity at the Ikea site and that the applicable policy was Policy AMP 10 of Planning Policy 3 - Access, Movement and Parking. This provides the key policy test for the provision of new car parks with the requirement that they 'meet a need identified by the Department for Regional Development in Transport Plans or accepted by DRD following robust analysis provided by the developer'.

The applicant was given the opportunity to submit a case of need which he submitted in August 2013. The Department fully considered the case presented but concluded that the case of need presented by the applicant did not meet the policy test. The Department re-presented the application to Belfast City Council Town Planning Committee on 12 December 2013 as a refusal on this basis. This decision was taken locally by planners and I was not involved in any capacity as a decision maker.

The process in this case is not unusual as often applicants or third parties, through the deferral process, will bring further matters to the Department for consideration in relation to an application.

There is a process of appeal available for anyone dissatisfied with a decision made by planning officials.

Coastal Communities Fund: Awards

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how much funding has been awarded, or distributed, from the Coastal Communities Fund in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29612/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Coastal Communities Fund (CCF) was launched by Treasury in 2012-13, and its annual budget is equal to 50% of the annual revenue from the Crown Estate's marine activities in that area.

In 2012-13, the NI budget was £450,000 of which £423,465 was awarded to two projects. The Seaview Heritage Activity Centre in Glenarm was awarded £265,000, and the Water Wheel Project in Magheramorne was awarded £158,465.

In 2013-14, the NI budget was £500,000 of which £447,342 was awarded to two projects. The NI Lobster and Marine Hatchery Research Centre in Kilkeel was awarded £260,782, and the Coastal Centre at Waterfoot was awarded £186,560.

Any funds not awarded in one year are added to the available funds for the following year. Up to 5.87% of the Fund over the lifetime of the programme is used to cover administration fees incurred by the Big Fund in delivering the CCF. This amounted to £26,520 in 2012/13 and will amount to a maximum of £29,350 in 2013/14.

The third round of the CCF will open in early February 2014.

The CCF is a UK-wide programme and the single outcome is that "coastal communities will experience regeneration and economic growth through projects that directly or indirectly create sustainable jobs, and safeguard existing jobs". However there are also some country specific requirements and priorities.

Here the CCF is aimed at projects that help contribute to the Executive's Economic Strategy. The Strategy's key priorities include growing a sustainable economy, investing in the future, creating jobs and tackling disadvantage.

CCF priorities in Northern Ireland are focussed on applications:

- from small and medium size coastal communities facing economic challenges;

- that promote regeneration and job creation through investment in tourism, business and the built and natural environments of coastal settlements; and
- that promote training and skills development, linked directly to the project activity, to enable local people to secure jobs in local industry growth sectors.

The key decision-making criteria are UK wide and are:

- Whether the project will directly or indirectly create jobs, and/or sustain existing jobs, and promote economic growth;
- Whether the need for the project has been clearly demonstrated;
- How well the project meets the CCF's outcome and country requirements;
- How well the project fits with local plans and priorities;
- How likely the project is to successfully deliver its intended outcomes;
- How likely the project is to be delivered within two years;
- How the benefits of the project will be sustained after the CCF funding finishes;
- Whether the project represents good value for money, that is, how much it will cost to create or safeguard jobs in relation to the overall project funding requested.

Grants of £50,000 and over are available, and the following types of organisations can apply:

- local authorities;
- development agencies;
- other public sector bodies;
- charities;
- voluntary and community sector organisations;
- social enterprises, including cooperatives and community ownership initiatives; and
- private sector companies.

Here funding decisions are made by a publicly appointed panel and endorsed by me.

More detail on the Fund can be found on the Big Lottery Fund website at http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/uk-wide/coastal-communities

Coastal Communities Fund: Availability

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment when the next tranche of Coastal Communities Fund money will be available. **(AQW 29613/11-15)**

Mr Durkan: The Coastal Communities Fund (CCF) was launched by Treasury in 2012-13, and its annual budget is equal to 50% of the annual revenue from the Crown Estate's marine activities in that area.

In 2012-13, the NI budget was £450,000 of which £423,465 was awarded to two projects. The Seaview Heritage Activity Centre in Glenarm was awarded £265,000, and the Water Wheel Project in Magheramorne was awarded £158,465.

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Coastal Communities Fund: Criteria

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment (i) to detail the criteria used for awarding funding from the Coastal Communities Fund; (ii) who is eligible to apply for funding; and (iii) who makes the decision on whether applications are successful.
(AQW 29615/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Coastal Communities Fund (CCF) was launched by Treasury in 2012-13, and its annual budget is equal to 50% of the annual revenue from the Crown Estate's marine activities in that area.

In 2012-13, the NI budget was £450,000 of which £423,465 was awarded to two projects. The Seaview Heritage Activity Centre in Glenarm was awarded £265,000, and the Water Wheel Project in Magheramorne was awarded £158,465.

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Coastal Communities Fund: Budget

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what is the annual budget of the local Coastal Communities Fund. **(AQW 29616/11-15)**

Mr Durkan: The Coastal Communities Fund (CCF) was launched by Treasury in 2012-13, and its annual budget is equal to 50% of the annual revenue from the Crown Estate's marine activities in that area.

In 2012-13, the NI budget was £450,000 of which £423,465 was awarded to two projects. The Seaview Heritage Activity Centre in Glenarm was awarded £265,000, and the Water Wheel Project in Magheramorne was awarded £158,465.

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Taxi Operator Licences: Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 29122/11-15, to list the operators of each of the 94 licenses; and how many licenses, broken down by year, each operator holds.
(AQW 29620/11-15)

Mr Durkan: A list of the 94 taxi operator licence holders is attached at Annex A. Each operator holds only one operator's licence.

Annex A

Name of Operator

- A Cabs
- A1 Taxi Derry
- Anthony Carton
- Barry O'Neill
- BE-KAB
- Bernadette Doherty
- Biju John
- Brendan Gourley
- Brendan O'Neill
- Brian Patrick Keenan
- City Cabs (Derry) Ltd
- Culmore Taxis
- Damien Griffiths
- Daniel McLaughlin
- Feeny Cabs
- Brown's Taxi
- Waterside Taxi
- Declan O'Donnell
- Derry Taxis Limited
- Nippy Taxis
- Eamonn Denis Burke
- Edward Burke
- Eglinton Taxis
- Elite Executive Travel
- Eoighan McCauley
- C.F.B Taxis
- George Hegarty
- Gerard John Moore
- GMC Taxi
- DMK Taxi
- Gerard Thomas Conaghan
- Gregory Brady
- Gregory Feeney
- Hugh Colm McIntyre
- Tony Morrison Taxi Service
- SEA - MC
- James Gerarde Harkens
- James Grieve
- Call A CAb
- James McCarron
- John Gerard McGinley
- John Hutton
- JJ's Taxi
- John Joseph Robinson
- J.L Taxi
- John Parke
- John Sweeney
- Foyle Taxis
- Joseph Ebbs
- JS Cab Services
- Kenneth Laurence Bradley
- Sunvale Taxis
- Kieron Brian Coyle
- Laurence McGowan
- Liam Farren
- Link Cabs
- Glassagh Taxis
- Swift Cabs
- City Tours
- Michael's Taxi
- Michael Brolly SNR
- Michael Browne
- MC Taxi
- Michael Harkin Wedding Cars
- Michael McGrath
- Mr Santhosh Vazhangattil
- Neil Benedict Campbell
- Niall Martin McGilloway
- Oliver Lynch
- Patrick Barton
- Patrick Doherty
- 3D Limos
- Patrick Killen Taxi's
- Paul McMullan

- Paul Vincent Mullan
- Pauline Gallagher
- Peter Hutton
- Peter Joseph Fleming
- Raymond McCafferty
- Rijumon Varghese
- Robert Cooke
- Bob's Easy Park
- K Cab
- R K Taxis
- Sean Doherty
- Terence McDermott
- The Taxi Company N.I. Limited
- Thornhill Taxis
- Tony Begley
- V Cab
- William Gill
- William Joseph Havlin
- Sackville (Coop) Taxis
- W.R.Ross

Lisburn City: Status

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment whether Lisburn's city status will be affected by the postponed merger with Castlereagh Borough Council.
(AQW 29644/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department is working towards taking the necessary steps to ensure that the city status in respect of all five cities in Northern Ireland, including Lisburn, is not affected by the reorganisation of local government.

As city status is conferred by Letters Patent issued under Royal Prerogative, my officials are working closely with the Northern Ireland Office to ensure that city status is preserved. Draft legislation will be brought before the Assembly in due course.

Councils: Ratepayers

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department intends to ensure that ratepayers, who currently live in an area where council debt is lower per capita, are not required to pay towards the debt previously incurred by a Council area that they are being joined with.
(AQW 29645/11-15)

Mr Durkan: District Councils are bodies corporate as defined in the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and, as such, are directly responsible for decisions regarding their own financial affairs.

Furthermore, my Department has no indication from the Chief Local Government Auditor that there is any defect in councils' strategies in relation to debt management.

However, I understand the specific concerns that some ratepayers may have in the run-up to local government reform in April 2015. As I have previously stated to the Assembly, there are controls in place to ensure that local government does not over-stretch in terms of borrowings. In line with Section 13 (1) of the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, "a council shall determine and keep under review how much money it can afford to borrow." A council may not borrow money if doing so would result in a breach of the limit determined by it under Section 13. This is examined each year by the Local Government Auditor as part of the audit process.

In terms of the expenditure of current councils in the run up to April 2015, I have issued a direction and guidance on expenditure controls for Statutory Transition Committees. This gives Statutory Transition Committees the power to examine and approve three year capital plans and revenue expenditure forecasts in their constituent councils.

The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, taken together with the Departmental direction, provides that councils must seek the consent of the relevant Statutory Transition Committee before:

- making a disposal of land where consideration exceeds £100,000;
- entering into a capital contract where consideration exceeds £250,000; or
- entering into a non capital contract where consideration exceeds £100,000.

This is to ensure that the current 26 councils cannot enter into new contracts that will have an impact on the finances of the newly created councils without first seeking permission from the Statutory Transition Committee. This power will also be applied to the new councils during the period when they will be operating in shadow mode from end May 2014 – March 2015.

Loughside Playing Fields

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail what information he or his Department has on the proposal by Crusaders Football Club to develop a new stadium at Loughside Playing Fields.
(AQW 29652/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department is not aware of a proposal by Crusaders Football Club to develop a new stadium at Loughside playing fields. Planning permission was refused on the site in 2012 for a mixed use development that included a foodstore and new playing fields. This proposal did not make provision for a football stadium however.

Coastal Defences: Questions Referred

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment why his department has referred questions tabled for him to answer in relation to coastal defences to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.
(AQW 29656/11-15)

Mr Durkan: DARD has powers under the Drainage (NI) Order 1973 to maintain watercourses and sea defences that have been designated by the Drainage Council for NI; and to construct and maintain drainage and sea defence structures.

DARD's Rivers Agency performs this flood defence role; and consequently monitors and maintains some 26km of designated sea defences (some of which are in the Strangford constituency) and two tidal barriers. In addition, DARD is the competent authority in terms of implementing the EU's Floods Directive.

It was on these grounds that my department approached DARD seeking the formal transfer of AQWs 29513 and 29514, which DARD accepted.

Climate Change Bill

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the introduction of a Climate Change Bill.
(AQW 29689/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I am committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and growing a sustainable, productive low carbon economy. The introduction of a Climate Change Bill is an option under active consideration.

There was a divided response to the pre-consultation on the need for a Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill which closed on 24 May 2013. As a follow up to this pre-consultation, I am meeting with businesses, agri-food, energy and environmental stakeholders, the Cross Departmental Working Group on Climate Change and the Environment Committee over coming weeks to hear their views on the optimum outcome focused approach to tackling climate change. Following this engagement I will confirm my course of action.

Used Cars: Changes in Ownership

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment to quantify the number of changes to the ownership of used cars, indicated by changes to the name on vehicle log books, in each of the last ten years.
(AQW 29691/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The figures provided below detail the number of changes of ownership transactions processed in each of the last ten years.

Year	Number of Change of Ownership Transactions
2013	197,491
2012	192,255
2011	196,605
2010	205,197
2009	209,028
2008	257,083
2007	283,520
2006	259,499
2005	241,818
2004	307,227

The figures are provided from Agency records and do not form part of published and validated DOE Official Statistics.

Energy: Public Consultation Responses

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQO 5204/11-15, to detail (i) the number of respondents to the public consultation; and (ii) the number of respondents advocating that the research programme should include a health impact assessment.
(AQW 29692/11-15)

Mr Durkan:

(i) 1356 valid submissions were received.

(i) The exact number was not recorded when submissions were processed, however a significant number of responses referred to the specific issue of health impact assessments and the general issue of public health.

A summary report, as well as links to all the submissions, is available from the Environmental Protection Agency (Ireland) website: http://www.epa.ie/researchandeducation/research/striveprogramme/water/ugee%20research/

Taxis: Mandatory Metering

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to notify the taxi industry of the introduction of mandatory taxi metering by September 2014.
(AQW 29699/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I acknowledge the importance of effective communication with the taxi industry over the coming months on issues such as the introduction of mandatory taxi metering.

As such, as part of the Taxi Reform Implementation Programme officials are developing a comprehensive communication plan, aimed at maximising awareness of the new provisions and effective dissemination of information relating to them to the industry.

Although the details of the communication plan have not yet been finalised, measures are likely to include use of direct mailshots to the taxi industry, promotion of the new provisions on the internet (including NI Direct), the dissemination of posters and leaflets through DVA test centres and local offices, and a news release will be issued to media outlets. These communications will be taken forward in advance of the provisions of the Regulations coming into effect.

Taxis: Mandatory Metering

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what assurances he can give that mandatory taxi metering will take place by 1 September 2014.
(AQW 29700/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The introduction of mandatory taxi metering is an important element of the Taxis Act and one that will bring significant benefits to consumers.

In response to the Environment Committee's request that the suite of legislation implementing the Taxis Act 2008 should be made operative from September 2014, my Department has been progressing the various draft Regulations to ensure that these targets are met.

The Regulations will become operative in September and will make it an offence to use a taxi without a taximeter fitted from March 2015, giving the industry 6 months to comply with the new regulations. Similarly, the mandatory requirement to have and use a receipt printer will take effect in January 2016.

My Department is engaging with the private sector in order to promote the establishment of a network of Approved Taximeter Centres, where it is intended that meters will be fitted, calibrated and sealed in accordance with prescribed conditions. It is intended that these Centres will be operating from September 2014. A programme of work is underway, working towards this date.

Taxis: Mandatory Metering

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what is the timescale for the implementation of mandatory taxi metering for taxis that do not currently have a meter.
(AQW 29701/11-15)

Mr Durkan: When the Regulations implementing the Taxis Act 2008 are fully implemented, taxis will fall into one of four categories.

Class A and Class B taxis, which will comprise the vast majority of the taxi fleet, will be required to have taximeters fitted. This requirement will take effect from March 2015. The requirement to have a receipt printer will take effect from January 2016.

Class C taxis (including limousines, chauffeured cars and wedding cars) and Class D taxis (taxibuses) will not be required to have taximeters or receipt printers fitted.

Taxis: Fitting of Meters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what checks will be in place to ensure that taxi meters are fitted to a safe and high standard.
(AQW 29702/11-15)

Mr Durkan: By September 2014 my Department will have established a network of Approved Taximeter Centres (ATCs). These will be privately owned and operated and will be authorised by the Driver and Vehicle Agency once officials are satisfied that they have met the prescribed requirements. Only ATCs will be permitted to fit, calibrate and seal taximeters. They will be subject to regular quality audits to ensure that the required standards continue to be met.

All taximeters will be required to undergo an annual calibration test. When a vehicle is submitted to DVA for a taxi vehicle test, the person presenting the vehicle will be required to present proof of a recent calibration test by an ATC. Additionally, the installation of the taximeter will be checked to ensure that the requisite seals are present and that there is no evidence of tampering.

Where an ATC is found to have failed to meet the required standards, the Department has the power to withdraw its approval, after which it will no longer be able to legally install or test meters.

Taxis: Metering

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department will inform the public of the introduction of taxi metering.
(AQW 29703/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Communication of the introduction of taxi metering to the general public will be included in an overall communications plan which is currently being developed by my Department. Measures are likely to include the promotion of the new provisions via the internet including NI Direct, posters and leaflets to be disseminated through DVA test centres and local offices and other outlets, and a news release to media outlets.

The main communication effort focussing on the public is likely to be scheduled closely to precede the mandatory fitment of meters, in order to maximise its effectiveness.

Electricity Substation: Rasharkin

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether the current planning application for an electricity sub station in Rasharkin meets the criteria for an Environmental Impact Assessment to be undertaken in accordance with Article 2 of The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations.
(AQW 29720/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The current planning application for an electricity substation at Finvoy Road, Rasharkin meets the criteria for a determination to be carried out as to whether the proposal is EIA development. In this case the Department determined on 13 December 2013 that the proposal was not EIA development and that an Environmental Statement was not required.

Crawfordsburn Country Park: Vehicle Access

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration is being given to ensuring that vehicular access for visitors to Crawfordsburn Country Park is available all year round.
(AQW 29745/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I have been advised by officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), who manage access to Country Parks and State Care Monuments, that the opening of Crawfordsburn Country Park is reviewed on an annual basis. This review takes into account matching available resources to best meet public demand at Country Parks, historic castles and other State Care Monuments.

In 2013, the main entrance to Crawfordsburn Country Park was only closed to vehicular access via the main entrance on three days (25th , 26th and 27th December 2013 inclusive). Access to the park via other access pathways remained open at all times of the year.

Officials in NIEA have advised me that it may be a necessary to restrict access to properties at short notice due to health & safety concerns, such as extreme weather events, which could lead to damage to property, injury or worse still a fatality. They have also advised that it may be necessary to restrict access to allow maintenance works such as resurfacing. It is therefore not possible to guarantee all year round vehicular access to Crawfordsburn Country Park due to these reasons.

Most recently you may be aware that due to a severe weather warning and public holidays access was not permitted via the main access route to Crawfordsburn Country Park on 25th, 26th and 27th December 2013. This decision was undertaken by NIEA due to a risk of falling branches and trees during high winds along the main entrance avenue and lower car park area. During this period alternative car parking was however made available at two car parks nearby at Grey Point Fort and Fort Road which are both owned by NIEA from which Crawsfordsburn Country Park can easily be accessed.

It appears however that despite NIEA staff closing the main access gate on 24th December 2013 a person, who was not an NIEA staff member, unfortunately opened the main entrance gate which led to traffic disruption on the main avenue on 26th December 2013 due to access barriers being closed further into the park. These second barriers are in place to allow access outside of hours to the scout centre but not to the main car park so as to deter anti-sociable behaviour. To ensure this does not happen again NIEA staff have changed the locks on access gates and will ensure that signage will be placed, in the event this gate is closed, to advise of alternative nearby parking facilities from which the park can be accessed.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan: Update

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 26630/11-15, for an update on the adoption of the Belfast Metrpolitan Area Plan.
(AQW 29781/11-15)

Mr Durkan: After extensive assessment of the recommendations made by the Planning Appeals Commission, my Department submitted BMAP to the Department for Regional Development for assessment of the Plan against the Regional Development Strategy 2035. I can confirm that the Plan was awarded a Certificate of General Conformity on 21 October 2013. The other outstanding statutory processes have recently been completed and my Department is now taking forward the next steps in the adoption and publication process.

Taxis: Hire Company for Meters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has any plans to establish a hire company for taxi meters; and what initial steps have been taken to date.
(AQW 29782/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department is working to establish a network of Approved Taximeter Centres (ATCs), which will be owned and operated by the private sector. These are likely to be affiliated with or agents of particular taximeter manufacturers, and will be able to sell and fit taximeters, as well as to carry out calibration testing and sealing.

It will be up to individual ATCs to decide which products to offer, and whether to sell or hire them. However, given that it is common practice in both Britain and Ireland to offer hire packages for taximeters and receipt printers, it is likely that ATCs in this jurisdiction will offer this service also.

Taxis: Fitting of Meters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment whether any concerns have been raised by the Committee for the Environment on the issue of taxi metering and installation.
(AQW 29788/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I attended a meeting of the Environment Committee on 24 October 2013 during which concerns were raised about the impact of the costs of implementing all of the taxi reforms at the same time. One of the main costs mentioned was that of the purchase of a taximeter and receipt printer. Accordingly I instructed officials to stagger the implementation of the provisions in order to mitigate the financial impact on the industry.

I am not aware of any other concerns having been formally raised by the Committee.

Taxis: Fitting of Meters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what actions are being taken to ensure that the installation of taxi meters will be carried out by accredited installers.
(AQW 29789/11-15)

Mr Durkan: When the Regulations implementing the Taxis Act are implemented, it will be an offence for a company or individual who has not been authorised as an Approved Taximeter Centre by the Department to install or calibrate a taximeter. When a taximeter is approved and tested, a test certificate will be issued by the ATC and a small plaque will be fixed to the dashboard of the vehicle close to the meter, including details of both the installation and the installer.

When the vehicle is presented for its annual taxi vehicle test, the certificate and the plaque will both be examined. Where they have not been validly issued by an authorised ATC, the examiner may refuse to complete the test.

The certificate and plaque may also be examined at any time by a DVA enforcement officer, who will be able to take appropriate enforcement action if the certificate and plaque are not valid.

All ATCs will be subject to a periodic audit by DVA.

Taxis: Calibration of Meters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to ensure that the calibration of taxi meters will be undertaken by an independent compnay.
(AQW 29790/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Under the new arrangements due to come into effect from September 2014, the opportunity to become an Approved Taximeter Centre (ATC) will be open to anyone in Northern Ireland. It is likely that applications will be received from existing taximeter installers and from in-car entertainment fitters. Applicants will have to satisfy the Department that they are competent and able to fulfil the conditions prescribed by the Regulations; such companies will subject to periodic auditing by DVA. These conditions will cover the equipment used to install and calibrate meters, the training of installers, procedures to be followed and records to be kept.

All such ATCs will be independent from the Department. Further, it may not be appropriate for taxi operators to establish themselves as ATCs, given the potential for a conflict of interest. Consideration is being given to this issue as the conditions for the approval of ATCs are developed.

Taxis: Calibration of Meters

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what checks are in place to ensure that the calibration of taxi meters and equipment is carried out correctly.
(AQW 29791/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Taximeters are at present only mandatory for Belfast Public Hire taxis. They are checked annually by DVA and a calibration test is carried out by DVA staff. When the test has been completed successfully, seals are applied by the DVA examiner. The calibration check is carried out by confirming that the approved fare charging programme code installed in the

taximeter matches that supplied by the taximeter manufacture. The taxi is then driven along a measured test route where the fare being charged is checked at periodic distance points. Finally, the taximeter waiting time clock and related fare charges are checked using a stop watch.

Public Hire Vehicles: Age

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of the Environment to list the ages of public hire vehicles licensed to carry passengers. **(AQW 29792/11-15)**

Mr Durkan: A summary table providing the age of public hire vehicles licensed to carry vehicles is attached at Annex A of this response.

Please note these figures are not part of official statistics and have not been subject to data validation

Annex A - AQW 29792/11-15

Taxi Age (Years)	Number
1	4
2	3
3	4
4	13
5	26
6	14
7	18
8	26
9	27
10	28
11	24
12	28
13	52
14	40
15	59
16	22
17	13
18	10
19	13
20	0
21	2
All Belfast Public Hire	426

Please note these figures are not part of official statistics and have not been subject to data validation.

Electricity Substation: Rasharkin

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether the current planning application for an electricity sub station in Rasharkin is a Schedule 2 development as outlined in Article 2 of The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations. **(AQW 29805/11-15)**

Mr Durkan: The current planning application for an electricity substation at Finvoy Road, Rasharkin meets the criteria under Schedule 2 of The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 for a determination to be carried out as to whether the proposal is EIA development. In this case the Department determined on 13 December 2013 that the proposal was not EIA development and that an Environmental Statement was not required.

Ravenhill Stadium: Taxi Operators

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28809/11-15, whether any specific taxi company have a Taxi Operator Licence granted for an Operator Centre at Ravenhill Rugby Ground on Mount Merrion Avenue, Belfast.
(AQW 29847/11-15)

Mr Durkan: There are no taxi companies with an operating centre at Ravenhill rugby ground listed on their Operator Licence.

Taxis, Belfast: Cross-departmental Meetings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment on how many occasions he, or his staff, have met with their colleagues in the Department of Regional Development on the taxi situation in Belfast; and to list the dates of these meetings.
(AQW 29851/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I met with Minister Kennedy on 17 December 2013 to discuss issues relating to taxis in Belfast which cut across both our portfolios, including ranks, parking enforcement and bus lanes.

My officials met with DRD colleagues to discuss taxi licensing/ranking issues on 13 February 2012, 9 August 2012, 24 April 2013, 10 May 2013 and 5 December 2013. There were also meetings around taxibus issues on 14 May 2013, 20 June 2013, 25 September 2013 and 24 October 2013.

Road Safety Forum

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of the Environment, given the recent rise in road fatalities, to outline the discussions of the recent meeting of the Road Safety Forum.
(AQW 29971/11-15)

Mr Durkan: As Minister with lead responsibility for road safety, I remain committed to the partnership work that has so greatly reduced road casualties over the last 40 years. I will work with all stakeholders to improve road safety and to reduce road casualties further.

To that end, and in response to the rise in road deaths at the beginning of 2014, I last week convened an urgent meeting of the Road Safety Forum. The turn-out for the meeting at such short notice, and members' obvious commitment and resolve to tackle road safety issues, demonstrated the importance of doing so. The meeting was attended by a range of road safety stakeholders including all relevant government departments, statutory agencies and the emergency services.

At the Forum the police presented an anonymised report on the fatal collisions, which was followed by discussion on what more might be done.

The meeting agreed that we need to continue our efforts, need to take every opportunity to communicate road safety messages and need to take a number of early actions to add to current work. DOE is providing additional focussed road safety advertising and messages. You will perhaps already have seen new messages on television and in the newspapers. We will also provide young people's groups with more materials to help them better communicate key road safety messages to their members. PSNI will continue its focus on visible road traffic policing, including increased focus on inappropriate speed, particularly in areas where there is known to be a risk of speed related collisions. DRD will, as Minister Kennedy announced in the Assembly chamber on 13 January, review the provision of information for those who make decisions on road gritting.

The Forum agreed to meet again before Easter to review progress on a range of other measures to be taken forward in 2014, including:-

- the Road Traffic Amendment (NI) Bill, for which I hope to have Executive approval soon;
- two new road safety public information campaigns on cyclist safety and speeding, that I will launch this year;
- Northern Ireland's first Safety & Lifeskills Centre; and
- a new Motorcycling Safety Strategy.

Everyone who uses the roads has to play a part in making our roads safer and must adjust their behaviours to suit the conditions. Drivers, particularly, need to concentrate and not get distracted, always wear a seatbelt, never drink and drive and moderate their speed to the road and the conditions. We all need to heed the key messages that will help keep us all safe.

I have asked all those in public life to seize every opportunity to communicate these messages to help keep their constituents and communities safe on our roads, and thank those that have, and continue to do, so.

We need to focus on the fact that travelling on our roads is probably the most dangerous thing that most of us will do on most days, and continue to work towards a vision of zero road deaths.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Parliament Buildings: Electric Car Charge Points

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any plans to install electric car charge points in the lower east car park, Parliament Buildings.
(AQW 29507/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): DFP has been in discussions with DRD in relation to the installation of electric car charge points at a number of Government car parks including the lower east car park, Parliament Buildings. The required work will be subject to a future funding bid by DRD.

Institute of Professional Legal Studies

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of students that have taken the Institute for Professional Legal Studies examination in each of the last five years, including the number seeking and obtaining barrister and solicitor admission.
(AQW 29519/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Department does not directly hold this information.

Land Registry: Property Sales

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline why the Land Registry's system of making property sales values available to the public, differs from the system operated in England and Wales.
(AQW 29574/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Each of the Land Registries in the UK and Ireland operate under different legislation and use different methodologies to hold and store information. Therefore the information available and how it is categorised and published, differs from Registry to Registry.

Civil Service Properties: Shower Facilities

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 27675/11-15, to detail the two buildings for which additional shower facilities are planned.
(AQW 29593/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The answer to AQW 27675/11-15 stated that provision of additional shower facilities are planned in a further two buildings, both of which are detailed below.

Building Name	Address
County Hall	Drumragh Avenue, Omagh
Forestview	Purdy's Lane, Newtownbreda

Rates Debt

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 28958/11-15, to detail the quantitative assumptions made concerning the write off of bad debt in the setting of the Regional Rate and the Penny Product calculations in 2013/14.
(AQW 29607/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: When undertaking the Penny Product calculations for 2013/14, LPS analysed debt for each district council as at September 2012 by category and age and based on this analysis applied a provision percentage. Results were then discussed with individual councils, some of whom amended their total write-off figure slightly to reflect circumstances specific to their council area. Based on this work, £27.1M was set aside for write-off in the 2013/2014 year.

A further £6.7M was provided in the estimate for writing-off debt relating to Rating of Empty Homes (REH) assessments leaving the total estimated write-off at £33.8M. As REH was only implemented in October 2011, there was no trend information available and a percentage was applied to the assessments in order to calculate an estimated write-off figure for 2013/2014.

Welfare Reform: Penalty Process

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the process regarding the penalty arising from the failure to implement welfare reform.
(AQW 29678/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Chief Secretary to the Treasury wrote in June 2013 advising that it was the intention of the UK Government to adjust the Northern Ireland Executive DEL allocation should welfare reforms not be agreed by January 2014.

HM Treasury has not yet advised how this penalty will be applied. However, in anticipation of a penalty being applied, the Executive has agreed, on my recommendation to make a provision of £15 million to cover the remaining three months of this financial year.

Travel Expenditure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total expenditure on departmental Ministerial travel in the periods (a) January to June 2013; and (b) July to December 2013, respectively.
(AQW 29680/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Information on the travel expenditure of Northern Ireland Ministers is not held centrally.

Trade: Proportions

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail, for the most recent consecutive five years, the proportion of trade (i) to Britain, (ii) to the south of Ireland; (iii) to countries for which the proportion of total trade is above three percent; and (iv) not included in the categories above.
(AQW 29695/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) Regional Trade Statistics (RTS) series provides information on the exports of goods from regions of the UK to other countries; however it does not measure trade between Northern Ireland (NI) and Great Britain (GB).

Table 1 presents the proportion of NI exports to Ireland and all other countries with a share of exports greater than three percent. Information is presented for 2008 to 2012 (the latest year for which complete figures for NI are currently available from the HMRC RTS series).

The proportion of trade to GB is available for the manufacturing sector only from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's (NISRA) NI Manufacturing Sales and Exports Survey (MSES).

Table 2 presents the sales by NI manufacturing companies to GB as a proportion of total sales (i.e. regardless of destination) and as a proportion of external sales (i.e. sales to destinations outside Northern Ireland), sourced from NISRA's MSES.

Table 1: Proportion of exports1 of goods2 for selected countries (with at least 3% share of exports) from Northern Ireland (%)

Country	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Ireland	41.1	41.2	39.0	37.3	36.1
Countries with 3% or greater share of exports					
United States of America	9.1	8.0	7.7	7.9	9.1
Canada	9.4	10.9	9.1	8.7	6.0
Germany	3.3	3.4	3.8	4.0	4.0
France	3.9	5.0	5.3	5.3	4.8
All other countries	33.2	31.5	35.1	36.7	40.0
Grand Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**

Note: Figures may not add due to rounding. Source: HMRC

Table 2: Proportion of sales by Northern Ireland manufacturing companies to GB as a percentage of total sales and external sales (%)

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Total Sales[3]	41.2	45.6	46.9	45.9	47.9
External Sales[4]	53.1	58.0	60.4	59.3	61.1

Source: Northern Ireland Manufacturing Sales and Exports Survey, NISRA

Footnotes:

1 Exports include all sales outside the United Kingdom

2 Including live animals

3 Total sales includes all sales regardless of destination

4 External sales include all sales outside Northern Ireland.

Legal Action: Expenditure

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total amount spent by his Department on the recent legal action taken against the Department for Agriculture and Rural Development regarding European funding.
(AQW 29704/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I refer the Member to AQO 5363/11-15 which was answered on 21 January 2014.

Family Law

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the consideration he has given to changing family law to enable penalties to be put in place by parents who do not grant each other access to their child following a break up.
(AQW 29709/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Under our current law, the court can impose penalties on those parents who breach a contact order, for example a custodial sentence or a fine. It has been suggested that additional enforcement measures should be available. However, it has also been suggested that more should be done to help parents to better understand their responsibilities toward their child and avoid disputes about contact. In the coming months I hope to elicit views on the issues, with a view to determining whether any legislative amendments are required.

Cancer Deaths

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people have died from (i) lung; (ii) throat; and (iii) mouth cancer in each (a) constituency; and (b) council area, in each of the last ten years.
(AQW 29712/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The attached tables detail the number of registered deaths due to (i) lung cancer; (ii) throat cancer; or (iii) mouth cancer (2003-12), by Local Government District and Assembly Constituency.

Table 1: Number of Deaths from Lung1 Cancer Registered in Northern Ireland by Local Government District, 2003-2012

Local Government District	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Ards	30	32	33	30	38	33	33	45	36	43	353
Belfast	208	225	187	211	224	231	204	220	224	209	2,143
Castlereagh	32	32	43	41	39	48	37	46	31	29	378
Down	27	23	23	26	37	27	31	26	36	26	282
Lisburn	45	38	41	43	50	43	46	53	48	70	477
North Down	46	38	38	38	30	43	37	31	37	30	368
Antrim	21	24	29	20	27	28	21	17	13	24	224
Ballymena	22	21	20	19	22	23	19	30	33	34	243
Ballymoney	8	10	6	14	9	11	12	13	9	16	108
Carrickfergus	20	21	25	23	20	21	22	24	25	22	223
Coleraine	23	30	39	22	25	27	23	27	26	34	276
Cookstown	5	13	8	16	13	15	14	17	13	13	127
Larne	14	19	21	10	11	17	24	15	13	12	156
Magherafelt	11	11	20	10	13	16	22	15	18	13	149
Moyle	10	12	7	6	10	6	8	6	9	5	79
Newtownabbey	40	44	35	34	43	54	45	52	55	53	455
Armagh	15	19	23	21	21	22	27	25	22	28	223
Banbridge	10	19	12	18	8	18	17	15	15	25	157
Craigavon	32	26	37	39	28	45	54	43	49	50	403
Dungannon	26	21	16	23	20	23	22	19	19	25	214
Newry & Mourne	42	48	38	42	39	43	42	42	40	44	420

Local Government District	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Fermanagh	30	37	27	32	24	25	29	24	32	23	283
Limavady	6	10	9	22	15	19	14	14	15	16	140
Derry	51	36	54	60	56	45	58	59	64	74	557
Omagh	18	9	21	11	20	27	26	13	16	25	186
Strabane	18	19	12	19	21	17	19	18	14	14	171
Northern Ireland	810	837	824	850	863	927	906	909	912	957	8,795

1 Lung Cancer deaths were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes C33-C34.

Table 2: Number of Deaths from Lung1 Cancer Registered in Northern Ireland by Constituency, 2003-2012

Assembly Constituency	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Belfast East	69	72	65	69	77	82	55	69	63	51	672
Belfast North	81	97	78	82	98	96	97	88	107	99	923
Belfast South	54	56	49	48	51	61	60	58	55	50	542
Belfast West	63	69	66	80	80	79	69	82	62	83	733
East Antrim	41	47	52	38	38	46	51	46	51	38	448
East Londonderry	33	44	51	45	43	48	40	46	41	50	441
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	50	54	39	49	43	40	44	38	47	39	443
Foyle	47	32	51	59	53	43	55	54	64	74	532
Lagan Valley	39	31	30	34	38	36	33	45	40	54	380
Mid Ulster	22	28	32	32	27	39	43	37	35	35	330
Newry & Armagh	38	50	51	46	46	46	49	50	45	53	474
North Antrim	38	43	32	38	38	39	38	48	50	55	419
North Down	52	47	42	42	36	49	41	40	41	37	427
South Antrim	37	35	43	32	38	46	37	42	33	48	391
South Down	38	34	31	37	42	42	48	40	46	45	403
Strangford	31	30	35	36	46	34	34	43	43	41	373
Upper Bann	38	40	44	53	28	57	67	52	59	65	503
West Tyrone	36	28	33	30	41	44	45	31	30	39	357
Unknown	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4
Northern Ireland	810	837	824	850	863	927	906	909	912	957	8,795

1 Lung Cancer deaths were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes C33-C34.

Table 3: Number of Deaths from Throat1 Cancer Registered in Northern Ireland by Local Government District, 2003-2012

Local Government District	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Ards	1	1	1	2	0	2	0	1	1	4	13

Local Government District	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Belfast	3	8	6	2	5	5	7	5	7	4	52
Castlereagh	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	3
Down	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	2	0	6
Lisburn	2	1	1	1	1	0	1	2	1	0	10
North Down	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	2	1	1	10
Antrim	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	1	5
Ballymena	0	1	0	0	0	2	3	1	0	0	7
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	3	6
Carrickfergus	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
Coleraine	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	0	3	0	7
Cookstown	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	4
Larne	1	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	4
Magherafelt	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	4
Moyle	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
Newtownabbey	1	0	1	1	0	0	2	2	2	1	10
Armagh	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	2	0	2	8
Banbridge	0	0	0	2	1	2	1	0	0	0	6
Craigavon	0	1	1	1	2	1	0	2	0	2	10
Dungannon	0	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	2	3	10
Newry & Mourne	2	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	3	2	14
Fermanagh	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	0	7
Limavady	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Derry	0	4	2	2	1	2	0	0	2	0	13
Omagh	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	3
Strabane	0	2	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	9
Northern Ireland	14	26	19	19	23	22	23	26	29	27	228

1 Throat Cancer deaths were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes C09-C13 & C14.0.

Table 4: Number of Deaths from Throat1 Cancer Registered in Northern Ireland by Constituency, 2003-2012

Assembly Constituency	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Belfast East	0	3	2	0	1	3	1	2	2	1	15
Belfast North	1	2	1	1	3	0	5	2	4	2	21
Belfast South	4	2	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	12
Belfast West	1	2	3	0	0	2	1	2	3	2	16
East Antrim	1	2	0	3	2	0	0	1	1	0	10
East Londonderry	0	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	3	0	8
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1	2	2	1	1	1	0	2	2	1	13

Assembly Constituency	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Foyle	0	4	2	2	1	2	0	0	2	0	13
Lagan Valley	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	8
Mid Ulster	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	4	12
Newry & Armagh	2	0	1	0	3	1		4	1	4	16
North Antrim	0	1	0	0	1	3	4	2	0	4	15
North Down	0	0	0	0	0	3	3	2	1	1	10
South Antrim	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	2	0	1	6
South Down	0	1	0	2	1	1	1	1	3	0	10
Strangford	1	1	1	3	0	2	0	1	2	4	15
Upper Bann	0	1	1	3	3	3	1	2	0	2	16
West Tyrone	0	2	2	1	3	0	2	0	1	1	12
Northern Ireland	14	26	19	19	23	22	23	26	29	27	228

1 Throat Cancer deaths were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes C09-C13 & C14.0.

Table 5: Number of Deaths from Mouth1 Cancer Registered in Northern Ireland by Local Government District, 2003-2012

Local Government District	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Ards	1	0	1	0	0	2	0	2	1	0	7
Belfast	4	3	2	3	5	4	3	4	6	1	35
Castlereagh	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	3
Down	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	7
Lisburn	0	0	3	4	1	0	1	0	0	1	10
North Down	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	1	3	0	7
Ballymena	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	1	1	7
Ballymoney	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Carrickfergus	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	5
Coleraine	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
Cookstown	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	5
Larne	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Magherafelt	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Moyle	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Newtownabbey	1	0	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	6
Armagh	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Banbridge	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2
Craigavon	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Dungannon	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Newry & Mourne	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	3
Fermanagh	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	2
Limavady	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	3

Local Government District	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Derry	0	0	0	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	8
Omagh	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	4
Strabane	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	4
Northern Ireland	7	7	10	20	19	11	12	18	18	12	134

1 Mouth Cancer deaths were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes C03-C06.

Table 6: Number of Deaths from Mouth1 Cancer Registered in Northern Ireland by Constituency, 2003-2012

Assembly Constituency	Registration Year										Total
	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
Belfast East	1	1	0	3	0	3	1	1	1	1	12
Belfast North	3	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	8
Belfast South	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	2	0	6
Belfast West	0	2	2	1	2	2	1	3	2	0	15
East Antrim	1	1	0	0	1	0	2	1	1	2	9
East Londonderry	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	5
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	3
Foyle	0	0	0	2	3	0	2	1	0	0	8
Lagan Valley	0	0	2	3	1	0	1	1	0	1	9
Mid Ulster	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	2	0	0	7
Newry & Armagh	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	1	0	1	5
North Antrim	0	2	0	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	11
North Down	0	0	1	0	3	1	0	1	3	0	9
South Antrim	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	4
South Down	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	1	1	5
Strangford	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	2	1	0	7
Upper Bann	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	3
West Tyrone	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	0	1	2	8
Northern Ireland	7	7	10	20	19	11	12	18	18	12	134

1 Mouth Cancer deaths were defined using the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes C03-C06.

Universal Credit

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in regard to the introduction of universal credit, to ensure that any changes being considered for rate relief will continue to provide rate rebates to low income households.
(AQW 29796/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The second consultation on the future of rate rebates closed recently, a report on the consultation is available on the Department's website.

I will be considering the responses shortly and providing direction on the way forward. I do however support the view that rate rebates should continue to protect households least able to pay domestic rates.

Government Contracts: Procurement Process

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how he intends to reform the procurement process to make it easier for small and medium sized businesses to bid for government contracts.
(AQO 5357/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: A key focus of the Procurement Board for Northern Ireland, which I chair, has been to make it easier for small and medium size businesses to bid for public sector contracts by simplifying procurement processes and making them less bureaucratic. Much of this work has been taken forward in consultation with the construction industry and business sector representatives.

Actions taken include:

- advertising all government contracts over £30,000 on a single portal;
- breaking larger contracts into lots to bring them within the scope of smaller businesses;
- simplifying procurement processes resulting in reduced bidding costs;
- requiring contracts which are over the value of the EU threshold to have a procurement strategy which includes engagement with the supply base;
- reducing liability and insurance requirements by making them proportionate to the risks associated with the contracts; and
- encouraging the advertisement of subcontracting opportunities.

The levels of small business and local business participation in the delivery of public contracts in Northern Ireland compares very well with the other devolved UK Administrations and is well above the levels achieved in England. For example:

- 80% of all contracts awarded by departments, agencies and non departmental public bodies in 2011/2012 were awarded to SMEs. 75% of these contracts went to businesses with fewer than 50 employees. In the construction sector 93% of contracts were awarded to SMEs.
- 79% of all contracts awarded in 2011/2012 went to companies based in Northern Ireland. Within the construction sector some 96% of contracts went to local businesses.

The work to improve procurement processes continues. A key priority is to ensure that Northern Ireland takes maximum advantage of the additional freedoms provided by the new EU procurement Directives to be adopted in the near future.

We continue to work closely with business organisations and a procurement conference to be held later this month will highlight improvements to the procurement process resulting from work carried out in conjunction with CBI.

Economy

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the economic prospects presented by the Chancellor in his Autumn Statement.
(AQO 5358/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: After a long period of slow economic growth it is encouraging to hear the Chancellor of the Exchequer reporting that the UK economy gathered momentum during 2013. I am also encouraged by the revised OBR projections suggesting that overall UK growth will increase from 1.4% in 2013 to 2.4% in 2014, reaching 2.7% by 2017-18.

However, despite the promising growth within the UK economy as a whole, the outlook for 2015-16 and beyond will continue to be challenging for public sector finances as evidenced by the continuing cut to Whitehall departments and the Chancellor's recent comments about further cuts in future years. As a result the Executive will undoubtedly face tough decisions going forward.

Budget Review Group

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the work of the ministerial Budget Review Group.
(AQO 5359/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Ministerial Budget Review Group last met on the 15th January. On the agenda were a range of strategic issues, including streamlining the procurement process to speed up the delivery of capital projects.

We also discussed key budget issues such as Revenue Financed Investment, transfer of social housing stock and local government reform.

Office for Budget Responsibility: Projections

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the latest Office for Budget Responsibility Expediture Projections for the determination of the NI block grant in future years.
(AQO 5360/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Office of Budget Responsibility's UK public expenditure projections were set out in their latest Economic and Fiscal Outlook report, which was published alongside the Chancellor's Autumn Statement back in December. This report

showed that overall UK Resource DEL is expected to decline until at least 2018-19, with overall UK Capital DEL expected to increase marginally.

It is important to note that the Office for Budget Responsibility projections are at a UK level and that Northern Ireland's funding will be determined through the Barnett Formula. It therefore matters for us how the UK Government prioritise its budget in future Spending Reviews.

However given the latest UK public expenditure projections, it is prudent to assume that our Resource DEL will continue to be heavily constrained, with perhaps slight increases in our Capital DEL.

Rates: Amateur Sports Clubs

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of abolishing rates for amateur sports clubs.
(AQO 5362/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: In 2011 the Assembly passed a motion which asked that DFP examine the rate relief afforded to sports clubs.

Following that debate it was agreed that DCAL would initiate the work, as the policy competent department. That Department have advised that they are currently considering the issue, having engaged with key stakeholders in the sports and recreation sector via the Northern Ireland Sports Forum. I am also aware that Daithi McKay has recently raised the issue of seeking enhanced relief for Community Amateur Sports Clubs (CASCs) by proposing a private members' bill that would bring relief up to 100% from the current level of 80%. I understand he is consulting with the sector.

I would like to wait for some findings before I give my view on the matter. What I would say, however, is that this is not a straightforward issue of Northern Ireland 'playing catch up' with the rest of the UK, as many have suggested, because in GB they also apply 80% mandatory rate relief to amateur sports club facilities. Local authorities there can choose to top up the relief to 100% but only do so in limited circumstances where additional criteria are met. There are also issues with clubs that have substantial social facilities because this raises the question of unfair competition with private enterprise, as businesses are required to pay full rates on their restaurants and licensed premises. This is not to say that change should not occur but we need to consider the evidence and await a proper assessment of the issues.

Legal Action: Expenditure

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the cost of the recent legal action taken against the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.
(AQO 5363/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The final bills in respect of the case for DFP have not yet been received but it is estimated that the case will cost DFP less than £20,000 which is less than 0.02% of the amount of the proposed transfer from Pillar I to Pillar II.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Pensioners Parliament

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his response to motions HS12, HS13, HS14, HS15, HS16, HS17, HS18 and HS19 recently passed by the Northern Ireland Pensioner's Parliament.
(AQW 29430/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): As we move forward with home as the hub, I expect the statutory, independent and voluntary sectors to work together to ensure we have the necessary flexible and responsive domiciliary care services and relevant training will be an important part of that. I have paid tribute many times to the enormous contribution that carers in our community make towards helping family members and friends to remain in their own homes, and live more independent and fulfilling lives. It is vitally important that carers are able to avail of their statutory right to assessment, to discuss their own needs as a carer, and be considered for services in their own right.

More widely I also recognise the issues of dignity and engagement raised in the motions: I have shared the Dignity Code with the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and have asked that it be publicised throughout the HSC. On 07 May, in light of concerns about Trust engagement, I stopped Trust consultations on the potential closure of statutory residential homes. I instigated a new regional process, led by the HSC Board which is designed to facilitate widespread engagement and includes two periods of public consultation, the first of which is currently underway.

In the TYC Strategic Implementation Plan, the Health and Social Care Board indicated that it would review the list of TYC projects in order to identify which of those will be subject to equality screening. The results of screening exercises will subsequently identify those requiring a full Equality Impact Assessment.

The intention is that screening and impact assessments will be conducted once each specific project reaches the appropriate stage, in line with the HSCB's equality scheme.

The scale of financial challenge facing my Department over the coming years is significant and, in that context, the Health and Social Care Trusts are currently considering all options, including efficiencies and savings opportunities, to maximise the amount of funding available to meet identified needs.

Whilst this is likely to mean difficult decisions must be taken, I am committed to ensuring that the needs of patients and clients are placed at the centre of this process.

Prescriptions

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what guidelines are provided to GP practices in relation to the time taken to transfer prescriptions from surgery to pharmacy.
(AQW 29522/11-15)

Mr Poots: GPs are not responsible for the transfer of prescriptions from surgery to pharmacy.

Community pharmacies generally offer patients a collection and delivery service for prescriptions. This service is not commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board. Guidance has however been provided by the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland. Under this guidance pharmacies should have an agreement with the GP practice about the procedures when a prescription collection service is offered to patients which should ensure that prescriptions are available in a reasonable and timely manner for dispensing, patient data is protected and consent recorded.

When providing a collection and delivery service the pharmacist must obtain consent to collect/receive patients' prescriptions and explain fully to patients, or their carers, what the service involves, including the time period required to collect/receive and dispense their prescription.

Bamford Review: Update

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the actions contained in the Bamford Review.
(AQW 29532/11-15)

Mr Poots: Progress against the Bamford Action Plan 2012-15 is monitored on a six-monthly basis by the Bamford Inter Departmental Senior Officials Group, and by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability.

When I launched the Bamford Action Plan 2012-15 in March last year, I committed to publishing regular monitoring information to highlight progress. The first monitoring report has been drafted and was approved by the Inter-Ministerial Group on Mental Health and Learning Disability in November 2013. An easy read version of this report is currently being prepared, and I hope to publish both versions within the next few weeks.

In general terms, there has been good progress made on the Bamford Action Plan 2012-15, with 83% of the 76 actions on target for completion, and the remaining 17% are progressing, with some delay against the target date. The monitoring report, when published, will provide a detailed update against each of the 76 actions.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Attendance

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people attended Accident and Emergency departments (i) between 30 and 39 times; (ii) between 40 and 49 times; and (iii) more than 50 times a year, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29569/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not currently available at a regional level.

My Department is in the process of developing a regional dataset for attendances at emergency care departments, and it is intended that this information will be available from 2014/15 onwards.

Funding

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the funding sources available to Health Service institutions for investment in new and innovative technologies; and who has responsibility for administering and dispersing these grants.
(AQW 29599/11-15)

Mr Poots: Funding for new and innovative technologies is provided through the Departmental capital DEL programme which is allocated to Trusts on an annual basis and set as part of the Executive's overall budget. In the current year, EU funding became available through the European Regional Development Fund and just over £21.5m was allocated to research and development and other new and innovative projects across all Trust areas. This programme was administered by the Department.

On occasions Trusts receive funding directly for research and development activities for the facilitation, support and governance arrangements for Clinical Trials of new pharmaceutical agents and medical devices from Pharmaceutical and Medical Technology Companies. Responsibility for administering these funds lies with the organising body.

Dental Appointments in Hospitals

Mr Eastwood asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the waiting times for dentistry appointments in each hospital.
(AQW 29624/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information is not available in the format requested. The Department collects the current waiting time for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment and the current waiting time for inpatient treatment, by specialty. For the purpose of this question, waiting times for dentistry appointments are taken to include the following specialties: Oral Surgery, Restorative Dentistry, Paediatric Dentistry, Orthodontics, Dental/Oral Medicine Specialties and Special Care Dentistry. Hospitals may provide dentistry services in one or more of these specialties. The figures detailed in the tables overleaf are presented for the total waiting times of these specialties combined.

Number of patients waiting for a first consultant-led outpatient appointment in a dentistry specialty, at 6th January 2014

Hospital/HSC Trust	Patients Waiting for a first Consultant-led Outpatient Appointment, by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0-6	>6-9	>9-12	>12-15	>15-18	>18	
RBHSC	71	24	49	27	20	39	230
School of Dentistry	786	435	436	160	98	6	1,921
Belfast HSCT	**857**	**459**	**485**	**187**	**118**	**45**	**2,151**
Northern HSCT[1]	**234**	**121**	**122**	**47**	**4**	**0**	**528**
Ulster	312	207	60	23	5	8	615
South Eastern HSCT	**312**	**207**	**60**	**23**	**5**	**8**	**615**
Craigavon Area	107	64	76	55	11	23	336
Daisy Hill	71	49	58	22	2	1	203
Southern HSCT[2]	**178**	**113**	**134**	**77**	**13**	**24**	**539**
Altnagelvin	315	145	135	102	99	204	1,000
South West Acute	64	41	8	6	0	12	131
Western HSCT	**379**	**186**	**143**	**108**	**99**	**216**	**1,131**

Source: HSC Trusts

Number of patients waiting for inpatient admission with a consultant in a dentistry specialty, at 6th January 2014

Hospital/ HSC Trust	Patients Waiting for Inpatient Admission, by Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0 - 6	>6 - 13	>13 - 21	>21 - 26	>26 - 30	>30	
RBHSC	45	27	14	7	2	4	99
School of Dentistry	49	81	12	5	0	0	147
Belfast HSCT	**94**	**108**	**26**	**12**	**2**	**4**	**246**
Northern HSCT[1]	**0**	**0**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**0**	**3**
Ulster	68	27	27	0	0	0	122
South Eastern HSCT	**68**	**27**	**27**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**122**
Southern HSCT	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Altnagelvin	192	140	68	8	4	8	420
South West Acute	17	0	0	0	0	0	17
Western HSCT	**209**	**140**	**68**	**8**	**4**	**8**	**437**

Source: HSC Trusts

1 Dental services in the Northern HSC Trust are provided by visiting consultants from the South Eastern and Western HSC Trusts. However, Northern Trust has responsibility for these patients waiting times. The Northern HSC Trust have

stated that they are unable to provide waiting times for each hospital as joint waiting lists are used, and patients could be treated at either Antrim, Braid Valley, Causeway or Mid Ulster Hospitals.

2 A first consultant-led outpatient appointment within the Oral Surgery specialty in Craigavon Area Hospital is provided by a visiting consultant from the South Eastern HSC Trust.

Horse Meat Scandal: Prosecutions

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many prosecutions have resulted from the horsemeat scandal.
(AQW 29630/11-15)

Mr Poots: To date, no one has been charged by the police, however the investigations are still ongoing. The Government recognised very early in the incident that there was likely to be complex international criminal activity involved, which is why the UK Police, SOCA and Europol were contacted at an early stage in the incident and the FSA and the police have been working jointly across the UK since February 2013.

Blood Donation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there is a probation on blood donation in respect of those recently in receipt of dental treatment; and whether a routine visit to the dentist in the previous 24 hours is sufficient to activate the prohibition.
(AQW 29634/11-15)

Mr Poots: The requirement of the Blood Safety and Quality Regulations (2005), as stated in the Guidelines for the Blood Transfusion Services in the UK, regarding dental treatment is that people must not donate blood if:

a) it is less than seven days since root canal treatment, dental capping (crown or veneer), dental implants or having a tooth removed;

b) it is less than 24 hours since a filling, scale and polish or other superficial treatments;

c) all wounds are not healed;

d) there is any infection or has been on antibiotics within the last seven days, or

e) allogeneic human tissue (bone) has been used.

Dental extractions and other treatments can result in bacteria getting into the blood stream. The waiting times after treatment are to allow healing and for any bacteria that have entered the blood stream to be cleared.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Critical Care Building

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total planned expenditure for the construction of the critical care building at the Royal Victoria Hospital; and for a breakdown of (i) building cost; and (ii) equipment cost.
(AQW 29643/11-15)

Mr Poots: In line with the approved capital costs for the Critical Care Building at the Royal Victoria Hospital, the total planned expenditure for the construction, including the costs for adapting the top 3 floors for Maternity facility, is detailed in the table below:

Total Planned Expenditure - Critical Care Building, R.V.H.

Description	Critical Care (Phase 2B)	Maternity Variation	Totals Combined
Building	£137,500,228	£7,702,349	£145,202,577
Equipment	£6,000,000	£480,000	£6,480,000
Totals	**£143,500,228**	**£8,182,349**	**£151,682,577**

Hospital Discharges: Care Packages

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 28910/11-15 and AQW 28911/11-15, how many patients within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area were unable to be discharged from hospital due to the required care package not being available for delivery by a private provider, in the last twelve months.
(AQW 29658/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of patients who were unable to be discharged from hospital due to the required care package not being available for delivery by a private care provider is not collected by the Department.

My Department currently has a key performance target (detailed below) to ensure that patients care needs are identified and assessed as swiftly as possible, and that they have prompt access to appropriate care to meet those needs in the most appropriate setting, within a suitable timescale.

"From April 2013, ensure that 90% of complex discharges from an acute hospital take place within 48 hours of the patient being assessed as medically fit for discharge, with no complex discharge taking longer than 7 days, and all non-complex discharges from an acute hospital taking place within 6 hours".

Information on performance against this target for the Northern HSC Trust is detailed in the table below for each month in 2013.

Northern HSC Trust	Jan 2013	Feb 2013	Mar 2013	Apr 2013	May 2013	Jun 2013	July 2013	Aug 2013	Sep 2013	Oct 2013	Nov 2013	Dec 2013
Complex <48 Hours	88.6%	91.0%	87.6%	89.3%	89.8%	93.5%	90.1%	92.9%	93.5%	91.7%	91.5%	90.3%
Complex > 7 Days	8	3	7	3	8	5	10	7	2	9	8	5
Non-complex 6 Hours	94.6%	96.2%	96.5%	95.7%	96.1%	96.2%	96.4%	95.5%	96.4%	95.6%	95.6%	95.2%

During December 2013, 90.3% of complex discharges within the Northern HSC Trust took place within 48 hours of the decision to discharge, with 5 complex discharges took longer than 7 days and 95.2% of non-complex discharges taking place within 6 hours of the decision to discharge.

Ambulance Service: Turnaround Times

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the turnaround time for ambulances in (i) December 2012; and (ii) December 2013, broken down by hospital.
(AQW 29670/11-15)

Mr Poots: It should be noted that the NIAS do not capture information on the date/time of admission of patients to emergency care departments. As a consequence, information on turnaround times detailed in the response refers to the time between the ambulance arriving at the emergency care department and it 'clearing' the location. The crew will remain with the patient until they have been handed over to the relevant clinical personnel within the HSC Hospital environment. The ambulance turnaround time will include patient handover and other aspects such as the time to clean and replenish the ambulance for the next call.

Ambulance turnaround times for each Acute hospital in December 2012 and December 2013 are detailed in the tables overleaf. The information provided relates to all ambulance journeys, including urgent and routine patient journeys in addition to those resulting from emergency calls.

Ambulance Turnaround Times at Acute Hospitals in December 2012

Hospital	< 15 min	15 - 30 min	30 - 45 min	45 - 60 min	1 - 2 Hrs	2 - 3 Hrs	More than 3 Hrs	Total
Royal Victoria	171	695	1038	488	206	2	0	**2,600**
Ulster	97	619	826	354	162	0	0	**2,058**
Antrim Area	205	803	618	188	69	2	0	**1,885**
Craigavon Area	226	796	436	170	103	6	2	**1,739**
Altnagelvin	384	649	227	47	28	2	0	**1,337**
Mater	103	382	300	48	16	0	0	**849**
Causeway	215	415	132	27	8	0	0	**797**
Daisyhill	156	316	153	65	49	2	3	**744**
South West Acute	164	377	103	28	16	0	0	**688**
Belfast City	69	295	185	31	4	0	0	**584**
RBHSC	54	125	48	4	4	1	1	**237**
Total	**1,844**	**5,472**	**4,066**	**1,450**	**665**	**15**	**6**	**13,518**

Source: NIAS

Ambulance Turnaround Times at Acute Hospitals in December 2013

Hospital	< 15 min	15 - 30 min	30 - 45 min	45 - 60 min	1 - 2 Hrs	2 - 3 Hrs	More than 3 Hrs	Total
Royal Victoria	173	763	1143	560	187	6	1	**2,833**
Ulster	119	694	814	278	63	0	1	**1,969**
Antrim Area	253	851	427	141	145	20	6	**1,843**
Craigavon Area	324	1046	394	69	9	0	0	**1,842**
Altnagelvin	296	696	269	75	36	0	0	**1,372**
Mater	89	376	305	93	22	0	0	**885**
Causeway	134	367	156	44	38	2	0	**741**
Daisyhill	157	441	156	34	19	0	0	**807**
South West Acute	194	431	100	18	4	0	0	**747**
Belfast City	75	221	144	38	5	0	0	**483**
RBHSC	60	117	37	3	3	0	0	**220**
Total	**1,874**	**6,003**	**3,945**	**1,353**	**531**	**28**	**8**	**13,742**

Source: NIAS

Ambulance Service: Turnaround Times

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the target turnaround time for an ambulance when bringing a patient to hospital; and how many times this was exceeded in December (i) 2012; and (ii) 2013. **(AQW 29671/11-15)**

Mr Poots: At present, there is no target turnaround time for ambulances at Northern Ireland hospital emergency departments (EDs). However, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) monitors the time taken for patients to be handed over to ED medical staff and for ambulances to be made ready for their next journey for a range of categories ie less than 15 minutes, 15–30 minutes, 31–60 minutes, 61–120 minutes and more than 120 minutes.

The table below shows performance in these categories at December 2012 and December 2013.

Category Minutes	Less than 15	15 - 30	31 - 60	61 - 120	More than 120	Total
December 2012	1,844	5,472	5,516	665	21	13,518
December 2013	1,874	6,003	5,298	531	36	13,742

Cancer Treatments

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to introduce Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy, Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy and Proton Beam Therapy for the treatment of cancer patients. **(AQW 29676/11-15)**

Mr Poots: Intensity modulated radiotherapy (IMRT) is provided to all suitable prostate cancer and an increasing number of head and neck cancer patients at the Northern Ireland Cancer Centre. Further capability will be added when new (planned) equipment is commissioned later this year.

Stereotactic ablative body radiotherapy (SABR) is a relatively new and highly specialist form of radiotherapy presently not routinely commissioned in Northern Ireland. However a pilot service is currently provided to Northern Ireland patients alongside existing arrangements to send patients to Leeds, Sheffield and London. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have plans to expand the pilot service.

Proton beam therapy is also a highly specialist service; it is currently unavailable UK wide. However, current plans are that this treatment will be provided at two specialist sites in England (London and Manchester) by 2018. Currently Northern Ireland patients are referred to specialist centres either in the United States, Germany or Switzerland and this arrangement is expected to continue for the foreseeable future; the arrangement will be reviewed in 2018 should UK provision become available.

The Health and Social Care Board's extra contractual referral (ECR) process provides a mechanism to consider requests for treatment that fall outside the range of services normally commissioned in Northern Ireland. Each request sent to the Board must be supported by the relevant Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust manager and clinical director.

The common position across HSC in the UK is that referrals to other countries should be controlled by prior authorisation, exercised by local health authorities. Because of the existing reciprocal arrangements with EU countries, where a referral outside the UK is clinically necessary, that referral would normally be made to a hospital in the EU before referrals would be initiated to non-EU countries.

Causeway Hospital: Accident and Emergency Services

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the pressures the Royal Hospital's Accident and Emergency department faced recently, whether he will take steps to ensure an adequate provision for A & E services is retained at the Causeway Hospital.
(AQW 29687/11-15)

Mr Poots: The delivery of emergency department services at Causeway Hospital is a matter for the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. The Trust has advised that the emergency department in the Causeway Hospital is an essential component of the unscheduled care response in the Northern Trust and maintaining emergency services in Causeway is a Trust priority. There have been improvements in the systems and flow design within the Causeway Hospital which have resulted in significant improvements in performance. The Trust is continuing to develop and stabilise the medical workforce in the emergency department to ensure the sustainability of this service.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Ambulance Diversions

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the ambulance divert which occurred on the 6 January 2014, how many ambulances were diverted from Craigavon Area Hospital; and to which hospital were they diverted.
(AQW 29694/11-15)

Mr Poots: The ambulance divert which occurred at Craigavon Area Hospital on the 6th January 2014, was in place between 5.40pm on 6th January 2014 and 8.14am on 7th January 2014. During this period, 12 ambulances were diverted from Craigavon Area Hospital to other Hospitals (table below).

Number of Ambulances Diverted from Craigavon Area Hospital to other Hospitals (6/7 January 2014)

Hospital Diverted to	Number
Daisyhill	10
Royal Victoria	1
South West Acute	1
Total	**12**

Source: Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS).

It is important to note that when a full 999 ambulance divert is in operation, the Command and Control records do not indicate that the ambulance would have gone to Craigavon Area Hospital, and then diverted to Daisyhill Hospital. However, they record that a 999 call was responded to where the patient had an assumed address within the Craigavon Area Hospital catchment area, but was taken to Daisyhill Hospital.

Craigavon Area Hospital: Ambulance Diversions

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many working hours were lost as a result of ambulances being diverted from Craigavon Area Hospital on 6 January 2014.
(AQW 29696/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) routinely monitors activity at Emergency Departments as part of the planning process to ensure patients are seen as quickly as possible. In the period 6-7 January 2014, NIAS diverted A&E ambulances to other hospitals in response to increased demand at Craigavon Area Hospital Emergency Department which was busier than usual. During this time, NIAS personnel were at all times appropriately employed. As there was no reduction in ambulance provision over the period, no working hours were lost.

Craigavon Area Hospital: CT Scanners

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many times the CT scanner in Craigavon Area Hospital has broken down in the last six months; and how many patients had to be transferred to an alternative hospital for their CT scan.
(AQW 29697/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust advise that the CT scanner has broken down twice in the last six months. Five patients were transferred to Daisy Hill Hospital and one patient to the Royal Victoria Hospital.

Cancer

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people in each constituency are currently being treated for (i) lung; (ii) throat; and (iii) mouth cancer.
(AQW 29713/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of people currently being treated for cancer is unavailable. However, information is available on the number of patients diagnosed with (i) lung, (ii) throat and (iii) mouth cancer who subsequently received treatment within one year of diagnosis:

(i) The number and percentage of patients diagnosed with lung cancer (ICD-10* C33-C34) in N. Ireland in the years 2006 to 2010 who received treatment (surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy) within one year, by Parliamentary Constituency

	Number of Patients		
Parliamentary constituency	**Total diagnosed**	**Number who received treatment (% of total)**	
Belfast East	404	206	(51.0%)
Belfast North	524	296	(56.5%)
Belfast South	315	196	(62.2%)
Belfast West	434	256	(59.0%)
East Antrim	253	151	(59.7%)
East Londonderry	235	147	(62.6%)
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	225	135	(60.0%)
Foyle	314	183	(58.3%)
Lagan Valley	235	123	(52.3%)
Mid Ulster	211	123	(58.3%)
Newry & Armagh	275	159	(57.8%)
North Antrim	238	128	(53.8%)
North Down	235	119	(50.6%)
South Antrim	245	150	(61.2%)
South Down	247	142	(57.5%)
Strangford	235	133	(56.6%)
Upper Bann	290	177	(61.0%)
West Tyrone	210	125	(59.5%)
Unknown	47	11	(23.4%)
Northern Ireland Total	**5,172**	**2,960**	**(57.2%)**

Source: Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR)

* For a listing and explanation of ICD10 topology or site codes see: International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth Revision, World Health Organisation, Geneva.
Or view online at http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en#/II

(ii) The number and percentage of patients diagnosed with mouth cancer (ICD-10* C03-C06) in N. Ireland in the years 2006 to 2010 who received treatment (surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy) within one year, by Parliamentary Constituency

	Number of Patients		
Parliamentary constituency	**Total diagnosed**	**Number who received treatment (% of total)**	
Belfast East	15	13	(86.7%)
Belfast North	18	16	(88.9%)
Belfast South	9	7	(77.8%)

Parliamentary constituency	Number of Patients		
	Total diagnosed	Number who received treatment (% of total)	
Belfast West	15	11	(73.3%)
East Antrim	12	11	(91.7%)
East Londonderry	10	7	(70.0%)
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	10	6	(60.0%)
Foyle	17	17	(100.0%)
Lagan Valley	6	4	(66.7%)
Mid Ulster	12	10	(83.3%)
Newry & Armagh	16	12	(75.0%)
North Antrim	15	12	(80.0%)
North Down	17	15	(88.2%)
South Antrim	11	8	(72.7%)
South Down	10	8	(80.0%)
Strangford	12	10	(83.3%)
Upper Bann	13	11	(84.6%)
West Tyrone	18	14	(77.8%)
Unknown	2	1	(50.0%)
Northern Ireland Total	**238**	**193**	**(81.1%)**

Source: Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR)

* For a listing and explanation of ICD10 topology or site codes see: International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth Revision, World Health Organisation, Geneva.
Or view online at http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en#/II

(iii) The number and percentage of patients diagnosed with throat cancer (ICD-10* C09-C13, C14.0) in N. Ireland in the years 2006 to 2010 who received treatment (surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy) within one year, by Parliamentary Constituency

Parliamentary constituency	Number of Patients		
	Total diagnosed	Number who received treatment (% of total)	
Belfast East	20	16	(80.0%)
Belfast North	26	21	(80.8%)
Belfast South	18	17	(94.4%)
Belfast West	24	17	(70.8%)
East Antrim	12	11	(91.7%)
East Londonderry	9	7	(77.8%)
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	10	6	(60.0%)
Foyle	12	8	(66.7%)
Lagan Valley	13	10	(76.9%)
Mid Ulster	10	10	(100.0%)
Newry & Armagh	21	16	(76.2%)
North Antrim	17	14	(82.4%)
North Down	20	16	(80.0%)
South Antrim	8	7	(87.5%)

Parliamentary constituency	Number of Patients		
	Total diagnosed	Number who received treatment (% of total)	
South Down	9	4	(44.4%)
Strangford	14	11	(78.6%)
Upper Bann	18	15	(83.3%)
West Tyrone	8	7	(87.5%)
Unknown	1	0	(0.0%)
Northern Ireland Total	**270**	**213**	**(78.9%)**

Source: Northern Ireland Cancer Registry (NICR)

* For a listing and explanation of ICD10 topology or site codes see: International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth Revision, World Health Organisation, Geneva.
Or view online at http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2010/en#/II

Emergency Doctors: Training

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many meetings he has had with the Minister for Employment and Learning on the training and skilling of emergency doctors; and whether he has any plans to raise the shortage of emergency doctors with Ministerial colleagues at the Executive, in Dublin and London, and in Europe.
(AQW 29716/11-15)

Mr Poots: The training of junior doctors including doctors in emergency medicine is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA). My Department is very aware of the shortage of emergency doctors and we continue to work closely with NIMDTA and with Trusts on this issue. However, there is currently a national shortage of doctors in emergency medicine making it very difficult for Trusts to fill these vacancies.

I have previously raised the junior doctor vacancy issue with the Home Office, particularly in relation to the impact of the immigration rules on the recruitment of junior doctors from outside the EEA. Although there are no plans for Minister Farry and I to meet to discuss this specific issue my officials hold regular meetings with the Department for Employment and Learning on a range of strategic issues of mutual concern, including future planning of the medical workforce.

Western Health and Social Care Trust: Medical Consultant Vacancies

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many medical consultant vacancies exist in each department of the Western Health and Social Care Trust; and what measures are being taken to fill the vacancies.
(AQW 29735/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Western Trust has informed my Department that there are currently 30.5 medical consultant vacancies across the Trust. These vacancies have been broken down by Directorate in the table below:

Directorate	Consultant Vacancies
Acute	16
Primary Care and Older People Services	9
Womens & Childrens	4.5
Adult Mental Health & Learning Disability	1

The Western Trust is actively taking steps to fill these vacancies. Some posts have been advertised on several occasions. The Trust has recruited locum consultants into posts that have proved difficult fill. It has advised that 26.4 posts (out of the 30.5 vacancies) are currently filled by locum consultants.

Western Health and Social Care Trust: Savings Plans

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether jobs in the Western Health and Social Care Trust are at risk in 2014/15 as a result of the Trust's savings plan for the current funding period.
(AQW 29738/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Western Trust, like other Trusts, is continuing to carry out detailed analysis of its financial position for 2013/14, taking account of emerging cost pressures and implementing, where possible, options to reduce expenditure which do not impact on front line services.

The scale of financial challenge facing my Department over the coming years is significant and in that context, all Health and Social Care Trusts are currently considering all options, including efficiencies and savings opportunities, to maximise the amount of funding available to meet identified needs.

I am committed to ensuring that the needs of service users and patients are placed at the centre of this process.

Special Educational Needs: Music Therapy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Review of the Allied Health Professionals' Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education has requested, or plans to consider, evidence from parents of children with the most complex needs on the inclusion of music therapy in special education.
(AQW 29769/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Review's focus is primarily on the services provided by Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, Dietetics, Orthoptics and Podiatry for children with Statements of Special Educational Needs (SEN). In addition, it has been agreed that there will be an opportunity for engagement with representatives from other Allied Health Professions (AHP), including those providing music therapy, who work with children with SEN Statements.

Furthermore, the Public Health Agency will seek views on the provision of AHP services, including music therapy, from the parents of children with Statements of Special Educational Needs.

Special Educational Needs: Allied Health Professions

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the need for additional allied health professional input and services to meet the needs of children with profound multiple learning difficulties and multiple complex needs is being included as part of the Review of the Allied Health Professionals' Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education.
(AQW 29770/11-15)

Mr Poots: The review will focus on Allied Health Professions (AHP) services for all children with statements of special educational needs, including those with profound multiple learning difficulties and multiple complex needs. In phases 1 and 2 the level of AHP provision will be scoped for these children and will culminate with the identification of issues and recommendations for action. In phase 3 an agreed regional model and implementation plan will be drafted, based on the findings of the scoping exercise and recommendations for further action.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional resources, including staff and finance, have been put in place in the Royal Victoria Hospital Emergency Department to deal with the impact of the early closures of Emergemncy Departments at the Lagan Valley and Downe Hospitals.
(AQW 29813/11-15)

Mr Poots: The following additional resources (contingency arrangements) have been put in place at the Royal Victoria Hospital:

- 6 additional inpatient beds;
- 2 additional emergency department nurses at weekends to cover 12-hour day time period both Saturday and Sunday;
- 2 additional emergency department senior doctors at weekends to cover 12-hour day time period both Saturday and Sunday;
- Consequential acute medicine, social work, radiology and laboratory activity.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has increased the cover provided to the Royal Victoria Hospital site by a Hospital Ambulance Liaison Officer to assist with expediting patient transfers via ambulance.

Fire and Rescue Service: Training

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the lifesaving potential of training greater numbers of Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service personnel in Large Animal Rescue techniques.
(AQW 29846/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) approach to providing emergency cover is based on a comprehensive analysis of risk. The assessment of training needs to ensure the availability of adequately trained personnel is an operational matter for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS). NIFRS places a strong focus on operational training to prepare staff for all of the challenges they face, including large animal rescue.

NIFRS currently have two dedicated Animal Rescue Teams based in Omagh and Newcastle. These teams provide full coverage across Northern Ireland with a specific focus on the rural communities. The Animal Rescue Teams have access to specialist equipment and use approved rescue techniques. In addition a number of officers are trained as Farm Animal

Handling Awareness Officers and all station based personnel receive annual training in animal rescue with each fire station having its own animal rescue instructors.

Air Ambulance Service

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an up to date assessment of the current air ambulance service provided to the Health Service.
(AQW 30006/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has in place an air ambulance contract with a private provider for the transfer of adult and paediatric patients to and from Northern Ireland. This is a planned service, initiated by individual Health and Social Care Trusts and is used primarily to transport seriously ill patients from a referring NI hospital to Belfast International Airport for onward transfer by dedicated aircraft to NHS services in Great Britain. It is also used to repatriate patients back to NI hospitals following treatment if they are deemed too unwell to travel by other means.

The framework scope and service specification for the contract sets out in detail the requirements the provider must meet in providing safe, responsive, value for money air transport and associated services to the population of Northern Ireland.

I have been assured by the HSCB that all aircraft involved in patient transfers are operated in full compliance with the current European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) regulations, which includes a certificate of airworthiness and that all maintenance is carried out in accordance with the Civil Aviation Authority requirements.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Funding

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the funding rule, applicable in England and Wales, that Accident and Emergency departments recieve only 30 per cent of the cost of treating patients admitted, over and above the number of patients treated in 2008-09, applies locally.
(AQW 30067/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is no equivalent funding mechanism in place in Northern Ireland.

There are many measures in place in Northern Ireland to reduce/divert Accident and Emergency activity. These include; GP out of hours services; Co-location of GP out of hours with emergency departments; Emergency department related pathways (e.g. DVT protocols); Extra GP clinics in winter; NIAS treat and leave initiatives; and Public campaigns such as “Choose well”.

Department of Justice

Harry Maguire

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to outline how Harry Maguire, a person convicted of the murder of Corporals Howes and Woods, recently sat on a promotion board within the Northern Ireland Prison Service.
(AQW 29520/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): No external representative sits on Prison Service promotion boards. A number of staff applied for a temporary secondment to a project involving the Prison Service working in partnership with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and two community-based restorative practice groups – Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland. This was not a promotion opportunity.

In line with normal practice for secondments these staff were invited for an informal chat with a panel which comprised a senior NIPS manager, a senior PBNI manager and the Director of one of the two community-based groups.

Third Sector Organisation: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by his Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29544/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since its formation in April 2010 the Department of Justice, including its Agencies but not its arm’s length bodies, has provided the following funding to third sector organisations who provide services to the public in each of the last three financial years:

	Value of funding £k		
Third sector organisation	**2010/11**	**2011/12**	**2012/13**
Barnardos	168	156	167
NI Prison Service Central Benevolent Fund	13	17	19
Challenge for Youth	40	-	-

	Value of funding £k		
Third sector organisation	**2010/11**	**2011/12**	**2012/13**
Colin Early Intervention Partnership	-	-	25
Community Restorative Justice Ireland	50	50	50
Domestic Violence Helpline	97	105	110
Extern	385	347	342
Include Youth	90	89	88
Migrant Help	27	124	45
Mindwise	298	313	246
NIACRO	984	1,322	1,511
NI Crimestoppers	20	20	20
Northern Ireland Alternatives	50	50	50
NSPCC	384	435	426
Prison Fellowship NI Ltd	7	9	9
Prison Service Trust	298	302	294
Quaker Service	241	191	341
Respect	6	6	6
SLS Legal Publications	25	25	13
Victim Support Northern Ireland	2,213	2,180	2,147

In addition to the above, the Youth Justice Agency (YJA), an executive agency of the Department of Justice, runs a Small Grant Scheme for amounts up to £1,500 to support the work that local community and voluntary groups do with vulnerable and marginalised young people. The total amounts funded under this scheme are as follows:

	Value of funding £k		
	2010/11	**2011/12**	**2012/13**
YJA Small Grant Scheme	111	203	154

Court Cases: Mixed Committals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the number of mixed committals held in each of the last five years, to detail how many (i) legal firms and (ii) counsel each equates to per year, to date.
(AQW 29567/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below details the number of distinct solicitors' firms and counsel in mixed committal proceedings for the period 2009-2013.

Year	Number of mixed committals	Number of solicitors' firms	Number of counsel
2013P	30	29	22
2012	24	29	23
2011	42	35	28
2010	32	29	15
2009	52	40	22

Source: Integrated Court Operations System

P Data currently provisional and may be subject to change.

Court Cases: Mixed Committals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cases heard or listed for hearing as a Mixed Committal in each of the last five years, and of these (i) how many were/are not legally aided; and (ii) how many were/are legally aided, including the cost of each.
(AQW 29590/11-15)

Mr Ford: Information in the requested format is not readily available and could only be compiled at disproportionate cost

Legal Aid: Local Courts and Proceedings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether legal representatives defending in local courts and proceedings, particularly those funded by Legal Aid and in which high costs are accumulating, have a responsibility to inform clients of potential convictions if relevant evidence indicates guilt, or whether they can continue to put forward their client's denial in absence of the defence disproving or moving to disprove guilt, even though the outcome is inevitable and delay will contribute to increasing costs which could be avoided.
(AQW 29591/11-15)

Mr Ford: The responsibilities of legal representatives towards their clients are regulated by the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Bar Council.

Subject to the Assembly's wider legislative programme, I intend to introduce a Justice Bill in the first half of 2014. The Bill will propose placing a statutory duty on a defence representative to make clients who are guilty of an offence aware of the benefits of admitting their guilt at an early stage.

Legal Aid: Payments

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice to detail the highest ten amounts paid, and to whom, in Legal Aid payments for the year ending 31 March 2013, including the average annual amount paid to each person/firm.
(AQW 29602/11-15)

Mr Ford: Top ten legal aid payments and average payments in 2012/13.

Ranking	Description	Highest Payments	Average Gross Payment	Average Net Payment
1	Kevin Winters & Co Inc Krw Law Llp	2,439,301	508	357
2	Mcconnell, Kelly & Co	1,620,474	897	678
3	Madden & Finucane 11	1,465,712	845	610
4	Mckenna Sweeney Mckeown	1,414,116	731	551
5	Trevor Smyth & Co	1,216,970	675	520
6	Mr P Lyttle	1,070,029	4,350	3625
7	Donnelly & Wall	1,023,396	910	680
8	Higgins, Hollywood, Deazley	945,675	842	851*
9	Mccann & Mccann	857,726	631	475
10	John Reavey	780,561	2,455	1948

* The total payments for this firm include a recoupment of an interim payment in respect of disbursement.

Notes:

- The figures tabled are gross figures which are subject to tax liability.
- Payments are made retrospectively for work completed. They can reflect payments in respect of cases conducted over a number of years but which were paid in the same year.
- Average payments have been calculated by dividing the total payment made by the number of payments made.
- Net average payments reflect the professional fee paid to each individual/firm, exclusive of disbursements and VAT.

On 23 December 2013, the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission published details of the 100 solicitor practices and 100 barristers receiving the highest payments from legal aid in Northern Ireland during the financial year 2012/13. Supporting notes were published alongside the NILSC's Disclosure of payments. These can be found on the Commission's website at www.nilsc.org.uk.

Criminal Justice: Informed Warnings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the status and genesis of Informed Warnings in the criminal justice system; (ii) the distinctions with adult cautions; and (iii) the use of informed cautions to date.
(AQW 29604/11-15)

Mr Ford: An informed warning is a formal reprimand administered by the PSNI on the direction of the Public Prosecution Service. It is not a criminal conviction but is recorded on a person's criminal record for 12 months. Informed Warnings were an alternative to prosecution used by the police, the use of which transferred to the PPS when it was set up in 2005.

Adult cautions are also formal reprimands administered by the PSNI on the direction of the PPS. A caution is not a conviction but is recorded on a person's criminal record for five years if an adult, and for 30 months if a youth.

Both Informal Warnings and Adult Cautions require an admission of guilt and details of the disposal remain available to criminal courts after the periods stated.

The Public Prosecution Service has provided the data below on the number of cautions and informed warnings issued from 2007 to December 2014

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2013/ 2014 (to end Dec)
Cautions	6678	7367	7252	7078	5438	3495
Informed Warnings	2865	2158	2242	1669	958	519

Human Tissue Retention

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the actions taken and the current situation relating to the body parts controversy which arose in 2012.
(AQW 29610/11-15)

Mr Ford: The review of retained human tissue by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) published in June 2012 included a number of recommendations directed towards the PSNI, Office of the Police Ombudsman, Coroners Service for Northern Ireland, State Pathologist's Department and Department of Justice.

Public confidence in the procedures for management of human tissue is important and so I requested Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) to carry out a review of progress against the recommendations of the ACPO audit. HMIC published its report in July 2013 and the report is available on the DOJ website.

The HMIC report acknowledged the progress made by the agencies in updating their practices and procedures. However, it noted that further work was needed to ensure a consistent approach across all of the justice agencies. The relevant agencies are currently progressing those recommendations and I have committed to a further review of progress against the recommendations being carried out during the summer.

Cannabis Cultivation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to cannabis factories operated by Chinese nationals and the convictions and cases currently within the court system, whether any evidence of (i) human trafficking; (ii) forced labour; and/or (iii) illegal gangmaster practice has been discovered.
(AQW 29627/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice does not hold this information. The Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPSNI) have advised that information is not kept in a form which would enable it to be examined without a significant exercise. They have confirmed, however, that when taking decisions as to prosecution, prosecutors will apply the PPS Policy for Prosecuting Cases of Human Trafficking and if it is considered that a suspect has committed an offence as a direct result of their having been trafficked then this will be a strong public interest factor mitigating against prosecution.

I understand that the PPSNI has exercised prosecutorial discretion not to prosecute in a number of cases where the alleged perpetrator was believed to be a victim of human trafficking, including cases of cannabis cultivation.

The Department of Justice has commissioned research on all the cases of potential victims of human trafficking that have been referred into the National Referral Mechanism from Northern Ireland, in order to identify any issues that need to be addressed. We will be examining any evidence relating to the prosecution of victims which that research might reveal.

Finally, the cultivation of cannabis is an illegal activity, defined in legislation within The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, and therefore falls outside the remit of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority.

Court Cases: Mixed Committals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 29450/11-15, whether guidance has been issued to staff of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service from any other agency or Department in relation to the listing of mixed committals, and if so, to detail (i) the content; (ii) the reasons for such guidance; and (iii) when it was issued.
(AQW 29628/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) has not issued guidance to staff from any other agency or Department in relation to the listing of mixed committals.

Barry McCarney: Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total cost of Legal Aid for the defence of Barry McCarney in the Millie Martin murder trial, broken down by (i) solicitor; (ii) junior counsel; and (iii) senior counsel; and to clarify if this matter will be appealed.
(AQW 29629/11-15)

Mr Ford: The total cost of legal aid for the defence of Barry McCarney in the Millie Martin murder trial, broken down by (i) solicitor; (ii) junior counsel; and (iii) senior counsel is as follows:

Solicitor	£167,029.92
Junior Counsel	£29,748.12
Senior Counsel	£121,085.51
Total	**£317,863.55**

The matter has been appealed but the appeal has not yet been heard.

Magistrates' Court: Summary Charge

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to outline the circumstances in which, a summary charge, which is subject to a six month limitation, can be proceeded outside that timeframe; and whether the Form 1 mechanism is available in respect of a charge sheet process, or only in respect of an unserved summons.
(AQW 29632/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under Article 19 of the Magistrates' Courts (NI) Order 1981 the magistrates' court does not have jurisdiction to deal with a summary offence unless the complaint was made within 6 months from the time when the offence was committed or ceased to continue.

In broad terms, a complaint is deemed to have been made when a summons is signed by a lay magistrate or, in charge sheet cases, when the case is first listed in court. A complainant may choose to raise a formal complaint, known as a Form 1, before a lay magistrate to ensure that the statutory time limit is complied with.

The statutory time limit for summary offences applies whether proceedings are brought by summons, charge sheet or Form 1. If the Form 1 is used it is normally followed by a summons not by a charge.

Where there is a time limit for an offence, the prosecution must prove, if the issue arises, that the time limit was observed. The time limit does not however apply to an indictable offence or to a hybrid offence. Nor does it apply where a specific time limit is set down by any enactment.

The time limit applies to the making of the complaint and not to the serving of the summons. There is no jurisdictional time limit for the service of a summons on foot of a complaint.

Magistrates' Court: Summary Proceedings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many summary proceedings have failed to proceed in the last twelve months as a result of the summons not being served within the limitation period.
(AQW 29633/11-15)

Mr Ford: Under Article 19 of the Magistrates' Courts (NI) Order 1981 the magistrates' court does not have jurisdiction to deal with a summary offence unless the complaint was made within 6 months from the time when the offence was committed or ceased to continue.

In broad terms, a complaint is deemed to have been made when a summons is signed by a lay magistrate or, in charge sheet cases, when the case is first listed in court. A complainant may choose to raise a formal complaint, known as a Form 1, before a lay magistrate to ensure that the statutory time limit is complied with.

The statutory time limit for summary offences applies whether proceedings are brought by summons, charge sheet or Form 1. If the Form 1 is used it is normally followed by a summons not by a charge.

Where there is a time limit for an offence, the prosecution must prove, if the issue arises, that the time limit was observed. The time limit does not however apply to an indictable offence or to a hybrid offence. Nor does it apply where a specific time limit is set down by any enactment.

The time limit applies to the making of the complaint and not to the serving of the summons. There is no jurisdictional time limit for the service of a summons on foot of a complaint.

Maghaberry Prison: Security

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 29468/11-15, to detail when prison officers last lost control of a wing or section of a prison.
(AQW 29657/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prison Officers last lost control of an area of Maghaberry Prison on 21st June 2011. During that incident of mass indiscipline, prisoners set fires in Lagan House recreation room and yard. The incident lasted for approximately seven hours before staff regained control of the area.

Legal Aid: Savings

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the estimated savings following the introduction of the reforms to Legal Aid.
(AQW 29688/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice has developed a comprehensive programme of legal aid reforms aimed at improving access to justice, bringing legal aid expenditure within budget and improving governance.

Reforms to criminal legal aid, already introduced, when fully implemented will achieve estimated savings of £20million; other savings will be achieved from further planned reforms to both civil and criminal legal aid.

A further reform to Crown Court Fees has been subject to consultation. If fully implemented, it would deliver further saving of up to £5.6million. In addition, my Department has undertaken consultations on a number of proposals including reforms to publicly funded legal Representation in the Civil and Family Courts, changes to Financial Eligibility for Civil and Criminal Legal Aid and proposals to introduce standard fees in the Civil Courts. If fully implemented these reforms would save up to a further £18 million per year.

All of these projects will contribute to my strategic objective of bringing legal aid expenditure within budget.

Rural Crime: Successful Prosecutions

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to tackling rural crime, to detail the number of successful prosecutions and value of equipment recovered in 2013.
(AQW 29717/11-15)

Mr Ford: Datasets held by my Department do not contain information on the location and circumstances in which offences were committed. It is not, therefore, possible to identify convictions resulting from rural crime. Similarly, information on the value of equipment recovered through the successful prosecutions of such crimes is not held by my Department.

Victims: Personal Statements

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the timescale for the introduction of a statutory right for victims to be able to tell a court how a crime affected them.
(AQW 29736/11-15)

Mr Ford: I plan to legislate in the forthcoming Justice Bill to give victims of crime a statutory entitlement to make a written victim personal statement. Subject to the agreement of the Executive, and the Assembly's legislative timetable, I intend to introduce this legislation in the early part of this year.

A new formalised process for submitting victim personal statements was introduced in December 2013. These statements give victims, or their representatives, the opportunity to make the court aware of how a crime has affected them. Where a case goes to court and a person pleads or is found guilty, victim personal statements can be used before sentencing to make clear to the judge the harm caused by the crime.

Human Trafficking and Prostitution: Victims' Fund

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, following the conviction of Bronislav Rybensky for human trafficking and controlling prostitution and Lyle Lamont for controlling prostitution, whether the funds seized at the scene of the crimes haVE been placed into a victims fund, specifically for those who were trafficked and/or exploited in the case.
(AQW 29747/11-15)

Mr Ford: This matter remains under police investigation.

Criminal Justice: Non-Northern Ireland Nationals

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of Non-Northern Ireland nationals that have been convicted of (i) human trafficking; (ii) controlling prostitution or any similar related offence; (iii) rape or a similar related sexual offence; (iv) murder; and/or (v) manslaughter; and of these, how many have been recommended for deportation on release, or have since been deported.
(AQW 29749/11-15)

Mr Ford: Information relating to prosecutions and convictions in respect of human trafficking offences is collated and included in the annual Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Human Trafficking (IDMG) Report. There have been three human trafficking convictions in Northern Ireland in 2012 and 2013. None of the individuals convicted in each of these cases were UK nationals.

Convictions databases held by my Department do not contain information on whether or not an offender is a "Non-Northern Ireland" national. It is therefore not possible to provide the exact figures requested for each of the crimes specified in the question. Instead, numbers for all convictions in relation to the crimes specified have been provided.

The latest published convictions data relates to 2009. Information in relation to the latest three years available, 2007-2009, is included in the table below.

Convictions for specified offences, 2007-2009

	2007	2008	2009
Human trafficking	0	0	0
Controlling prostitution	0	3	3
Rape	15	16	22
Murder	18	12	24
Manslaughter	12	13	7

Notes:

1. Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.
2. The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offence specified.

Deportation is a matter which falls under the remit of the Home Office.

Magilligan Prison: Replacement

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current timescale of the (i) commencement; and (ii) completion of the replacement Magilligan Prison complex.
(AQW 29802/11-15)

Mr Ford: Following my updates to the Assembly on March 19th and October 21st 2013, NIPS Officials continue their work in developing the plans for all the projects outlined in the Estate Strategy including that of the rebuilding of Magilligan.

Following Department of Finance and Personnel approval of the Strategic Outline Business Case for Magilligan's redevelopment, NIPS Officials are in the process of developing the Outline Business Case (OBC). The future programme is dependent on the OBC being approved and capital funding being made available. Until the OBC is approved and capital funding made available, I am unable to provide any further details of the timetable.

Prisoners: Christmas Parole

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of prisoners released for Christmas parole in each of the last five years; and of these, how many prisoners failed to return to prison.
(AQW 29860/11-15)

Mr Ford: The number of prisoners released under the Christmas Home Leave Scheme in each of the last five years, and of these the number who failed to return to prison, is detailed in table A below:

Table A

Calender Year	No. of prisoners released	No. of prisoners who failed to return at the appropriate time or who breached bail conditions
2009	76	0

Calender Year	No. of prisoners released	No. of prisoners who failed to return at the appropriate time or who breached bail conditions
2010	57	1
2011	87	3
2012	72	3
2013	92	3

Prisoners who breached their leave conditions or failed to return to prison at the appropriate time were posted unlawfully at large (UAL). All were subsequently returned to prison.

Thomas Ward

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, following the judgement on 16 January 2014 and the subsequent dismissal of the appeal against conviction and sentence brought by Thomas Ward, whether he will publish the report of the Serious Case Review in respect of handling and monitoring following his release from custody for a similar attack, and his arrest and charge of the second attack.
(AQW 29921/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Court of Appeal has delivered its judgment and once the statutory time limit for any remaining avenues of appeal has passed the PPANI Strategic Management Board will be in a position to consider the publication of the conclusions of the report in this case.

Threats: Orange Halls and Personnel

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the threat to Orange Halls and personnel resulting from the deputy First Minister's claiming the UVF and Orange Order are one and the same in Belfast.
(AQW 29982/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is not for me as Minister of Justice to make any assessment of threat. At recent meetings neither the Chief Constable nor the Secretary of State raised any specific concerns regarding this issue.

Drug-related Offences: Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of prosecutions and convictions for drug related offences in the Upper Bann constituency, in the last twelve months.
(AQW 30010/11-15)

Mr Ford: Drugs offences may be prosecuted under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, the Medicines Act 1968, the Criminal Attempts and Conspiracy (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 and the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979.

There were 66 convictions for drug related offences in 2009 (the latest year for which figures are currently available), where the known address provided for the offender was within the Upper Bann constituency. It is not possible to provide prosecution data.

Note:

3. Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

4. The figures provided relate to convictions for all classifications of the offence specified.

Department for Regional Development

Speed Limits

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 13221/11-15, how many 20mph zones have been implemented in (i) 2012; and (ii) 2013; and how many are planned to be implemented before 2014.
(AQW 29155/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I can confirm eight 20 mph zones were implemented during 2011/12, and a further 14 during 2012/13. One further 20 mph zone is due to be implemented during 2013/14.

Barrack Street, Belfast: Closure

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the benefits that have resulted from the closure of Barrack Street in Belfast to through traffic.
(AQW 29509/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The closure of Barrack Street, Belfast to through traffic derived from the 'Belfast On The Move' strategic review of traffic within Belfast City Centre. Roads Service had previously been aware of local residents' concerns over the volume and nature of through traffic in this street and took the opportunity to address those concerns within the overall scheme proposal.

Whilst there has been no formal assessment carried out on the specific benefits of the closure of Barrack Street, it is considered the stopping-up has returned the area to being a residential street for the benefit of all those who live there.

Whitechurch Road, Ballywalter: Repair

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale for the repair of the A2 Whitechurch Road in Ballywalter, which subsided as a result of the recent tidal surge.
(AQW 29512/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service has assessed the damage at Whitechurch Road, Ballywalter as a result of the recent tidal surge. Design work will soon be completed and it is anticipated the repair work will take up to three months, given the extent of the damage.

Cycling: Programme for Government

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development how they are ensuring that the Executive meets the Programme for Government 2011-15 target to increase the number of pupils that cycle to school.
(AQW 29531/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Programme for Government 2011-15 makes a commitment to 'by 2015 create the conditions to facilitate at least 36% of primary school pupils and 22% of secondary school pupils to walk or cycle to school as their main mode of transport'. In order to deliver this commitment my Department, in partnership with the Public Health Agency, is funding a three year Active School Travel Initiative which involves delivering a programme of cycle and walking skills training to pupils in 180 schools across Northern Ireland. The programme is being delivered by Sustrans and its objective is to encourage school children to adopt cycling and walking as their main mode of travel to school.

A robust programme of monitoring and evaluation has been developed by my Department's Statistics and Research Branch to measure achievement of the PfG targets and provide improved information on the progress made under the Active School Travel Initiative.

I have also established a Cycling Unit within my Department to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery. In addition, my Department continues to invest in the Safer Routes to School programme which is an initiative aimed at encouraging the use of sustainable transport options to school such as walking, cycling, public transport or car sharing to school. We are also exploring opportunities to work with other Departments to improve walking and cycling infrastructure and facilities at participating schools.

My Department continues to work with other stakeholders in the forthcoming Giro d'Italia Big Start to ensure that it provides a lasting legacy for cycling among our school children. We are actively involved in the schools sub-group which is chaired by the Department of Education.

Moneydig Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development what base maintenance is planned for Moneydig pumping station.
(AQW 29546/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it plans to upgrade the Moneydig Wastewater Treatment Works as part of the Rural Wastewater Investment Programme and work is expected to be completed by March 2015.

Moneydig Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Regional Development when Moneydig pumping station is expected to reach its population equivalent.
(AQW 29547/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that Moneydig Wastewater Treatment Works has already surpassed its design population equivalent (PE). The current Works has a design PE of 44 while the actual PE discharging to the Works is 61. NIW plans to upgrade the Works under the Rural Wastewater Investment Programme and it is expected that this will be completed by March 2015. The upgrade will increase the capacity to 100 PE.

Bloomberg Associates

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has considered availing of the free services offered by the new Bloomberg Associates Group in relation to the development of public spaces and improved pedestrian and cycling participation and their experience in New York City.
(AQW 29556/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have advised my officials to liaise with Belfast City Council regarding the details of Bloomberg Associates Group as this would appear to represent a better match to the potential wide and varied support offered by the group for cities around the world.

In relation to improved facilities for walking and cycling I will seek to explore best practice examples both worldwide and nearer to home are we develop a workable and achievable means to promote both as alternative and sustainable modes of travel.

Cycling: Departmental Unit

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development when the first meeting of the departmental cycling unit will be held.
(AQW 29557/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Cycling Unit is a work group within my Department which is developing an ongoing programme of work as it aims to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery. Staff within the Cycling Unit meet internally on a daily and ongoing basis and have met with various other stakeholders since the creation of the Unit in November 2013.

The Cycling Unit looks forward to meeting with the Committee for Regional Development and the All Party Group on cycling in due course.

Cycling: Eye-level Traffic Lights

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has considering introducing eye level cycling traffic lights which were approved by the Department for Transport in December 2013.
(AQW 29558/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am aware the Department for Transport has issued a site-specific authorisation for the use of eye-level cycle traffic lights at Bow Roundabout in London for a trial period.

My officials will review the outcome of the trial before making recommendations on their use here.

Dunhill Road, Coleraine: Traffic

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 22367/11-15, to outline the reasons for the announcement of the further potential traffic problems over the course of 2014 at the same location on the Dunhill Road, Coleraine due to more work being carried out.
(AQW 29601/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) previously laid a high voltage (33kv) underground cable along the Northern side of Dunhill Road to serve Dunmore Wind Farm. A second Wind Farm, known as Dunbeg Wind Farm, requires a similar service which, for technical reasons, cannot be laid in the same trench or within three metres of the Dunmore cable.

In order to minimise traffic disruption, the new cable will be laid on the Southern side of Dunhill Road using Temporary Traffic management arrangements, similar to those used during the previous works. No works will be undertaken during public or bank holidays and special consideration will be given to traffic management during major public events throughout the period. The works are expected to be completed by the end of July 2014.

Roads Service is also aware of imminent plans by Firmus Energy to lay approximately 400 metres of gas main along Dunhill Road to service local quarries and other customers, if requested. My officials have met with both utility companies involved and through regular progress meetings will ensure the works are co-ordinated in order to minimise inconvenience to road users, affected residents and businesses, and implemented efficiently.

In addition to the usual press releases, Firmus Energy intends to make a special presentation to Coleraine Borough Council regarding the specific details of its proposed works.

Flooding: Adopted Roadways

Mr Campbell asked Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps he will take, following the recent severe weather, in assessing the need for improvements to road infrastructure to help prevent flooding on adopted roadways.
(AQW 29603/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Department's road drainage systems are the first line of defence from flooding on adopted roadways with the primary purpose of removing surface water to prevent flooding of the road itself. Roads Service has a well-established system of maintenance, which includes cyclic inspections of roadways, including gullies, footways and adjacent seawalls and, where necessary, implementation of improvements to the infrastructure, taking account of the available funding.

To help reduce the impact of run-off from the adopted road network, all new housing development projects are required to provide separate foul and storm water drainage systems. In most instances the storm water run-off from a site, post-development, must be no greater than the existing storm water run-off and in many cases this can only be achieved by the use of Sustainable Drainage Systems, which attenuate surface water to prevent flooding.

My Department has also created a Flood Investment and Planning Group, chaired by my Water Policy Division with membership from NI Water, Roads Service and the Rivers Agency. This group aims to help mitigate flooding by providing a co-ordinated approach to the investigation of multi –agency flooding issues including proposing potential solutions, prioritising investment, agreeing responsibilities and funding proposals, and ensuring joint responses including making the case for investment.

The Member may also be aware the PEDU 'Review of Response to Flooding June 2012' recommended that Rivers Agency, Roads Service and NI Water work with their parent departments to review current flood defence expenditure priorities and report to the Executive on their adequacy to meet the potential threats over the next 10 years. This review was completed and the Executive noted the requirement for an additional targeted programme of £120m over the next 10 years and agreed that it should be prioritised in the next iteration of its Investment Strategy.

Electric Cars: Charge Points

Mr McClarty asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the frequency of use; and (ii) income generated from each electric car charging point.
(AQW 29622/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The usage for each publically accessible ecar Charge Point in Northern Ireland is detailed in the attached table.

To incentivise uptake, no charge has as yet been made for electricity used at ecar Charge Points. Therefore no income has been generated.

Fast Charge Points (22kW AC)

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
SC01	Riverdale	Riverdale, Larne, Co Antrim BT40 1LB	March 2012	
SC02	Linenhall Street DRD Car Park	Linenhall Street, Armagh, BT61 7DW	March 2012	5
SC03	Hope Street North Car Park	Hope Street North/Bruce Street, Belfast, BT12 5ED	March 2012	19
SC04	Palace Demense	The Palace Demense, Armagh, BT60 4EL	March 2012	15
SC05	Bagenal's Castle	Castle Street,Newry Co Down BT34 2BY	March 2012	5
SC06	Railway Yard Car park	Railway Yard, Off Dukes Street Roundabout Londonderry, BT47	March 2012	6
SC07	Strand Road Car Park	Strand Road, Londonderry, BT48	March 2012	5
SC08	Dublin Road	Dublin Road on-street, Belfast, BT6 8ES	March 2012	3
SC09	Central Station	East Bridge Street,Belfast, BT1 3PB	March 2012	13
SC10	Basin Walk Car Park	Basin Walk, Newry, Co Down BT34 1DW	March 2012	33
SC11	Quay Lane North	Quay Lane North, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 6AG	March 2012	5
SC12	Eden Street	Eden Street, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 7EG	March 2012	13
SC13	DRD Car Park Main Street	Main Street, Belleek, Co Fermanagh BT93 3FX	March 2012	18
SC14	Narrow Gauge Road Larne	Narrow Gauge Road, Larne, Co Antrim BT40 1XB	March 2012	3
SC15	Lonsdale Street DRD Car Park	Lonsdale Street, Armagh, BT61 7LL	March 2012	
SC16	Wellington Street	Wellington Road, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74	March 2012	37
SC17	DRD Car Park Queen Street	Queen Street, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 7JR	March 2012	8
SC18	Down/Market/Cross Street	Cross Street, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 7DX	March 2012	7
SC19	Adelaide Street	Adelaide Street, Belfast, BT2 8GB	March 2012	72

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
SC20	Agnew Street Larne	Agnew Street, Larne, Co Antrim BT40 1RF	March 2012	3
SC21	Lower Crescent	Lower Crescent, Belfast, BT 7 1NR	March 2012	22
SC22	DRD Car Park Little Victoria Street	Little Victoria Street, Belfast, BT2 7JH	March 2012	17
SC23	Little Donegall Street	Little Donegall Street, Belfast, BT1 2JD	March 2012	18
SC25	Carlisle Road Car Park	Carlisle Road, Londonderry, BT48 6JW	March 2012	4
SC26	Templemore Leisure Centre	Buncrana Road, Londonderry, BT48 7QL	March 2012	17
SC27	Victoria Market Car Park	Queens Quay, Londonderry, BT48 7AZ	March 2012	10
SC28	Bridge Street	Bridge Street, Newry,Co Down BT35 8AN	March 2012	19
SC29	DRD Car Park Main Street	Main Street, Irvinestown, Co Fermanagh BT94 1DW	March 2012	
SC30	Hill Street	Hill Street,Newry , Co Down BT34 1AR	March 2012	11
SC31	DRD Car Park Cross Street	Cross Street, Lisnaskea, Co Fermanagh BT9 20J	March 2012	12
SC32	Monaghan Street	Monaghan Street,Newry, Co Down BT35 6BB	March 2012	35
SC33	Cromac Street Car Park	Cromac Street, Belfast, BT2 8JN	March 2012	32
SC34	The Diamond	The Diamond, Londonderry, BT48 6HN	March 2012	28
SC35	Cairns Hill Park and Ride	Cairnshill Road/Saintfield Road, Belfast, BT8 6RG	March 2012	26
SC36	Carnlough, Harbour Road/ Garron Road	Carnlough, Harbour Road/Garron Road Co Antrim	March 2012	5
SC37	Canal Court Hotel	Merchant's Quay, Newry, Co Down BT35 8HF	March 2012	10
SC38	South West College	Burn Road, Cookstown, Co Tryone BT80 8DN	March 2012	23
SC39	Bishop Street Car Park	Bishops Street, Londonderry, BT48 6PT	March 2012	
SC40	Cathedral Road Recreation Centre	Cathedral Road, Armagh, BT61 7QX	March 2012	
SC41	Newry Train Station	Newry Train Station Car Park Co Down	March 2012	3
SC42	DRD Car Park Dunluce Avenue	Dunluce Avenue, Portrush,Co Antrim BT56 8DW	June 2013	
SC43	Sixmile Leisure Centre	Ballynure Road, Ballyclare, Co Antrim BT39 9YU	June 2013	0
SC44	The Valley Leisure Centre	The Valley Leisure Centre, 40 Church Road, Newtownabbey, Co Antrim BT36 7LJ	June 2013	1
SC45	DRD Car Park Benson Street	Benson Street, Lisburn, Co Down BT28 2AA	June 2013	44
SC46	DRD Car Park Castle Street	Castle Street, Antrim, Co Antrim BT41 4JE	June 2013	
SC47	Seven Towers Leisure Centre	Trostan Avenue, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT43 7BL	June 2013	1
SC48	DRD Car Park Beverley Road	Beverley Road, Carnmoney, Co Antrim BT36 6QD	June 2013	2
SC49	DRD Car Park Waterside	Waterside, Coleraine, Co Londonderry BT51 3DP	June 2013	3
SC50	DRD Car Park Townhead Street North	Townhead Street North, Ballymoney, Co Antrim BT53 6BE	June 2013	
SC51	DRD Car Park St. Lurachs Road	St. Lurachs Road, Maghera, Co Londonderry BT46 5JE	June 2013	

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
SC52	DRD Car Park Castle Street	Castle Street, Ballycastle, Co Antrim BT54 6AS	June 2013	
SC53	Catherine Street Car Park	Catherine Street, Limavady, Co Londonderry BT49 9DB	June 2013	
SC54	DRD Car Park	Farmley Road, Glengormley, Co Antrim BT36 7TY	June 2013	1
SC55	Slieve Donard Hotel	Downs Road, Newcastle, Co Down BT33 0AH	June 2013	7
SC56	Junction 1 Shopping Centre	Junction One Shopping Centre, 111 Ballymena Rd, Antrim, BT41 4LL	June 2013	3
SC57	Roe Park Resort	Drumrane Road, Limavady, Co Londonderry BT49 9LB	June 2013	
SC58	DRD Car Park Lower Lansdowne Road	Lower Lansdowne Road,Portrush, Co Antrim BT56 8AP	June 2013	47
SC59	Car Park Glenburn Road	Glenburn Road, Dunmurry, Co Down BT17 9AQ	June 2013	10
SC60	Supevalu, Ballymena Rd, Ballymoney	Supervalu, Ballymena Rd, Ballymoney, Co Antrim BT53 7AB	June 2013	1
SC61	DRD Car Park Dublin Road	Dublin Road/Bridge Street, Antrim, BT41 4DA	June 2013	
SC62	Omagh Sports Forum	The Grange/Mountjoy Rd, Omagh, Co Tyrone BT79 7EG	June 2013	1
SC63	Riversdale Leisure Centre	Lisnafin Park,Strabane, Co Tyrone BT82 9DG	June 2013	
SC64	DRD Car Park Castle Street	Castle Street,Omagh, Co Tyrone BT78 1DD	June 2013	
SC65	The Fir Trees Hotel	Dublin Road,Strabane, Co Tyrone BT82 9EA	June 2013	
SC66	DRD Car Park Maguiresbridge	Maguiresbridge, Co Fermanagh, BT94 4RZ	June 2013	2
SC67	DRD Car Park Campsie Road	Campsie Road,Omagh, Co Tyrone BT79 0AE	June 2013	
SC68	DRD Car Park Canal Basin	Dock Street,Strabane, Co Tyrone BT82 8EE	June 2013	1
SC69	Car Park Main Street	Main Street, Castlederg, Co Tyrone BT81 7AT	June 2013	
SC70	Newtownstewart 2000	17 Moyle Road, Newtownstewart, Co Tyroe BT78 4AP	June 2013	
SC71	DRD Car Park Main Street	Main Street, Dromore, Co Down BT78 3AD	June 2013	
SC72	Car Park Cornmill	Main Street/Lineside, Coalisland, Co Tyrone BT71 4LP	June 2013	
SC73	DRD Car Park Magowan Buildings	DRD Car Park, Magowan Buildings, Woodhouse St, Portadown Co Armagh BT62 1JG	June 2013	3
SC74	Moneymore Recreation Centre	Moneyhaw Road, Magherafelt, Co Londonderry BT45 7XJ	June 2013	
SC75	Rushmere Shopping Centre	Central Way, Craigavon, Co Armagh BT64 1AA	June 2013	3
SC76	DRD Car Park Scotch Street South	Scotch Street South, Dungannon, Co Tyrone BT70 1BD	June 2013	
SC77	Lurgan Park and Ride	Lough Road, Lurgan, Co Armagh BT66 6JB	June 2013	14
SC78	Glenavon House Hotel	Cookstown Road, Cookstown, Co Tyrone BT80 8JQ	June 2013	
SC79	DRD Car Park Fair Green	Duke Street,Portadown, Co Armagh BT62 3PF	June 2013	
SC80	The Burnavon Theatre	Burn Road,Cookstown, Co Tyrone BT80 8DN	June 2013	2
SC81	DRD Car Park Union Place	Union Place, Cookstown, Co Tyrone BT80 8NP	June 2013	

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
SC82	Brownlow Community Hub	Craigavon Leisure Centre,Brownlow Rd,Craigavon, Co Armagh BT65 5DL	June 2013	
SC83	Tandragee On-Street	Market Street, Tandragee, Co Armagh BT62 2BW	June 2013	
SC84	Barbican Filling Station Newcastle	Dundrum Road, Newcastle, Co Down BT33 OLN	June 2013	
SC85	DRD Car Park Union Street	Union Street, Magherafelt, Co Londonderry BT45 6DF	June 2013	2
SC86	DRD Car Park Meadow Lane East	Meadowlane East, Craigavon, Co Armagh BT62 3TN	June 2013	1
SC87	DRD Car Park The Square	The Square, Crossgar, Co Down BT30 9EE	June 2013	37
SC88	Church Street Kilrea	Church Street, Kilrea, Co Londonderry BT51 5QU	June 2013	1
SC89	DRD Car Park Shimna Road	Shimna Road,Newcastle, Co Down BT33 0AS	June 2013	17
SC90	Benone Tourist Complex	Benone Ave, Limavady, Co Londonderry BT49 0LQ	June 2013	
SC91	Ballee Road Park & Share	Ballee Road, Ballymena, Co Londonderry BT42 2HD	June 2013	
SC92	Bloomfield Shopping Centre	South Circular Road, Bangor, Co Down BT19 7HB	June 2013	24
SC93	Galgorm Manor Hotel Ballymena	136 Fenaghy Road, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT42 1EA	June 2013	
SC94	Antrim Forum Leisure Complex	Lough Road, Antrim, Co Antrim BT41 4DQ	June 2013	
SC95	Ulster American Folk Park	2 Mellon Road,Omagh, Co Tyrone BT78 5QU	June 2013	
SC96	DRD Car Park Brooke Street	Brooke Street,Omagh, Co Tyrone BT78 5HD	June 2013	
SC97	Galgorm County Hall, Ballymena	Sourhill Road, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT43 1QF	June 2013	
SC98	DRD Car Park Harrier Way	Main Street, Ballyclare, Co Antrim BT39 9AA	June 2013	
SC99	Dunsilly Park and Ride	Lisnevenagh Road, Co Antrim, BT41 2JH	June 2013	
SC100	DRD Car Park Lisburn Street North	Lisburn Street North, Ballynahinch, Co Down BT24 8BL	June 2013	7
SC101	DRD Car Park Upper Main Street	Upper Main Street ,Strabane, Co Tyrone BT82 8AU	June 2013	
SC102	Dundonald Cinemaplex	Old Dundonald Road, Castlereagh, Co Down BT16 1XT	June 2013	6
SC103	Park and Ride Victoria Street	Victoria Street, Carrickfergus, Co Antrim BT38 8AQ	June 2013	10
SC104	Meadowlane Shopping Centre	Moneymore Road, Magherafelt, Co Londonderry BT45 6PR	June 2013	
SC105	Robinson Centre	Montgomery Road, Belfast BT6 9JD	June 2013	11
SC106	Ratkeltair House	Ratkeltair House, Market St, Downpatrick, Co Down, BT30 6AJ	June 2013	
SC107	Antrim NIR Park and Ride Station Road	Station Road, Antrim, BT41 4AB	June 2013	

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
SC108	Main Street Limavady	Main Street, Limavady, Co Londonderry BT47 0ET	June 2013	2
SC109	Roe Valley Leisure Centre	Roe Valley Leisure Centre, 9 Greystone Road, Limavady, Co Londonderry BT49 0ND	June 2013	
SC110	Strabane Park and Ride Railway Street	Railway Street,Strabane, Co Tyrone BT82 8EQ	June 2013	
SC111	Townsend Street Car Park	Townsend Street, Banbridge, BT32 3LF	June 2013	
SC112	Church Street	Church Street, Saul Link, Co Down Downpatrick, BT30 6EH	June 2013	
SC113	The Quay, Strangford	The Quay, Strangford, Co Down BT30 7LL	June 2013	2
SC114	Hilton Templepatrick Hotel	Hilton Templepatrick Castle Upton Estate, Templepatrick, Co Antrim BT39 0DD	June 2013	
SC115	Crumlin Community Centre	Main St Crumlin, Co Antrim, BT29 4UR	June 2013	1
SC116	Logans of Cloughmills	Logans of Cloughmills, 235 Frosses Road, Cloughmills, Co Antrim BT44 9PU	June 2013	3
SC117	Dublin Rd Castlewellan	Main Street, Castlewellan, Down, BT31 9DQ	June 2013	8
SC118	Gallows Street Car Park	Gallows Street, Banbridge, Co Down BT25	June 2013	
SC119	Cookstown Leisure Centre	Cookstown Leisure Centre, 78 Fountain Rd, Cookstown, Co Tyrone BT80 8QF	June 2013	
SC120	Randalstown	Porthlenone Road, Randalstown, Co Antrim BT41 3EH	June 2013	1
SC121	Greencastle St	Greencastle St, Kilkeel, Co Down, BT34 4QD	June 2013	1
SC122	Oak Shopping Centre	Oaks Road, Dungannon, Co Tyrone BT71 4NA	June 2013	
SC123	Ulster Transport Museum Cultra	Bangor Road, Holywood, Co Down BT18 0EU	June 2013	5
SC124	Ballygawley Park and Ride	Tullyvar Road, Dungannon, Co Tyrone BT70 2	June 2013	
SC125	Lisburn Street on-street	Lisburn Street, Hillsborough, Co Down BT26 6AB	June 2013	
SC126	Donard Park	Donard Park, Newcastle, Co Down BT33 0SE	June 2013	4
SC127	Stormont Hotel	Upper Newtownards Road,Belfast,BT4 3LP	June 2013	
SC128	Ivanhoe Hotel	Ivanhoe Inn & Hotel, 556 Saintfield Rd, Castlereagh, Co Down BT8 8EU	June 2013	9
SC129	The Quays Shopping Centre	The Quays Shopping Centre, Newry, Co Down BT35 8QS	June 2013	1
SC130	Havelock Place	Havelock Place, Warrenpoint, Newry, Co Down BT34 3NE	June 2013	5
SC131	The Outlet Shopping Centre	Bridgewater Park, Banbridge, Co Down BT32 4GJ	June 2013	
SC132	Eastside Park and Ride	Eastside Park and Ride, Middlepath St, Belfast BT5 4BG	June 2013	2
SC133	Park and Ride Crevenagh Road	Crevenagh Road,Omagh, Co Trrone BT78 1ND	June 2013	1
SC134	Edfield Way, Fivemiletown	Car Park, Edfield Way, Fivemiletown, Co Tyrone BT75 0QN	June 2013	1
SC135	Lough Neagh Discovery Centre	Oxford Island National Nature Reserve,Craigavon, Co Armagh BT66 6NJ	June 2013	9

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
SC136	Mourne Esplanade Kilkeel	Mourne Esplanade, Kilkeel Leisure Centre, Co Down BT34 4DB	June 2013	
SC137	Quay Street Car Park	Quay Street,Bangor, Co Down BT20 5ED	June 2013	2
SC138	Castle Street	Castle Street, Portaferry, Newtownards, Ards, Co Down BT22 1NZ ?	June 2013	1
SC139	Sainsbury's Car Park	Kennedy Centre, 564-568 Falls Road, Belfast,BT119AE	June 2013	1
SC140	Spar Car Park, 46 Main Street	Spar Car Park, 46 Main Street, Derrylin, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT92 8JW	June 2013	
SC141	Jordanstown Park and Ride	Lynda Avenue, Co Antrim BT37 0NX	June 2013	20
SC142	Railway Place Car park	Railway Place, Coleraine, BT52 1PQ	June 2013	
SC143	Craigadick Park and Ride	Craigadick Park & Ride, Glenshane Rd/ Tobermore Rd A6 & A29, Maghera, BT46 5DR	June 2013	
SC144	Templepatrick Park and Ride	Templepatrick Park and Ride, A6 Belfast Rd/ Paradise Walk, Co Antrim BT39 0DD	June 2013	
SC145	Park and Ride Toome Bypass	Moneynick Road A6,Toomebridge, Co Londonderry BT41 2JH	June 2013	
SC146	Giants Causeway Park and Ride	Main Street, Bushmills, Co Antrim BT57 8QB	June 2013	2
SC147	Mossley West Park and Ride Newtownabbey	The Glade, Newtownabbey, Co Antrim BT36 5NN	June 2013	
SC148	Joey Dunlop Centre Ballymoney	33 Garryduff Road, Ballymoney, Co Antrim BT53 7DB	June 2013	1
SC149	Draperstown	St Patricks Street, Draperstown, Co Londonderry BT45 7AL	June 2013	
SC150	Chapel Road	Chapel Road, Dungiven, Co Londonderry BT47 4RT	June 2013	
SC151	Larne Leisure Centre	Tower Road, Larne, Co Antrim BT32 1AB	June 2013	
SC152	New Road Glenarm	New Road, Glenarm, Co Antrim BT44 0AA	June 2013	5
SC153	Car Park Fairhill Shopping Centre	Thomas Street, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT43 6UF	June 2013	
SC154	DRD Car Park Harryville Henry Street	Henry Street, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT42 3AH	June 2013	
SC155	Castledawson Roundabout	Castledawson Road Park and Ride, Co Londonderry	June 2013	
SC156	Brunswick Cinemaplex Pennyburn Ind est	Brunswick Moviebowl, Brunswick Lane, Londonderry BT48 0LU	June 2013	6
SC157	Downshire Place	Downshire Place, Banbridge, Co Down BT32 3DF	June 2013	
SC158	Ballygally Castle Hotel	274 Coast Road, Larne, Co Antrim BT40 2QZ	June 2013	
SC159	Plumbridge	Main St, Plumbridge, Strabane, Co Tryrone BT79 8AA	June 2013	
SC160	Ballymena NIR Park and Ride	Galgorm Road, Ballymena,Co Antrim BT42 1AD	June 2013	
SC161	Dobbies Garden World	Saintfield Road, Lisburn, Co Down BT27 5PG	June 2013	1

Rapid Charge Points (50kW DC)

Ref. No.	Name	Location	Approximate Date Installed	Usage to 31/12/2013
RC01	M1, Junction 15 Rapid Charger	Donnelly Motor Group Garage, 59 Moy Rd, Dungannon, Co Tyrone BT71 7DT	March 2012	58
RC02	Glenshane Pass	Glenshane Tourist Services, Jamesie's Garage, 31 Glenshane Rd, Maghera, Co Londonderry BT46 5JZ	March 2012	136
RC03	Fiveways	Fiveways Shops and Service Station, 101 Armagh Rd, Newry, Co Down BT35 6PW	March 2012	222
RC04	Portrush Rapid Charger	Causeway Street,Portrush, Co Antrim BT56 8JE	August 2012	115
RC05	Phoenix Service Station	Phoenix Service Station, 14 Antrim Rd (Queen St), Ballymena, Co Antrim BT42 2BJ	June 2013	99
RC06	Larne Rapid Charger	Topaz Service Station, Unit 1A Larne Business Pk, Redlands Rd, Larne, Co Antrim BT40 1AY	June 2013	67
RC07	Texaco Garage, Junction 1 International Outlet	Ballymena Road, Antrim, BT41 4LQ	June 2013	50
RC08	Barbican Centra A1	Halfway Road, Banbridge, BT32 4ET	June 2013	37
RC09	Fermanagh Rapid Charger	Topaz Service Station, 236 Irvinestown Rd, Trory, Enniskillen, Co Fermanagh BT74 6DN	June 2013	36
RC10	Omagh Rapid Charger	Beltany Road,Omagh, Co Tyrone BT78 5RA	June 2013	8
RC11	Derry-Londonderry Rapid Charger	Maxol Service Station, Waterside, 29 Glendermott Rd, Londonderry, BT47 6BG	June 2013	20
RC12	A7 Rapid Charger	Bell's Spar, 7 Saintfield Rd, Crossgar, BT30 9HY	June 2013	12
RC13	Shane Retail Park	Boucher Road, Belfast, BT12	June 2013	61
RC14	Belvoir Rapid Charger	Maxol Service Station, Belvoir, 60 Milltown Rd, Shaw's Bridge, Belfast, BT8 7XP	June 2013	56

Cycling: Schoolchildren

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps his Department is taking to facilitate the opportunities for school children to cycle to and from school.
(AQW 29640/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department, in partnership with the Public Health Agency, is funding a three year Active School Travel Initiative to deliver a programme of cycle and walking skills training to pupils in 180 schools across Northern Ireland. The programme is being delivered by Sustrans and its objective is to encourage school children to adopt cycling and walking as their main mode of travel to school.

A robust programme of monitoring and evaluation has been developed by my Department's Statistics and Research Branch to measure achievement of the PfG targets and provide improved information on the progress made under the Active School Travel Initiative.

I have also established a Cycling Unit within my Department to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery. In addition, my Department continues to invest in the Safer Routes to School programme which is an initiative aimed at encouraging the use of sustainable transport options to school such as walking, cycling, public transport

or car sharing to school. We are exploring opportunities to work with other Departments to improve walking and cycling infrastructure and facilities at participating schools.

My Department continues to work with other stakeholders in the forthcoming Giro d'Italia Big Start to ensure that it provides a lasting legacy for cycling among our school children. We are actively involved in the schools sub-group which is chaired by the Department of Education.

A6: Improvements

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 28511/11-15, to detail whether a finance alternative to Executive funds could be secured to fund improvements to the A6.
(AQW 29675/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As advised in AQW 28511/11-15, the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-21 sets out plans to augment Executive funds by accessing alternative finance for some projects. The plans include a £390 million package of high-priority road schemes, which would include improvements to the A6. This package may be a Revenue Funded Investment (RFI) initiative through which the private sector would finance, construct and maintain the assets over a defined period, typically for 25 to 30 years. However, a commitment to fund the revenue consequences of such a road package will be required from the Executive.

Executive funding, whether it is from capital or resource budgets, is required to support the improvements to the A6. The UK Government's policy of increasing capital funding at the expense of revenue funding makes RFI relatively less attractive in terms of value for money and affordability. The Executive is continuing to explore the potential role of Revenue Finance in the delivery of the Investment Programme, and the Department will continue to advance road schemes through the statutory processes so as to be able to make use of whatever funding is available in future years.

It should be noted that the Government could not borrow from the European Investment Bank (EIB). The EIB would, however, be a finance option for private sector suppliers in the case of potential RFI schemes.

Cregagh View Residential Development, Cushendun

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 29416/11-15, whether he has asked departmental officials to keep the situation under review; and to detail the stage at which enforcement action would be taken.
(AQW 29742/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can confirm I have asked my officials to keep the situation at Cregagh View, Knocknacarry under review.

Enforcement action is usually taken when the development has progressed sufficiently to be classified as a backlog site. This is normally when 80% of the dwellings have been completed and occupied for over one year, whereas only 8 out of 24 have been completed on this site.

Alternatively, action under the Private Streets Order can be considered, if at least one-half of the dwellings on both sides of the road are completed. This, however, is currently not the case on this site.

Street Light Replacement Schemes: Newry and Armagh

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the rationale behind the street light replacement schemes in local housing developments across Newry and Armagh; and (ii) how he will address the concerns of local residents that the light output from the new units is inadequate.
(AQW 29825/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The street lighting replacement schemes in the Newry and Armagh areas are part of an ongoing programme throughout Northern Ireland to replace those street lighting systems which have reached, or are nearing, the end of their safe structural or electrical lives.

The replacement lighting schemes are designed to conform fully to the relevant current British Standard and British Standard Euronorm recommended lighting levels, distributions and uniformities. These standards are currently BS5489-1 and BS EN 13201-2 and they also apply equally to lighting installations on new roads and housing developments. Checks are also carried out following installation to ensure that the designed levels of lighting have been achieved.

However, if local residents have particular concerns about lighting levels at specific locations, they should notify officials from my Department's Roads Service who will carry out further investigations.

Drumardan Road, Portaferry: Resurfacing

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the timescale for the resurfacing of the Drumardan Road, Portaferry.
(AQW 29951/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service plans to commence resurfacing approximately 600 metres of Drumardan Road before the end of February 2014. This section of the road is in particularly poor condition and therefore warrants attention now.

Roads Service had originally planned to resurface the entire length of the road but, given that NI Water proposes to lay a replacement watermain along Drumarden Road, the scale of the resurfacing will be reduced until after the watermain has been laid.

Upon completion of the works carried out by NI Water, and the subsequent maintenance period, resurfacing of the remainder of Drumardan Road will be given consideration, subject to the availability of funding at that time.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: Contracts

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the contractor that is currently completing the work in each district for the All-Trades contract; and (ii) the reason for any change of contractor.
(AQW 29536/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The table below, provided by the Housing Executive, gives details of the contractor completing work in each Housing Executive district and the reason for any change of contractor.

Area	District	Old Contractor	New Contractor	Reason for Change
Belfast	Belfast 1& 3 (West)	Mel Davison Construction	DLO	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Belfast District 2 East	Garrivan O'Rourke	DLO *	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Belfast Dist 4	DLO	DLO	
	Belfast Dist 5 Shankill	Mel Davison Construction	DLO	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Belfast Dist 6 North	Garrivan O'Rourke	DLO	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Belfast Dist 7 South	Mel Davison Construction	DLO	Original Contractor went into Administration
South East	Castlereagh	ESE Ltd	ESE Ltd	
	Lisburn Antrim Street	Garrivan O'Rourke	DLO *	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Lisburn Dairy Farm	Mel Davison Construction	DLO *	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Bangor, Newtownards	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd	
	Downpatrick	ESE Ltd	ESE Ltd	
South	Armagh / Banbridge	PK Murphy	PK Murphy	
	Lurgan/Brownlow/ P'Down	Mel Davison Construction	DLO	Original Contractor went into Administration
	Fermanagh(4&5)	PK Murphy	PK Murphy	
	Dungannon	PK Murphy	PK Murphy	
	Newry (1-5)	Bayview Contracts	Bayview Contracts	
North East	Newtownabbey 1 & 2	CFM	CFM	
	Ballymena, Carrick, Larne	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd	
	Antrim	PK Murphy Construction Limited	PK Murphy Construction Ltd	
	Ballycastle/ Ballymoney	CFM	CFM	
	Coleraine	DLO	DLO	
	Larne	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd	H & A Mechanical Services Ltd	

Area	District	Old Contractor	New Contractor	Reason for Change
West	Magherafelt/ Limavady	CFM	CFM	
	Omagh / Cookstown	CFM	CFM	
	Strabane	Robinson Ferry Construction Ltd	Robinson Ferry Construction Ltd	
	Londonderry 1,2,3	Omega Mechanical Services Ltd	Omega Mechanical Services Ltd	

* These contracts are currently the subject of secondary competitions and new contractors will be appointed in due course.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have successfully appealed a decision to (i) refuse; and (ii) reduce their Disability Living Allowance entitlement, in each year since June 2011.
(AQW 29568/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Appeals Service does not routinely record the successful outcome of Disability Living Allowance appeals in relation to relation to refused or reduced entitlement. The Chairman of The Appeals Service records whether the decision made on appeal was either more or less advantageous than a previous decision*.

Below is a breakdown of more advantageous decisions made in each year since June 2011.

1June 2011 – December 2011	852
1 January 2012 – 31 December 2012	1,469
1January 2013 – 31 December 2013	1,309

* A more advantageous decision may increase the allowance or direct that a new award be made

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 29124/11-15 and given that the examining criteria is unchanged, to detail the comparitive statistics for (i) the three years prior to; and (ii) since Atos Healthcare took over the medical examinations in June 2011 of (a) successful first time applicants; and (b) successful renewals.
(AQW 29596/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The tables below show the success rate for Disability Living Allowance new claims and renewals from 2008 to date.

Year	DLA New Claims Success Rate	DLA Renewals Success Rate
2008	48%	79%
2009	52%	81%
2010	53%	81%
2011	58%	83%
2012	60%	83%
2013	59%	85%

The variations in success rates will be due to the nature and type of applications received in any particular year. It is important to note that entitlement to Disability Living Allowance is determined by Decision-Makers in the Social Security Agency who consider and weigh up all the available evidence in reaching a decision. This includes information on the claimant's application form and reports from Health Care Professionals who the claimant has identified on the form and/ or in a small number of cases the Medical Service Provider is requested to complete a report. This approach is in line with the legislation governing the benefit, is supported by decision making guidance and has not changed since Atos Healthcare commenced providing the Examining Medical Practitioner service for the Social Security Agency in June 2011.

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Housing Executive: Repairs

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 28936/11-15, whether a tenant could be informed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that it is their, or their agents, responsibility to repair an airlock in their central heating system; and where the responsibility for any future damage to the system or to property would lie should work was to be completed by the tenant or their agent.
(AQW 29661/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has explained that should a tenant report an airlock in a heating system which was installed by the Housing Executive, they request their heating contractor to inspect and determine the cause of the airlock and carry out any necessary repair. They confirm that the only instance where clearing an airlock is the tenant's responsibility is where the tenant has installed their own heating system which has not been adopted by the Housing Executive, or where the tenant has made modifications to the existing heating system. In such cases the Housing Executive would advise the tenant they are also responsible for any future damage to the system or property.

Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many (i) complaints; and (ii) convictions have resulted from The Private Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 2006.
(AQW 29667/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department does not hold the information in the exact format requested. Responsibility for enforcing the Private Tenancies Order falls to Council environmental health departments. The tables below detail the information, which is reported to my Department by Councils on a quarterly basis.

Table (i) details the number of complaints/disputes that did not result in court action and Table (ii) details the number of cases where court action has been taken by Councils.

Table (i)

	2007/ 08	2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12	2012/ 13	April- Sept 2013	Total
Disputes/complaints that did not result in court action being taken.	Not collected	30*	105**	175	184	210	87	791

* Collected from October 2008 only in relation to harassment or illegal eviction.

** Collected from October 2009 in relation to all offences.

Table (ii)

	2007/ 08	2008/ 09	2009/ 10	2010/ 11	2011/ 12	2012/ 13	April- Sept 2013	Total
Failure to provide a statement of tenancy terms.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Failure to provide a rent book.	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	3
Failure to comply with notice of unfitness or notice of disrepair	0	2	1	3	5	1	0	12
Causing an obstruction.	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Failure to comply with a Certificate of Fitness	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	3
Causing harassment or illegal eviction	1	3	4	3	1	5	2	19
Failure to provide information about ownership of dwelling house.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total								**38**

* Collected from October 2008 only in relation to harassment or illegal eviction.

** Collected from October 2009 in relation to all offences.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Ministerial Meeting: Request

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development why a request for a meeting with him on behalf of P K Murphy Construction Ltd, on 9 May 2012, was refused.
(AQW 29682/11-15)

Mr McCausland: When I announced on 9 May 2012 that I had asked the Housing Executive to review their specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing, I also advised that the Housing Executive should hold further double glazing installations until the review was completed, though where a contractor had a contract in place with a supplier for the delivery of frames and cancellation would lead to nugatory expenditure, these contracts could proceed.

PK Murphy Construction Ltd then requested a meeting with me about the suspension of double glazing units that were due to be installed. As I had already agreed what category groups and double glazing schemes could proceed and had also asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position, I decided that a meeting at that time was not required.

Ministerial Meeting: Request

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development why a request for a meeting with him on behalf of the contractor Paddy McIlhatton, on 11 May 2012, was refused.
(AQW 29684/11-15)

Mr McCausland: When I announced on 9 May 2012 that I had asked the Housing Executive to review their specification for the supply and fitting of double glazing, I also advised that the Housing Executive should hold further double glazing installations until the review was completed, though where a contractor had a contract in place with a supplier for the delivery of frames and cancellation would lead to nugatory expenditure, these contracts could proceed.

Daithi McKay MLA then requested a meeting on behalf of Mr Paddy McIlhatton to discuss the suspension of the double glazing scheme. As I had agreed what category groups and double glazing schemes could proceed and had also asked the Housing Executive to urgently write to all contractors to confirm the position, I decided that a meeting at that time was not required.

Ministerial Meeting: Request

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development why a request for a meeting with the Minister requested by an Ulster Unionist MLA on behalf of Super Window Systems Ltd on 20 June 2012 was refused; and a meeting requested by a DUP representative on 29 June 2012 was granted.
(AQW 29685/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In June 2012 Mrs Sandra Overend, MLA, requested a meeting on behalf of Super Seal Window Systems Ltd to discuss the situation regarding the company's double glazing contracts. However, as I had previously written to Mrs Overend MLA, on 31 May 2012, confirming that the six double glazing contracts with Super Seal Window Systems Ltd could proceed, I decided that a meeting would not be required at this time.

I subsequently then received a request from Dr William McCrea MP to meet with Super Seal Window Systems Ltd. I agreed to this meeting as this was to discuss the review of the specification and savings relating to the alternative type of hinges and casement windows which were being proposed.

Abacus Housing Consortium

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development what procurement the Abacus Housing Consortium has (i) tendered for; and (ii) awarded, since forming as a group of housing associations.
(AQW 29724/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Details of all procurements that Abacus Housing Group has (i) tendered for; and (ii) awarded, since forming as a group of housing associations is detailed in the table below:

Abacus Housing Consortium: Procurement Activity Summary as at January 2014

Procurement Area	Lead Association	Tender Status	Participants
Development: Architect led integrated Design Team	Oaklee	Tendered and awarded March 2011	Clanmil & Oaklee on joining Abacus
Development: Quantity Surveying Services	Clanmil	Tendered and awarded March 2011	Clanmil & Oaklee on joining Abacus
Development: Architect led integrated Design Team	Helm	Tendered and awarded March 2011	All original Abacus members

Procurement Area	Lead Association	Tender Status	Participants
Development: Quantity Surveying Services	Helm	Tendered and awarded March 2011	All original Abacus members
MTC Response Maintenance Contract		Tender. Procurement halted Feb 13	All Abacus member except Helm and Ark HAs
Lift (Servicing & Maintenance)	Oaklee	Tendered and awarded June 2011	Oaklee procured with Accord Group.
Fire Alarm, Emergency Lighting, Fire Equipment, roller shutters & smoke vents (Servicing & Maintenance)	Helm	Tendered awarded June 2011	Helm, Open Door, Wesley, Ark hearth & Ulidia
Boiler & TMV (Servicing and Maintenance)	Helm	Tendered but Halted October 2013	All Abacus members
EPCs	Helm	Tendered and awarded August 2013	All Abacus members
MTC Response Maintenance Contract B	Oaklee	Tender ongoing return Feb 2014	Oaklee, SUHA, Ark & Ulidia only
Fire Alarm, Emergency Lighting & Fire Equipment (Servicing & Maintenance)	Oaklee	Tender ongoing return Feb 2014	All Abacus members
Adaptations Consultancy Services	Oaklee	Tender ongoing return Feb 2014	All Abacus members

Abacus Housing Consortium

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development why the Abacus Housing Consortium terminated the procurement for Heating Systems, Service, Response Maintenance and planned Maintenance/Replacement in October 2013 after starting the process in November 2012.
(AQW 29725/11-15)

Mr McCausland: An OJEU advertisement was published on 19 October 2012 on behalf of 10 Abacus members for the provision of mandatory heating systems service, response maintenance and planned maintenance works, plus additional discretionary works. Following due process a contract award letter was issued on 19 July 2013, but the decision was challenged by an unsuccessful tenderer before the 'standstill' period had expired.

Abacus engaged Carson McDowell (Solicitors) to assist with the procurement process and they in turn provided legal advice in relation to the challenge received. A number of meetings of the procurement group facilitated by Carson McDowell took place through the months of August and September to consider the options available to Abacus, culminating in the issuing of a set aside application to the Courts. The set aside hearing had originally been scheduled by the court for 14 October 2013 but was subsequently postponed at the request of the plaintiff until 24 October 2013.

An affidavit from the plaintiff was received on Thursday 10 October 2013 and the Chief Officers Group met on Friday 11 October 2013 and Monday 14 October 2013 to consider next steps. As before, the legal advisers provided an overview of the options available with respective merits. After a lengthy debate it was clear that Abacus members had different views as to the costs and benefits of sustaining the defence to the challenge received. As a consequence and without the necessary consensus the procurement process could not continue. The competition was then formally terminated at the end of October 2013. Abacus members are currently exploring new competitions to deliver best value for money and ensure excellent service to tenants.'

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department is on target to spend the full budget allocation of the Boiler Replacement Scheme.
(AQW 29757/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Boiler Replacement Scheme commenced on the 1st September 2012 with a total budget of £12m, allocated by the NI Executive over the three financial years 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15. In addition, £6m match funding has been secured from the European Regional Development Fund for the final two years of the scheme.

In the 16 months up to the end of December 2013, almost £7m of the total funding allocation has been spent which indicates that my Department is on target to spend the full budget allocation.

Housing Repossessions Task Force

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the repossessions taskforce.
(AQW 29759/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I recognise that further action is needed to address the issue of repossessions, and possibly the impact of negative equity, in Northern Ireland to help alleviate the impact of this distressing situation for many households here.

I have agreed draft Terms of Reference for the Taskforce and invites have issued to the proposed members. Officials await responses to these invites before arranging the inaugural meeting of the Taskforce for mid-February.

Housing Repossessions Task Force

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Social Development whether the repossessions taskforce will be in a position to liaise with lenders to ensure that repossessions are only undertaken as a last resort.
(AQW 29760/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Yes, engagement with lenders will be key in tackling the issue of repossessions and I am pleased to confirm that the Council of Mortgage Lenders have agreed to participate in the Housing Repossessions Taskforce.

Housing Repossessions Task Force

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Social Development whether the repossessions taskforce will give consideration to the American model of Principal Reduction.
(AQW 29761/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The objective of the Taskforce, outlined in the Housing Strategy Action Plan, is to engage with stakeholders and identify actions to mitigate the impact of repossessions and, where possible, prevent them occurring in the first place.

The Taskforce will draw on the comprehensive knowledge and experience of its members to consider a range housing initiatives and mitigation measures from across other jurisdictions to determine their suitability for adoption in Northern Ireland.

Statutory Sick Pay

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the changes to statutory sick pay in light of the abolition of the Percentage Threshold Scheme.
(AQW 29859/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Following a major Government review of the sickness absence system the Percentage Threshold Scheme (PTS) will be abolished from 6 April 2014 as it has been found to provide a disincentive for employers to effectively manage sickness absence. The funding from the PTS will be recycled into providing a Health and Work Service (HWS) scheme which will support a proactive approach to sickness absence management. The HWS will provide an alternative to the compensation currently provided by the PTS by helping employers to better manage sickness absence and provide interventions to help get employees back to work more quickly. Interventions costing up to £500 a year per employee will be exempt from tax.

As a consequence, the regulation requiring employers to keep specific SSP records to support claims under the PTS will also be abolished. Employers will still be required to produce SSP records to show they are meeting their legal SSP obligations but will have the freedom to keep records in a more flexible manner, better suited to their organisation. Claims for reimbursement of SSP (paid for sickness periods up to 5 April 14) will still be able to be to be made by employers until the close of the 2015/16 tax year.

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance/Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Social Development whether claimants of Employment Support Allowance and Disability Living Allowance, who are in face to face assessments and tribunals, are entitled to have those meetings recorded, as is the case in England, Scotland and Wales; and if not, why this is the case.
(AQW 29986/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Claimants of Employment and Support Allowance may request that their medical assessment is recorded. However requests can only be agreed with the prior consent of the examining healthcare professional. The recording can only take place if stringent safeguards have been put in place to ensure the recording is complete and accurate. The recording must be made by a professional operator, on equipment of a high standard, properly calibrated by a qualified engineer immediately prior to the recording being made. The equipment must also have the facility for reproduction so that a copy can be retained by all parties. The responsibility for meeting the costs of the recording rests with the claimant.

In a small number of Disability Living Allowance cases, a decision-maker in the Social Security Agency will request an Examining Medical Practitioner report to help them determine eligibility to the benefit. The Examining Medical Practitioner report gathers information on the diagnosis, the history of the condition, treatment and the severity and likely disabling effects of the condition on day-to-day living and the vast majority of these reports are completed in the claimant's home. It is not a medical assessment. Given the nature of an EMP report they have never been recorded in Great Britain and the same arrangement applies in Northern Ireland.

There is legislative provision for formal note taking in benefit appeal tribunals to support the decision making process. Regulation 55(1) of The Social Security and Child Support (Decisions and Appeals) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 stipulates that a record of the proceedings at an oral hearing, which is sufficient to indicate the evidence taken, shall be made by the Chairman or a member sitting alone in an appeal tribunal in such medium that he may determine. Currently the practice is for a hand written note to be taken. Parties to the proceedings may take a note of the hearing with the permission of the Tribunal.

A pilot project on the recording of benefit appeals is at a preliminary planning stage and the scope has not yet been agreed. Therefore it is not possible to give a commencement date for the pilot. My previous answer to AQW 27407/11-15 refers.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Assembly: Resources

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission for their assessment of whether the Assembly is adequately resourced to hold the Executive to account.
(AQW 29582/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Section 40 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act) requires that "the Assembly Commission shall provide the Assembly, or ensure that the Assembly is provided, with the property, staff and services required for the Assembly's purposes". This legislative requirement guides the Assembly Commission's Corporate Strategy, business planning and risk management processes.

The Assembly Commission's budget for the four financial years from 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 was set within the constrained budget position for the Northern Ireland Block as part of the wider Spending Review 2010 exercise.

While the Spending Review 2010 settlement saw a cut in the Assembly Commission's budget of 8.9% in cash terms, the Commission took the view that it could deliver the services required for the Assembly's purposes (including holding the Executive to account) within the agreed Spending Review 2010 settlement. The budget allocation is reviewed annually to ensure that it is sufficient to meet the Assembly's needs.

Friday 31 January 2014

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Numeracy and Literacy Signature Programme

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the schools that will receive teaching assistance as part of the Signature Programme on numeracy and literacy; and when the assistance will commence.
(AQW 25953/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Department of Education is taking forward the Delivering Social Change Signature Programme to provide additional literacy and numeracy support within primary and post primary schools, announced by us on 10 October 2012. As a result of these measures, a total of 233.3 full-time equivalent graduated teachers, who are not currently in work, are being recruited to deliver tuition to children in primary and post-primary schools who are currently struggling to achieve educational standards.

Recruitment of the teachers, funded under the Delivering Social Change Signature Programme, is ongoing.

A list of Primary Schools due to receive extra teaching support under the Delivering Social Change Signature Programme on Literacy and Numeracy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

A list of Post Primary Schools due to receive extra teaching support under the Delivering Social Change Signature Programme on Literacy and Numeracy has been placed in the Assembly Library.

North/South Bodies: Savings Targets

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the efficiency saving targets for each of the North South Bodies within this budget period; and (ii) the savings which have been realised to date.
(AQW 26080/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Since 2011, all North South Bodies have been required to deliver efficiency savings of 3% year-on-year calculated against their 2010 budget.

To date all bodies have met these targets.

Together: Building a United Community: Summer Camps

Mr Copeland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the 100 summer camps to be delivered in Together: Building a United Community, to detail the purpose of the camps; and whether there is a planned year round engagement with the young people involved in the camps.
(AQW 27775/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The preparation work for the planned summer camps is currently in a co-design phase with voluntary and community groups, external stakeholders and other interested groups. We plan to deliver a number of pilot summer camps in Summer 2014 well in advance of the 2015 target set out in the Together: Building a United Community Strategy.

Legal Actions

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how much their Department spent on (i) legal costs; and (ii) paying damages or compensation as a consequence of legal actions, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 27957/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In the last five financial years from 2008-09 to 2012-13, our Department has spent £191,870.74 on legal costs. Nothing has been spent on paying damages or compensation as a consequence of legal action.

‘Building a Prosperous and United Community’: Economic Package

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the progress made to date under the Building a Prosperous and United Community economic package.
(AQW 28149/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Executive and the UK Government are continuing to make progress towards the commitments made in the Economic Pact.

We have delivered a successful G8 branded Investment Conference with Tourism Ireland developing a considerable PR campaign to build on the G8 legacy.

Securing the right policy levers, and in particular the devolution of Corporation Tax powers, remains a priority for the Executive. We are continuing to advance the case for devolution of Corporation Tax within the timeframe set out in the Pact.

We have confirmed that we will continue to benefit from 100% assisted area status until at least 2017.

We have undertaken analysis to help inform a number of policy options on the establishment of Enterprise Zones. Officials have also had discussions in relation to establishing Enterprise Zones, including engagement with England, Scotland and Wales.

The Joint Ministerial Taskforce is examining whether tailored support is required for local banks and how support for local businesses can be maximised to improve access to finance. An Access to Finance Implementation Panel has been established as recommended in the Economic Advisory Group’s “Review of Access to Finance for NI Business”. The first meeting was held on 3 October 2013.

Work is underway to address barriers to access for tourists such as visa recognition and processing.

The Executive has agreed the Asset Management Strategy which includes recommendations to improve processes and deliver significant projects that will unlock value through more efficient and effective management of assets.

We have also made good progress with the Better Regulation Executive, to progress a review of business red tape in the local economy.

Childcare: Bright Start

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the (i) funding available for the early actions contained within Bright Start; and (ii) budget to implement the actions of the childcare strategy, when it is released in 2014.
(AQW 28246/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The £12 million Executive Childcare Fund was put in place in 2011. Its remaining funds are available to support the key first actions.

Childcare: Bright Start

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the rationale for choosing a figure of 5,000 to 7,000 school aged childcare places, which are contained within the early actions of Bright Start; and what further actions are being taken to sustain the current level of funding for childcare within the voluntary and community sector.
(AQW 28301/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The principal rationale for Bright Start aiming to sustain or create up to 7,000 school age childcare places is that school age childcare is the single biggest area of unmet childcare need. That was made clear by parents and stakeholders during consultation.

The places are intended to bring about a measurable increase in services and, thereby, begin to close the gap in current provision. However, they are just a start. Work will continue under the full Bright Start Strategy. We plan to prepare this over the coming months and for it to run until 2020. Preparation will include identifying any additional actions that might be required.

Equality Coalition

Ms Fearon asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their discussions with the Equality Coalition.
(AQO 5008/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Junior Minister Bell and Junior Minister McCann attended a Biannual meeting with the conveners of the Equality Coalition on Wednesday 6 November.

A range of current issues was discussed including: OFMDFM’s equality co-ordinating role; Together: Building a United Community Strategy legislation; Delivering Social Change/Social Investment Fund and Anti-Poverty Strategy and OFMDFM led equality strategies.

Together: Building a United Community: Urban Village Regeneration Projects

Mr Douglas asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what criteria will be used to determine the location of the four Urban Village Regeneration Projects which were included in the Together: Building a United Community Strategy.
(AQO 5014/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The process and criteria for identifying the four urban villages will consider a number of options. These could include, but would by no means be limited to, community readiness; area need; geographical spread; and overall cost considerations.

We are currently considering areas that could potentially become sites for the urban villages and will make decisions and announcements on those in the near future.

Victims and Survivors Service: Available Services

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they assess whether victims and survivors, health professionals and non-governmental organisations are being made adequately aware of the services available from the Victims and Survivors Service.
(AQW 28638/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In order to communicate their services effectively, the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) has ensured that:

- Victims and survivors have been made aware of the services available via direct communication with all those who previously availed of support through the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund and via ongoing communication with victim/ survivor support organisations.
- Health Professionals have been made aware of the services available via ongoing communication with the Health Board, specifically with reference to ensuring that service delivery by the VSS adheres to the developments of the Psychological Therapies Strategy, and via direct communication with individual clients' General Practitioners (GPs) where necessary.
- Non-government Organisations have been made aware of the services available via communication with VSS-funded groups who are embedded in the community and voluntary sector.
- In addition, all of the above have been made aware of the services available via advertisements in the regional and local press regarding the opening of the Individual Needs Programme in April 2013.

Haass Talks: Attorney General's Submission

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to clarify and comment on the status of the Attorney General's submission to the Haass talks.
(AQW 28715/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Attorney General is an independent statutory officeholder and, as such, has contributed his views on the issues which the Panel of Parties has been established to examine. The rationale for appointing an independent Chair and vice-Chair to the Panel of Parties was to protect the integrity of the process and its independence. It would be entirely inappropriate, therefore, for us to offer clarification of any submission made to Dr Haass in the course of his engagement with members of civil society.

Public Services Hub: Fermanagh

Mr Flanagan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the efforts of the Strategic Investment Board to help Fermanagh District Council establish a public services hub on the site of the former Erne Hospital in Enniskillen.
(AQO 5109/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Work is currently underway on the site of the former Erne Hospital to procure demolition of existing buildings, to assess and deal with contamination, and to develop business cases as a prelude to the sale of the site by the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

In response to a request from the Budget Review Group, the Strategic Investment Board has provided a part-time Project Manger to co-ordinate the activities involved in the sale of the site and has part funded contamination reports.

A Site Transfer Project Team has been established with representation from the Strategic Investment Board, the current owner of the site and those public sector organisations with an interest in acquiring or occupying the site.

We understand that Fermanagh District Council is interested in buying the site subject to certain prior conditions being met in relation to demolition, decontamination and agreements with the South West College. If all goes according to plan, transfer of the site is expected in the next financial year.

The Strategic Investment Board will continue to support the actions required for the sale of the site and will be closely involved with the new owners in developing plans for a public sector hub at the site.

We applaud Fermanagh District Council and the other organisations that are committed to the development of a public sector hub at the Erne Hospital site and we expect this to be an example which others will follow in the future for the delivery of excellent and citizen-focused public services.

North/South Ministerial Council: Communiqués

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether all the Executive Ministers who attend a particular North South sectoral meeting are taken to endorse the resulting communique from that meeting.
(AQW 28802/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Joint Communiqué arising from a North South Ministerial Council meeting is agreed by Ministers in attendance.

Assembly Questions: Response Times

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what actions they will initiate to ensure that all written and oral Assembly Questions tabled to their Department are answered within the stipulated timescales.
(AQW 28835/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our Department has detailed guidance, systems and procedures in place to ensure that questions are answered as expeditiously as possible.

Visits: Japan

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide details on the meetings they had during their recent trip to Japan.
(AQW 29169/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The visit to Japan was at the invitation of Prime Minister Abe and we met with him on Monday 2 December.

The visit was focused on strengthening trade links and, along with Invest NI support, we had a wide range of meetings with existing and potential investors including Fujitsu. We are pleased that these engagements have already created results. In addition, we met with the British and Irish Ambassadors and their trade and investment staff; and the Japanese Senior Vice Foreign Minister. In addition, we hosted a NI Connections event.

Visits: Japan and the Taoiseach

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what correspondence they had with the Taoiseach, or his office, prior to their recent trip to Japan.
(AQW 29174/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We had no formal correspondence with the Taoiseach or his office. We discussed our visit with the Taoiseach informally when we last met shortly before our visit.

Visits: Japan and the Taoiseach

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings and events they attended with the Taoiseach during their recent visit to Japan.
(AQW 29175/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We met the Taoiseach and the Irish Ambassador to Japan briefly at the start of the Ambassadors' reception on Tuesday 3 December.

Visits: Japan and the Taoiseach

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their recent trip to Japan was the result of a joint invite with the Taoiseach.
(AQW 29176/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: This was not a joint invitation. Prime Minister Abe extended his invitation to us to visit Japan during the G8 Summit to strengthen Government to Government relations and to explore opportunities for business collaboration.

Visits: China and the Prime Minister

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what correspondence they had with the Prime Minister or his Office about promoting Northern Ireland prior to his trip to China.
(AQW 29177/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our officials have been in contact with the Foreign Office regarding our plans for China and the Prime Minister was fully informed and supportive of our objectives and future actions prior to his visit.

Visits: Japan and Vice-President Biden

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what prior knowledge they had that their trip to Japan coincided with a visit from Vice-President Biden.
(AQW 29179/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We were aware of US Vice-President Joe Biden's visit to Japan prior to our going there.

Visits: Japan and Vice-President Biden

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings during their recent trip to Japan were cancelled or rescheduled as a result of Vice-President Biden visiting at the same time.
(AQW 29180/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: None of our meetings were cancelled or rescheduled as a result of our visit to Japan coinciding with the US Vice-President Joe Biden.

Visits: Japan and Vice-President Biden

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what meetings they had with Vice-President Biden or the US Ambassador to Japan during their recent visit to Japan.
(AQW 29181/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We did not meet with Vice-president Biden or the US Ambassador to Japan during our visit.

Executive Website

Mr Flanagan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister on how many occassions the proposed agreement among the Executive parties on parades, select commemorations, and related protests, flags and emblems and contending with the past, has been downloaded from the Executive's website.
(AQW 29586/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Since publication on 31 December 2013 the proposed agreement has been downloaded 3,434 times.

Derry: Jobs Promoted

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 28009/11-15, why information on the total number of jobs promoted in Derry in 2012/13, broken down by company, has not yet been made available.
(AQW 29655/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Information on the number of jobs promoted, broken down by company, has not been provided as some of the information would be considered as commercially sensitive.

Derry: Jobs Created

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 28009/11-15, when details of how many jobs were created in Derry in 2012/13 will be available.
(AQW 29672/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Information provided to date includes jobs created and jobs promoted within that period. Ongoing monitoring of this information by the 'One Plan' team will indicate the number of jobs created converted from the jobs promoted.

Children's Services: Legislation

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail any policy or legislation that their Department is developing which is aimed at improving the integration of planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services; and on which date they will be published.
(AQW 29827/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As the Member will be aware from the answers to previous questions, the planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services is primarily a matter for the Department of Heath Social Services and Public Safety.

He may wish to note however that a new strategy 'Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People', is being developed and is currently out for public consultation. This strategy will provide an integrated policy framework encompassing policy on children and young people, including child poverty and children's rights.

The 'Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People' strategy proposes a more focused approach to outcomes and more collaborative working across Government and key stakeholders to deliver better outcomes for children and young people. The consultation document is available on our website at www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/dsc-children-young-people. The final strategy will be published in March 2014.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

European Funding: Legal Case

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total amount spent by her Department on legal costs for the recent court case taken against the Department of Finance and Personnel regarding European funding.
(AQW 29706/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): My Department has not yet received the final legal costs associated with the legal action taken against DARD by the Department of Finance and Personnel.

Fishing: Nephrops

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the adoption of quad rigs or four nets by the local nephrop fleet, and if not, if she will undertake an investigation into the merits of their use.
(AQW 29763/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Multiple rigs are permitted under EU Technical Conservation Regulations for the Irish Sea. I have no immediate plans to undertake an investigation into the merits of their use as our research focus must remain on developing highly selective fishing gear in order to reduce catches of unwanted fish by the Nephrops fleet. However my Department will monitor use of such gear and its potential impact.

Farm Safety Partnership: Update

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the work on achievements on the Farm Safety Partnership, including the funding costs.
(AQW 29806/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In response to the worsening situation regarding fatalities on farms, the Farm Safety Partnership was established in May 2012 between the Health & Safety Executive NI, DARD and the Ulster Farmers Union. Since then the Partnership has also been joined by NFU Mutual, the Young farmers Clubs of Ulster and NIAPA.

The aim of this Partnership is to improve health and safety standards on farms and strive to significantly reduce work-related deaths, injuries and illnesses. The Farm Safety Partnership developed an Action Plan that sets out its priorities and objectives over 18 months ending March 2014. This was launched at Ravenhill Rugby Ground on 27 November 2012.

The Action Plan contains 44 commitments of which DARD has lead responsibility for 7. The 7 actions allocated to my Department are set out in the table below and includes my Department's actions to date:

Action Number	Action	Comments
2.2	Develop new health and safety training materials and presentation slides for new course for farmers.	Completed. Subject to monitoring and evaluation.
2.6	Deliver a new health and safety awareness course to 3,000 farmers using existing Farm Family Options, Focus Farms and existing trainers by March 2014	To date there have been 2559 registrations with 129 workshops completed with 2400 attendees. A further 9 courses are scheduled. There has been increased activity at Focus Farm events and an additional 127 local halls/venues have been put forward for use. To date DARD have spent £159,896 in relation to the Farm Safe Awareness courses which are funded under the Rural Development programme.

Action Number	Action	Comments
2.10	Deliver appropriate health and safety messages at DARD events attended by farmers, which would include CAFRE's training events, open days and focus farm visits.	A number of events have taken place where farm safety material has been disseminated including Balmoral Show, DARD Direct offices. Since November 2012, CAFRE have held 1027 events with over 17,500 participants where in addition to the main topic of the event, farm safety material has been made available to those attending.
2.11	Deliver key health and safety presentations to all CAFRE students studying agriculture or horticulture.	All CAFRE courses have always contained a high level of farm safety as part of the course. Since the introduction of the farm safety partnership there is a heightened focus on safety. CAFRE have been working with HSENI in relation to course content aiding the increase of focus on safety. Translink have also presented to students in relation to the safety of farm machinery at railway crossing. There are 250 FSA packs being delivered to all students who will be on work placements during the 2013/14 academic year.
3.1	Examine the potential for health and safety standards to be taken into account when awarding grants or loans to farmers and report back to the FSP with recommendations.	The Department is considering the potential to take health and safety standards into account as part of the NEW RDP 2014 - 20
3.2	Explore the potential for financial assistance to farmers to promote improved health and safety on farms.	Over the three Tranches of the Farm Modernisation Programme, some £4.6m of financial support for items that promote safer working on farms was awarded in letters of offer to successful applicant.
4.1	Explore the potential to repeat the Farms and Farm Families in Northern Ireland Social Survey, in order to update information on non-fatal accidents, farm safety awareness and training in the use of hazardous equipment.	A pilot survey was posted to a random sample of 1,000 farmers in December 2013. The survey will remain open until the end of January. The pilot exercise will be evaluated in February 2014 Any lessons learned will be incorporated into the main survey which is planned to begin in March 2014. The survey results will provide useful; baseline information and inform the Partnership's forward work post March 2014, when the current action plan will end.

As part of its farm Safety Partnership involvement my Department provided £139k in funding towards the cost of the Partnership's 2013 Multimedia Campaign. My Department will also be providing an additional £111k for the 2014/15 year to extend this highly effective campaign.

Single Farm Payments: Non-compliance

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many farmers have been convicted of, and/or had their Single Farm Payments reduced, for non-compliance regarding environmental matters, in the last three years.
(AQW 29819/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The number of farm businesses that have had their Single Farm Payment reduced for non-compliance regarding environmental matters in the each of the last three years is:

2011	455
2012	386
2013	244

My Department has not prosecuted any farmer under the Environmental Impact Assessment (Agriculture) Regulations (NI) 2007 for non-compliance regarding environmental matters in the above three years.

Single Farm Payments: Outstanding Claims

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of Single Farm Payment claims that are yet to be paid, including the number of those that were subject to an inspection in 2014.
(AQW 29821/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: 2,510 claims for 2013 Single Farm Payment remain to be paid

This figure includes 1,418 claims that were subject to a 2013 inspection

Single Farm Payments: Outstanding Claims

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to the number of Single Farm Payment claims yet to be paid, to detail the number and percentage based in (i) lowland areas; (ii) Severely Disadvantaged Areas; and (iii) Disadvantaged Areas.
(AQW 29822/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The total number of claims received for the 2013 scheme year was 37,636

The number of 2013 claims remaining to be paid is 2,510 the requested breakdown is as follows:

1 Lowland areas = 618 claims, that is, 1.6% of the claims received

2 Severely disadvantaged areas = 1,024 claims, that is, 2.7%

3 Disadvantaged areas = 868 claims, that is, 2.3%

Common Agricultural Policy: Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 Transfer

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what efforts she made to reach a compromise on the Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 transfer, after losing the High Court challenge and before the end of year deadline, including before she sought emergency approval through the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.
(AQW 29832/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As a result of the High Court judgement on the Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 transfer on Friday 27 December 2013, I immediately sought urgent Executive approval that 7% of the funds available to the north of Ireland under Pillar 1 of the Common Agricultural Policy 2014-2020 should be transferred to Pillar2. I clearly explained the pressing timescale for a decision and that this decision was required no later than 30 December. This was a matter that needed to be dealt with urgently, as the European Commission had indicated that a Member State wishing to avail of the provisions in 2014 must notify its decision by 31 December 2013.

As approval was not granted by this deadline, Defra were advised that Executive agreement had not been reached. As a result, a 0% rate of transfer for the north of Ireland was notified to the European Commission by Defra.

Single Farm Payments: Maximum Eligible Area

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 29493/11-15, of the 3,529 farm businesses where one or more fields were claimed with an area greater than the Maximum Eligible Area, and that responded to the Department's letter requesting an explanation from the farm business within a ten day period, how many subsequently received payment in December 2013.
(AQW 29878/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Of the initial 3,529 farm businesses where one or more fields were claimed with an area greater than the Maximum Eligible Area

2,721 of these businesses were paid in December 2013.

A total of 3,104 of these businesses have now been paid up to 23 January 2014

Every effort is being made to progress the remaining 425 cases as quickly as practical to payment. Reasons for delay include the need to apply inspection findings and outstanding information, such as bank account or probate details, which has been requested from relevant farm businesses.

Single Farm Payments: Maximum Eligible Area

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 29493/11-15, of the 3,529 farm businesses where one or more fields were claimed with an area greater than the Maximum Eligible Area, and that responded to the Department's letter requesting an explanation from the farm business within a ten day period, how many faced delayed payments due to a departmental error.
(AQW 29879/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Of the initial 3,529 farm business where one or more fields were claimed with an area greater than the Maximum Eligible Area none were delayed payment due to a departmental error.

Farms: Inspections

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what statutory notice must her Department give to farmers prior to (i) on farm inspections; and (ii) aerial inspections.
(AQW 29880/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There is no requirement to provide notice of an on-the-spot control.

Movement Authorisation Licence

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the circumstances in which a movement authorisation licence (MC2L) can be issued in respect of cattle; and by what criteria can discretion be exercised and by whom.
(AQW 29901/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: An MC2L is a licence to move cattle that are restricted either individually or on a herd basis. The restrictions are applied for disease control reasons e.g. Tuberculosis (TB) or Brucellosis (Br), or Identification, Registration and Movement (IRM) reasons. MC2Ls must be applied for, by completion of an MC2LA application form. Herd keepers must obtain an MC2L before restricted animals leave the farm. These movement licences cannot be issued retrospectively.

Animals individually restricted for TB/Br such as TB and Br reactor animals and animals with inconclusive test results, if moving direct to slaughter can only be moved using the MC2L movement authorisation licence.

In exceptional circumstances, for example significant animal welfare or human hardship problems, discretion can be exercised for the movement of restricted animals. Permission for such moves may be granted following consideration by the local Divisional Veterinary Officer (DVO) or by the Regional Senior Principal Veterinary Officer (SPVO) after advice from the local DVO, depending on the reason for the restriction.

Rural Development Programme: Mid Ulster

Mr Milne asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much investment has been provided in Mid Ulster via the Rural Development Programme, broken down by each council area.
(AQW 29906/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Table 1 below provides a breakdown of expenditure on Axis 1 and Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme 2007-13 by each Council area in the Mid Ulster Constituency.

Table 1

Constituency Mid Ulster	Priority	Total
Cookstown	Axis 1 - improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector	1,018,068.55
	Axis 3 - the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy	2,303,958.24
Cookstown Total		**3,322,026.79**
Dungannon & South Tyrone	Axis 1 - improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector	1,002,462.01
	Axis 3 - the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy	858,007.15
Dungannon & South Tyrone Total *		**1,860,469.16**
Magherafelt	Axis 1 - improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector	683,039.56
	Axis 3 - the quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy	2,274,273.15
Magherafelt Total		**2,957,312.71**
Mid Ulster Total		**£8,139,808.66**

Expenditure up to and including 31 December 2013

*Dungannon & South Tyrone represents only those electoral wards which fall into the Mid Ulster Constituency.

DARD does not hold records of expenditure by Council area for Axis 2 measures. Table 2 below shows Axis 2 expenditure for the Mid Ulster Constituency.

Table 2

Measure 2.1 Less Favoured Areas Compensatory Allowance Scheme	2,125,549
Measure 2.2 Agri-environment Programme:	16,575,705
Measure 2.3 & 2.4 Forestry Measures	135,000*
Mid Ulster Total	**£18,836,254**

Expenditure up to and including 31 December 2013

* DARD does not hold records by Parliamentary Constituency for expenditure on support for existing woodland. Therefore this figure is expenditure for new woodland creation only and excludes support for existing woodland.

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the ministerial meetings on agriculture issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council.
(AQW 29984/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Agriculture issues are not formally listed amongst the areas of work considered by the British-Irish Council. However, the previous DARD Minister attended two meetings at which 'Marine' issues were discussed.

Since May 2007, there have been 14 North South Ministerial Council Meetings for Agriculture and 15 North South Ministerial Council meetings for the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC).

The above response relates to specific Sectoral meetings in Agriculture and FCILC format. However, the NSMC also meets in Plenary and Institutional format and Agriculture issues may also be raised within these forums.

Rivers Agency: Inspection Programme

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the timescale for the completion and reporting of the Rivers Agency's post-event inspection programme following the recent tidal surges.
(AQW 30052/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency's post-event serviceability inspections are progressing well, with completion anticipated by early February 2014. In parallel, more detailed structural inspections are being progressed, with completion anticipated by the end of March 2014. There are no current proposals to report externally on the outcome of these inspections.

Common Agriculture Policy: Pillar 1 Consultation

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to Question 17 of the recent CAP Pillar 1 Consultation, to outline why she is proposing that a Level 3 qualification in agriculture, or an equivalent subject, should be a requirement for young farmers and new entrants to receive an award from the regional reserve.
(AQW 30053/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under Regulation (EU) No 1307/2013, the Department has discretion to set objective and non-discriminatory eligibility criteria as regards the appropriate skills, experience and/or education of the claimant when making allocations to young farmers and new entrants from the Regional Reserve.

In the recently closed public consultation on 'Policy Options arising from the Reform of the CAP (Pillar I Direct Payments)', I sought stakeholder views on a suggestion that we would include an eligibility criterion that would require young farmers and new entrants to hold a Level III educational qualification in agriculture or a closely related subject.

The consultation has now closed and I will carefully consider all responses received before reaching a decision on the way forward.

Aerial Inspections

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how her Department selected the areas that were to be subjected to aerial inspection, including whether an equality assessment formed part of the selection process.
(AQW 30104/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In accordance with Commission Regulations for area based schemes a minimum of 5% inspections (on-the-spot checks) must be carried out each year. These can be carried out by farms visits or remotely using aerial imager. To meet our target for inspections by remote sensing in 2013 two areas were needed. The location of each of the areas was selected randomly and satellite imagery for each was requested from the European Commission. An equality assessment was not undertaken because of the random selection process.

Finches

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether there are any restrictions or documents required for the import of finches from Great Britain.
(AQW 30228/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There are presently no restrictions on the import of finches from Britain. A general import licence is in place to permit the import of captive birds, including finches, and only requires the birds to be accompanied by a commercial document signed by the importer. Veterinary certification is not required. Copies of the licence and a sample commercial document are available on the DARD website.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Casement Park: GAA

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether, following funded renovations to Casement Park, it will be available for use by sports other than the Gaelic Athletic Association.
(AQW 29773/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): The matter of the use of the Stadiums by sports other than that of the Governing Body is a matter for the governing bodies in the first instance.

In March 2013, the GAA Annual Congress approved the use of their facilities by the IRFU as part of any proposed bid for the 2023 Rugby World Cup.

The redeveloped Casement Park along with Croke Park is included in the list of potential venues.

Tour of the North Cycle Race

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQT 414/11-15 and the stated need to ensure no funding gaps exist that may prevent the Tour of the North cycling race from going ahead, upon what basis has her Department decided not to fund the event.
(AQW 29852/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for major sporting events, including the Tour of the North Cycle Race, rests in the first instance with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI).

However, as a result of AQT 414/11-15 on 25 November 2013, I asked my officials to meet the race organisers to explore if DCAL could assist in any other way. Officials from DCAL and Sport NI met with the race organisers on 19 December 2013 to discuss such support, including how the event could support my Department's priorities around promoting equality and targeting poverty and social exclusion. Sport NI offered to work with the organisers to explore this further; however, as yet no such request has been received by Sport NI. The organisers were also advised that Sport NI's pilot programme for 2013/14 International Events had closed, however, following a planned evaluation exercise, this may be an option for them to consider in future years, should the programme be implemented beyond 2014.

Department of Education

Schools: Sports Pitches

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to list the schools that have a 3G or 4G sports pitch in their grounds.
(AQW 29722/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The following schools have a 3G or 4G sports pitch in their grounds.

Education and Library Board Area	School Name
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	Aquinas GS
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	Ashfield Boys HS
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	Boys Model School
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	Orangefield PS
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	Rathmore GS
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	St Dominic's HS
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	St Malachy's College

Education and Library Board Area	School Name
Belfast Education and Library Board Area	St Patrick's College
Western Education and Library Board Area	Castlederg HS
Western Education and Library Board Area	Erne Integrated College
Western Education and Library Board Area	Holy Cross College, Strabane
Western Education and Library Board Area	Lisnagelvin PS
Western Education and Library Board Area	Omagh CBS
Western Education and Library Board Area	St Columb's College, Derry
Western Education and Library Board Area	St Mary's College, Derry
Western Education and Library Board Area	St Mary's College, Irvinestown
North Eastern Education and Library Board Area	Dalriada School, Ballymoney
North Eastern Education and Library Board Area	St Colm's HS, Draperstown
South Eastern Education and Library Board Area	Assumption GS, Ballynahinch
South Eastern Education and Library Board Area	Bangor GS
South Eastern Education and Library Board Area	Our Lady & St Patrick's College, Knock
South Eastern Education and Library Board Area	St Patrick's GS, Downpatrick
Southern Education and Library Board Area	Abbey GS, Newry
Southern Education and Library Board Area	Drumgor PS (under construction)
Southern Education and Library Board Area	Lurgan Junior HS
Southern Education and Library Board Area	Rathfriland HS
Southern Education and Library Board Area	Royal School, Dungannon
Southern Education and Library Board Area	St Catherine's College, Armagh
Southern Education and Library Board Area	St Colman's College, Newry
Southern Education and Library Board Area	St Patrick's College, Dungannon

Southern Education and Library Board: Term Service Contracts for Maintenance

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the operation of the Term Service Contracts for Maintenance within the Southern Education and Library Board, how many compensation events payments have been authorised since the commencement of the contract.
(AQW 29771/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) have advised me that they do not maintain a separate record of compensation events on Term Service Contracts for Maintenance. Therefore I am unable to provide the information requested.

Education and Library Boards: Term Service Contracts for Maintenance

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the operation of Term Service Contracts for Maintenance, whether all the Education and Library Boards make compensation events payments similar to those paid in the Southern Education and Library Board.
(AQW 29772/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Currently, only two other Education and Library Boards operate Term Service Contracts (TSC) for the provision of maintenance services. I have been advised by both Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) and South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB), that their TSCs for Maintenance include a clause allowing for Compensation events, which is similar to the Contract operated by the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB).

Similar to the SELB, neither Board maintain a separate record of compensation events on Term Service Contracts for Maintenance.

The Western Education and Library Board (WELB) and the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) are in the process of introducing TSC arrangements for Maintenance and so have not paid any compensation events to date.

School Closures

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to list the name and location of closed schools, that are registered as owned by his Department or an Education and Library Board, including the date on which these schools were closed.
(AQW 29829/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not own any schools.

Please see below, a table of properties which are no longer in operation as schools but are still owned by the Education and Library Boards.

These properties may still be under consideration for other educational purposes, bound by covenants requiring legal advice, leased or at some stage of the disposal process.

Demolition of the school building may also have been carried out since the closure of the school.

List of Closed schools, still the responsibility of the Education and Library Boards

Closed School & Location	Date Closed
North Eastern Education and Library Board	
Ballypriormore Primary School, Islandmagee	31/08/2003
Glenarm Primary School, Glenarm, Larne	31/8/06
Maghera High School - site, Maghera	31/08/09
Garvagh High School, Garvagh	31/08/13
Bruslee CLASS centre (former Primary School)	Closed as a centre on 1/11/12.
Cullycapple Primary School, Coleraine	31/08/13
Drumard Primary School, Maghera	31/08/13
Belfast Education and Library Board	
Ballygolan Primary School, Belfast	31/8/13
Balmoral High School, Belfast	31/8/08
Beechfield Primary School, Belfast	30/9/10
Castle High School (Land)	31/8/09
City of Belfast School of Music & Porters Annex building	10/2010
Mount Gilbert Community College – Site	31/8/07
Suffolk Primary School, Belfast, (main school building demolished)	31/8/09
Vere Foster Primary School, Belfast	31/8/11
Western Education and Library Board	
Duke of Westminster HS, Kesh, Co Fermanagh	31/08/06
Faughan Valley HS, Londonderry	31/08/07
Bridgehill PS, Castlederg, Co Tyrone	31/08/13
Lisnaskea HS, Co Fermanagh	31/08/13
Ballycolman Nursery School, (now a maintained Nursery Unit leasing site.)	31/03/13
Southern Education and Library Board	
Annaghmore PS, Craigavon	01/09/05
Collone PS, Armagh	31/08/08
Keady PS, Armagh	31/08/12
Toberlane PS, Cookstown	31/08/03
Tullymacarette PS, Dromore	31/08/07
South Eastern Education and Library Board	
Ballycarrickmaddy former PS, Lisburn (remainder)	1/8/02
Charley Memorial Primary School, Dunmurry	31/8/07
Derriaghy Primary School, Lisburn	31/8/11

Closed School & Location	Date Closed
Dunmurry High School, Belfast	31/8/12
Groomsport Primary School	31/8/07
Hilden IPS, Lisburn	30/11/08
Killard House Special School, Newtownards	24/8/09
Lisnasharragh High School, Belfast	31/8/08
Clough Primary School, Downpatrick	30/4/05
Downshire Primary School, Newcastle	30/4/05
Newtownbreda Primary School	31/8/09
Ravarnette PS, Lisburn	31/12/99
Redburn Primary School, Holywood	31/8/12
Kindle PS, Ballykinler	31/08/08

Free School Meals: Comparisons

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what percentage of pupils receive free school meals; and how this compares to (i) England; (ii) Scotland; and (iii) Wales.
(AQW 29934/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The most up-to-date validated figures for free school meal entitlement across the jurisdictions relate to the 2012/13 school year and these are detailed in the table below.

Free school meal entitlement – The North of Ireland - 2012/13

Country	Primary	Post-primary
The North of Ireland	29.9%	19.0%

Source: NI school census,

Information relating to the proportion of pupils in England, Scotland and Wales with entitlement to free school meals is detailed in the table below.

Free school meal entitlement –England, Wales and Scotland- 2012/13

Country	Primary	Post-primary
England	18.1%	15.1%
Scotland	22.1%	15.4%
Wales	18.9%	16.2%

Sources: England school census, Scottish Healthy Living Survey and Welsh Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC).

Note:

1 Figures for primary include nursery, reception and year 1 - 7 classes.

2 In Northern Ireland different criteria is applied to primary and post primary age pupils. (See entry for working tax credit in table overleaf)

3 Data for primary and post-primary schools in England and Wales include pupils that attend middle schools.

4 Data for England excludes pupils in pupil referral units who are registered with other providers and further education colleges.

Free school meal figures for the different jurisdictions are not directly comparable due to the different eligibility criteria applied in each area. These differences are summarised in the table overleaf. For this reason, care should be exercised when making comparisons between regions.

	North of Ireland	England/Wales	Scotland
Income Support	■	■	■
Income-based Jobseekers' Allowance	■	■	■

	North of Ireland	England/Wales	Scotland
Income-related Employment and Support Allowance	■	■	■
Child Tax Credit	■ (if not entitled to WTC and annual gross income <£16,190)	■ (if not entitled to WTC and annual gross income <£16,190)	■ (if not entitled to WTC and annual gross income <£15,910)
Working Tax Credit	■ (if annual gross income <£16,190 and child is at nursery or primary school)	X	■ (Both maximum child tax credit and maximum working tax credit and income is < £6,420
Working Tax Credit run-on	■	■	X
Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999	■ (child of an asylum seeker supported by the Home Office National Asylum Service (NASS)	■	■
Guarantee Element of the State Pension Credit	■	■	X
Universal Credit	N/A	■	■
Statement of SEN and designated to require a special diet	■	X	X
Boarder at a special school	■	X	X
None of the above apply and child presents at school hungry	■	X	X

Lisanelly Shared Education Campus: Programme Board

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the (i) Terms of Reference; and (ii) composition of the Programme Board for the Lisanelly project.
(AQW 30007/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is in the final stages of reconstituting the Programme Board for the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus with the intention of holding the initial meeting in February. When the composition of the Board has been confirmed and the Terms of Reference agreed the information will be posted on the Department's website.

Lisanelly Shared Education Campus: Stakeholder Consultation Group

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the (i) Terms of Reference; and (ii) composition of the Stakeholder Consultation Group for the Lisanelly project.
(AQW 30008/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is in the final stages of reconstituting the Programme Board for the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus with a view to holding the initial meeting in February. The Programme Board will consider the Terms of Reference and composition of the Stakeholder Consultation Group moving forward. When this has been determined the information will be posted on the Department's website.

Education and Library Boards: Salaries

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 28966/11-15, when the last independent review was completed.
(AQW 30009/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Senior Management Pay Review Panel (SMPRP) last reviewed the salary ranges of Chief Executive and Second Tier Officers and made recommendations to the Department in December 2013.

Delivering Social Change: Literacy and Numeracy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 28475/11-15, how many teaching posts in the Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Project are yet to be filled.
(AQW 30011/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As at 23 January 2014, 27.5 FTE posts remain to be filled. In the primary sector this comprises 1 FTE post (5 schools requiring a teacher for 1 day per week) and in the post-primary sector 26.5 FTE posts (12 full-time and 6 part-time English posts, 10 full-time and 3 part-time mathematics posts). The recruitment process for these outstanding posts is currently underway.

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the ministerial meetings on education issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council, since May 2007.
(AQW 30036/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At the British Irish Council (BIC) summit in September 2008, the Council adopted Early Years Policy as a new work sector with the Welsh Government as the lead administration. Since then there has been 10 Summit meetings where Early Years has been discussed. Early Years was the subject of the BIC summit held in Wales in November 2012 which I attended.

The North South Ministerial Council meets in education sector format in order to make decisions on common policies and approaches in areas such as education for children with special needs, educational under-achievement, teacher qualifications and school, youth and teacher exchanges. Since May 2007 there have been 13 meetings.

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education how many children are treated in outreach by the Middletown Centre for Autism.
(AQW 30039/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism has advised that 20 children were referred for outreach support from 1 April 2013 to 30 November 2013.

A further 123 children also benefitted from support offered to the referred children within the same school.

Teachers: Ill-health Retirement Benefits

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Education how many teachers, in receipt of ill health retirement benefits, have had their eligibility for this benefit reviewed in each of the last three years.
(AQW 30040/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of teachers in receipt of ill health retirement benefits who have had their eligibility for this benefit reviewed in the last three financial years is detailed in the table below:

Financial Year	No. of Teachers
2013-2014 (to date)	1
2012-2013	0
2011-2012	2

Priorities for Youth: Update

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of Priorities for Youth.
(AQW 30072/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Following publication of Priorities for Youth in October 2013, implementation is being taken forward in partnership with the statutory and voluntary sectors on a phased basis with full implementation anticipated by April 2016.

A key priority in Priorities for Youth is the establishment of a Regional Advisory Group which will involve a range of stakeholders with interest and expertise in youth service policy and delivery. Work is in hand to take this forward so that the Group can be established as soon as possible. The Group will provide advice to the Education and Skills Authority or the Education and Library Boards/Youth Council in the interim.

Priorities for Youth: Youth Council

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact of Priorities for Youth on the work of the Youth Council.
(AQW 30073/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Youth Council will continue to carry out its statutory duties as outlined in the Youth Service (NI) Order 1989 until the establishment of ESA. Under Priorities for Youth, the Youth Council and Education and Library Boards will work collaboratively to ensure that youth services continue to be provided in line with assessed need. Officials have recently held discussions with the Youth Council and Education and Library Boards in relation to the delivery of key actions arising from Priorities for Youth. I expect the Youth Council to play an integral part in the delivery of the actions arising from Priorities for Youth.

Capital Spend: Projects

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 22718/11-15, for an update on the amount of finance expended to date in each of the projects listed.
(AQW 30077/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Finances expended against the 18 capital build projects announced in June 2012 up to 31 December 2013 are shown in the table below.

School Scheme	Type of School	All Expenditure up to 31/03/2013 £000's	2013/14 Expenditure up to 31/12/2013 £000's	Total Spend to Date £000's
Coláiste Feirste, Belfast	Post-Primary	2,645	69	2,714
St Clare's Convent Primary School	Primary			
St Colman's Abbey Primary School, Newry		840	155	995
St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	Primary	159	376	535
Dromore Central Primary School	Primary	324	309	633
Eglinton Primary School	Primary	160	90	250
Tannaghmore Primary School, Lurgan	Primary	209	121	330
Ebrington Controlled PS, Derry	Primary	164	27	191
Foyle & Londonderry College	Post-Primary	15073	316	15389
St Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan	Primary	160	55	215
Victoria Park Primary School, Belfast	Primary	720	0	720
Enniskillen Model Primary School	Primary	142	10	152
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge	Primary	69	124	193
Bheann Mhadagain, Belfast	Primary	52	74	126
Belmont House Special School, Derry	Special	10	1	11
Rossmar Special School, Limavady	Special	19	6	25
Castletower Ballymena	Special	10	13	23
Arvalee School & Resource Centre, Omagh	Special	0	341	341
St Gerards Education Resource Centre	Special	2	2781	2783
		20,758	**4,868**	**25,626**

The expenditure up to 31 March 2013 is based on expenditure reported at 2012/13 Final Outturn.

It should be noted that the figure for Coláiste Feirste, Belfast and Foyle & Londonderry College include site purchases of £2,325k and £14,500k respectively.

Expenditure for the current financial year reflects payments against invoices presented as at 31 December 2013.

Projects: Opening Dates

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 22718/11-15, what is the anticipated date of opening for each of the projects listed.
(AQW 30082/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The anticipated dates of opening for the new build projects below are based on current programmes but, as is the nature of major construction projects, are subject to change.

School Scheme	Anticipated opening date
Coláiste Feirste, Belfast	Qtr 4 2016
St Clare's Convent Primary School	Qtr 3 2015
St Colman's Abbey Primary School, Newry	
St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	Qtr 2 2015
Dromore Central Primary School	Qtr 2 2015
Eglinton Primary School	Qtr 3 2016
Tannaghmore Primary School, Lurgan	Qtr 2 2016
Ebrington Controlled PS, Derry	Qtr 3 2016
Foyle & Londonderry College	Qtr 3 2016
St Teresa's Primary School, Lurgan	Qtr 1 2015
Victoria Park Primary School, Belfast	Qtr 2 2015
Enniskillen Model Primary School	Qtr 3 2016
St Mary's Primary School, Banbridge	Qtr 4 2016
Bheann Mhadagain, Belfast	Qtr 1 2015
Belmont House Special School, Derry	Qtr 2 2017
Rossmar Special School, Limavady	Qtr 1 2017
Castletower Ballymena	Qtr 1 2017
Arvalee School & Resource Centre, Omagh	Qtr 4 2015
St Gerards Education Resource Centre	March 2014

Preschool Places 2014-15

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of need for pre-school places in the 2014/15 academic year; and how many additional places will be made available to meet this need.
(AQW 30083/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Executive's Programme for Government Commitment is to provide at least one year of pre-school education for every for every child whose parents want it. During the 2013/14 admissions process, 99.8% of children, whose parents engaged with the admissions process to the end, were offered a funded pre-school place.

The Pre-School Education Advisory Group (PEAG) in each Education and Library Board manages the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) at local level and, as in previous years, the Department has worked with the PEAGs to assess demand for funded pre-school education places for the 2014/15 academic year.

As a result, funding has been made available for 24,159 pre-school places in statutory and voluntary/private pre-school settings. This is an increase on the previous year. In addition, recognising the need for pre-school places in the area, I have recently approved a further 52 places in Dungannon.

The position will be monitored and should pressures arise I will consider how best to respond.

Craigavon: Post-primary Education

Mrs Dobson asked Minister of Education, in light of the community reaction to the area planning proposals known as Option A concerning the provision of post-primary education in the Craigavon area, whether he has held any discussions with the Southern Education and Library Board on the removal of this option to move on from the current impasse.
(AQW 30090/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As you are aware the area planning process is being managed by the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the consultation on the controlled post-primary in the Craigavon area has been undertaken by the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB).

It is the responsibility of the SELB to determine the appropriate structure for controlled post-primary provision in the Craigavon area and to bring forward proposals to the Department of Education (DE).

I am aware that the SELB voted in favour of Option A which, if approved, would see the reorganisation of post-primary education in the Portadown, Lurgan and Tandragee areas resulting in new bi-lateral schools with both selective and non-selective intake. I have not held any discussions with the SELB on the removal of this or any other option.

Dickson Plan: Post-primary Education

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education how students from post-primary schools in the Dickson Plan catchment area can voice their opinion about the present impasse over the future of post-primary education in their schools.
(AQW 30091/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As you are aware the area planning process is being managed by the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the consultation on the controlled post-primary in the Craigavon area has been undertaken by the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB).

The SELB published their Draft Post-Primary Area Plan for public consultation between 5 July and 26 October 2012 during which time all interested parties had an opportunity to submit their views on the future of post-primary education in the area.

The SELB also advise that they have also consulted with young people directly on the proposals in their Draft Area Plan throughout the process.

I am aware that the SELB recently issued consultation questionnaires to parents of each pupil, governors, teaching and non-teaching staff of the 7 post-primary and 34 designated feeder primary schools in the Craigavon two-tier system.

An analysis of these responses to the consultation will be presented to the Board at its meeting on 12 February 2014. A decision will then be taken on progression of development proposals for any changes proposed.

It is important to note that the Board's decision is only part of the process. Any significant change to the existing provision requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal (DP) to support that intent. Following publication of a DP there is a statutory 2-month period during which anyone who wishes can forward objections or comments to DE

I will be happy to meet with pupils, parents, schools, elected representatives and other interested parties throughout the consultation process and will listen to their views and concerns before I make a final decision at the end of the two-month period that follows publication of a DP.

Special Schools: Looked-after Children

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how many looked after children attend special schools; and what percentage of these children are in (i) foster care; (ii) kinship care; and (iii) residential care.
(AQW 30094/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Data relating to looked after children are collected via the annual school census. The type of care received by looked after children has been collected for the first time in 2013/14. This data will be available at the end of February 2014.

Primary Integrating/Enriching Education Project

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for (i) continuing the legacy of the Primary Integrating/ Enriching Education programme, along with other shared education projects; and (ii) using the project as a pilot to encourage further shared education.
(AQW 30105/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As I indicated in my statement to the Assembly on 22 October 2013, I am committed to delivering the Programme for Government commitments to advance shared education through a variety of actions. My Department is currently working with the Office of the First and deputy First Minister and the Atlantic Philanthropies on a funding programme to support shared education.

The Primary Integrating/Enriching Education (PIEE) programme, along with two others, was subject to evaluation by the Shared Education Learning Forum (SELF), with the Education and Training Inspectorate taking forward evaluations of a number of other shared education projects. Lessons learnt from these evaluations are being taken into account in developing the new funding programme, thus building on the legacy of the Sharing in Education Programme.

The PIEE project has already been used as an example of shared education and my Department will continue to use this and other similar projects to encourage further shared education.

North Down Schools: PPPs and PFIs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to list the (i) schools in North Down that are subject to Public Private Partnerships or Private Finance Initiative contracts; (ii) length of each contract and its remaining term; (iii) cost of each contract; and (iv) date on which each contract was signed.
(AQW 30108/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

(i) There is one school in the North Down Constituency, Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College which is part of a Public Private Partnership (PPP) contract. This PPP contract also includes Nendrum College, Comber (Strangford Constituency). Both schools are in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.

(ii) The PPP project has a 30 year contract and there are 25 years remaining of this contract.

(iii) The cost of the contract, covering both schools, is £160m over the 30 years of the project.

(iv) The contract, for both schools, was signed on 1 September 2006 and Bangor Academy and Sixth Form College became operational on 1 May 2008.

South Eastern Education and Library Board: Capital Development

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area that have been identified as requiring new capital development, including those that are a priority.
(AQW 30127/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My announcement of June 2012 and January 2013 represents a capital investment of approximately £393m in 40 schools projects.

One of the primary projects in the NEELB area has been withdrawn and of the remaining 39, twenty-four are in the primary sector but none are in the SEELB area.

I am liaising with all Managing Authorities, including those in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, to identify priorities for new capital investment, and I will continue to review the position within the constraints of the available Education capital budget.

Special Education Needs: Lurgan

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education whether there are plans to provide a facility for post-primary pupils with Special Education Needs in the Lurgan area.
(AQW 30138/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Assessment of the need for special educational needs (SEN) provision and the delivery of services to meet this need are the responsibility of each Education and Library Board (ELB).

The Southern Education and Library Board SELB has confirmed that it has no current plans to submit a development proposal to the Department of Education for a post-primary facility for pupils with SEN in the Lurgan area.

I can, however, confirm that SELB has lodged an application to my Department under the Schools' Enhancement Programme for an extension to Ceara Special School to meet anticipated need. An economic appraisal has been submitted and is currently being assessed by officials.

Schools: Building Projects

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education for an update on the forty new school building projects that had been approved in recent months.
(AQW 30151/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In my Capital Statement of 25 June 2012, 18 schools were announced to receive new facilities as part of a £173m investment in the schools estate. Of the 18, three projects have started construction work on site with a further 4 expected to be on site by the end of April 2014. A further 4 schemes are at procurement stage and the remaining 7 projects are at various stages of the planning / design process.

In my capital announcement of 22 January 2013, 22 school projects are to be advanced in planning representing a further investment of £220. The majority of these projects are at an early stage in planning, principally Development Proposal or economic appraisal stage.

Travel Expenditure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the total expenditure on (i) ministerial travel; and (ii) Special Adviser travel in 2013.
(AQW 30184/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Flight Costs only

(i) £3547.01

(ii) £4865.43

January Monitoring Round: Bid

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education why his Department did not submit a bid for funding in the January Monitoring Round.
(AQW 30206/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As the ability of DE funded organisations to commission and incur significant additional resource expenditure prior to the 31 March 2014 is limited at this late stage of the financial year it was not considered prudent to bid for additional

funding; due to the risk that the budget could not be effectively utilised. Similarly, the ability to incur additional capital spend at this late stage of the financial year is also limited.

Schools: Road Safety

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education whether his Department makes resources available to schools to secure the services of a school crossing patrol; and what opportunities exist for schools to address road safety concerns outside the school gates.
(AQW 30213/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Funding provided within the Department of Education overall Block Grant to the Education and Library Boards is used for the purposes of determining the need for, and, if required, the deployment of school crossing patrols.

The revised curriculum which has been taught to all pupils of compulsory school age in grant-aided schools since 2009/10 provides teachers with a number of opportunities to cover the issue of road safety. For example through their delivery of the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) Area of Learning at primary level and the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) Area of Learning at post-primary level pupils are provided with the opportunity to learn about road safety. As with all aspects of the curriculum, the specifics of what is taught, and how it is taught, under each Area of Learning is a matter for each teacher/school.

The Department of the Environment, which has statutory responsibility for road safety, has produced a number of road safety resources and lesson plans which are available to all schools through the C2k elearning platform, Fronter. Schools may also approach the Department of the Environment to explore further their local traffic conditions and the suitability of introducing a range of safety measures.

Education and Skills Authority

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Education and Skills Authority Bill.
(AQW 30311/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I would refer the Member to my answer to AQO 5300/11-15, tabled by Anna Lo MLA and published in the Official Report on 17 January 2014.

Department for Employment and Learning

Procurement Process

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning in regard to his departmental procurement process, to detail the checks carried out to ensure that organisations are only appointed to the areas they applied for during the Pre-Qualification Quotation stages.
(AQW 29611/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The Central Procurement Directorate operates an ISO 9001 accredited procurement process and documentation is subject to quality checks throughout the process. This process has ensured organisations will only be appointed to areas for which they applied.

At Stage 2 of the competition separate tenders will be requested and submitted for each individual contract area, this will ensure that organisations can only submit a tender against one of the contract areas they were successful for during Stage 1 of the procurement process.

Consultancy: Costs

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how much money has been spent by his Department on consultancy fees in each of the last two years, including a breakdown of each consultancy firm used.
(AQW 29909/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department and its Non-Departmental Public Bodies have spent a total of £387,119 on consultancy fees (rounded to the nearest pound) in the last two full financial years and the current financial year to 30 September 2013. The breakdown per supplier is as follows:

1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012

Supplier	Expenditure £
PricewaterhouseCoopers	22,720
Professor Robert Kirk	400

Supplier	Expenditure £
FXL Training	5,456
EMQC	3,000
KPMG	51,995
Mr Pat Toal CB	14,900
Deloitte	15,452
Total	**113,923**

1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013

Supplier	Expenditure £
Harry McConnell	20,998
EMQC	2,767
Grant Thornton	53,250
RSM McClure Watters	34,938
Just Economics	8,532
Deloitte	4,200
RLA	2,995
Puro Solutions	8,868
FIG PC Limited	135
Quadra Limited	1,170
Questor Centre - Queens University	4,620
ADP Architects	12,600
Total	**155,073**

1 April 2013 to 30 September 2013

Supplier	Expenditure £
Just Economics	4,268
RLA	1,996
Deloitte	75,697
FIG PC Limited	1,490
Microsoft Premier Service	29,522
Grant Thornton	1,900
UCEA	3,250
Total	**118,123**

Note: The latest available data broken down by supplier is for the quarter ended 30 September 2013.

Teaching Facility: Coleraine Campus, University of Ulster

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the perceived benefits of the £5.1 million teaching facility at the Coleraine Campus, University of Ulster due for completion in 2015.
(AQW 29920/11-15)

Dr Farry: The new teaching facility is being built as part of the University's overall estates strategy. It will replace teaching facilities currently located in its South Buildings which have reached the end of their economic life. The new teaching block will improve the functionality of the teaching space for students and improve the research experience at the campus. The

development will ensure that the University can maintain its estate more effectively and will improve both its space utilisation and management.

It will also allow the University to reduce its carbon emissions as the new teaching block will be more energy efficient. Finally, the new facility will improve the student's learning experience.

Apprenticeships: Travel Expenses

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline whether his Department pays travel expenses to apprenticeship students; and if not to detail any plans to introduce travel payments, for apprentices to travel to and from their workplace.
(AQW 30029/11-15)

Dr Farry: The ApprenticeshipsNI programme is an employer-led provision, with employers creating apprenticeship positions and recruiting suitable individuals as apprentices in line with future business needs. The programme aims to provide participants with the opportunity to take part in a Level 2/Level 3 Apprenticeship where the apprentice, in paid employment from day one, works towards achieving an industry-approved Level 2/Level 3 Apprenticeship Framework.

My Department, through the ApprenticeshipsNI programme, funds the 'off-the-job' training element of an apprenticeship and provides an Employer Incentive payment on the apprentice's achievement of the full framework qualifications. ApprenticeshipsNI currently offers no subsidy towards the cost of an apprentice's travel to and from their place of work, nor do we have any plans to offer such a subsidy in the future.

As the member will be aware, I announced my proposals for the future of apprenticeships in Northern Ireland during an oral statement to the Assembly on Monday 13 January 2014. The proposals outlined are now subject to a 12 week consultation period. Feedback received through this consultation will be used to inform our final policy for apprenticeships and this will be published in the early summer of 2014. I am keen to hear views on the findings of a review - a link to the consultation document can be found below.

- http://www.delni.gov.uk/apprenticeshipreview

Higher Education: Looked-after Children

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline any specific packages of support his Department provides for looked after children attending university.
(AQW 30080/11-15)

Dr Farry: Access to Success, my Department's regional strategy for widening participation in higher education, has identified care leavers as an under-represented group in higher education. My Department makes funding available to all higher education providers, including the Further Education Regional Colleges, to support various outreach initiatives in schools and the community, which are targeted at increasing representation in higher education, including by children from a care background. In addition, my Department pays an annual financial premium to support the extra costs to higher education institutions of recruiting and retaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In academic year 2013/14 this premium amounts to £1.34m.

Access to Success has introduced a new Widening Access & Participation Plan (WAPP) reporting process, within which all higher education providers must demonstrate their clear commitment to supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds into and through higher education. Institutions are specifically required to target financial support to under-represented groups, including children from a care background. This support may take the form of bursaries and other direct financial support such as fee waivers, and free or discounted accommodation. It will also include post-entry support activities such as mentoring and additional tutoring to ensure the students' progression and success.

For example, the University of Ulster has committed to providing a support package for care leavers, which includes assistance with the higher education application process, a bursary of £1,000 per annum, access to year round accommodation and increased pastoral care. Under its "Fostering Aspiration" programme it will support a wide range of projects and activities that look to raise the educational aspiration of care leavers.

In addition, the University has joined forces with The Fostering Network Northern Ireland and the Health and Social Care Board to launch the "Tick the Box" awareness raising campaign. This initiative aims to encourage young people who have spent time in care to self report that fact on their Universities and Colleges Admissions Service application form to ensure that they get the extra support that they may need while at university.

My Department has been strongly supportive of the work that has been done by ButtleUK with all higher education providers in Northern Ireland to provide a framework to improve and accredit support for looked after children in higher education.

Further Education: Looked-after Children

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail what specific policies and programmes of support are available to facilitate looked after children to avail of Further Education.
(AQW 30081/11-15)

Dr Farry: Whilst my Department does not have specific policies relating to looked after children in further education, it provided financial assistance to enable two colleges, Belfast Metropolitan College and North West Regional College, to attain the Buttle UK (FE) Quality Mark for Care Leavers, as part of a pilot programme for the award in April 2011.

Since then, Southern Regional College and South Eastern Regional College have attained the Buttle UK Quality Mark in September 2013. The remaining colleges, Northern Regional College and South West College, are currently working towards achieving this quality mark.

The Quality Mark provides a set of standards and guidelines to ensure appropriate action is taken to raise the aspirations of care leavers in relation to accessing further education provision. This is achieved through:

- outreach activities in local communities;
- developing effective links with key organisations;
- adapting application arrangements to ensure that the additional needs of care leavers are met; and
- providing the necessary support to secure recruitment and retention in further education.

All colleges provide a wide range of support for students from this background in relation to entering, sustaining and achieving in further education.

Pre-enrolment

Outreach activities are designed to present the opportunities available in further education, and to highlight the support available to students whilst in provision. These include visiting care homes, regular contact with professional staff in social work teams, Education and Library Boards, the Careers Service and voluntary sector organisations such as Include Youth.

Colleges maintain close links with feeder schools where they deliver information talks. There are also taster sessions and college open days to allow young people to experience colleges at first hand. College literature and websites contain information specifically targeted at looked after children.

Enrolment and on provision support

All colleges already have in place, or are working towards implementing, arrangements to identify looked after young people at an early stage. This allows colleges to establish appropriate additional support arrangements for individual students and also provides information on the level of participation by this particular cohort of students.

Colleges provide additional support for students from a care background by designating specific staff to arrange the support required, as well as delivering training and awareness sessions for all staff on the potential additional barriers faced by these students. Students can then be given extra support, if needed, by learning support staff, counsellors and student finance officers.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI: Supported Jobs

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of jobs that InvestNI have supported, broken down by constituency, including (i) the financial assistance offered to secure these jobs; and (ii) the investment provided by business to create these jobs, for each of the last five years.
(AQW 29677/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Tables 1 to 5 below detail the number of jobs promoted and safeguarded in each Parliamentary Constituency Area (PCA) in each of the last five financial years (2008-09 to 2012-13). The tables also detail (i) the financial assistance offered to secure these jobs; and (ii) the investment planned by businesses to create these jobs. It should be noted that the total planned investment figure represents the total value of the funds required to implement the projects being supported, and will be the aggregation of what the business will generate from its operations, and the amount from external sources such as the banks, and other lenders/funders (including Invest NI). It is not possible to collate the investment figure specifically provided by the business itself.

Table 1: Invest NI Jobs Promoted by PCA in 2008-09

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast East	24.35	545.20	1,157	55
Belfast North	1.01	13.80	178	0
Belfast South	2.25	28.03	335	1
Belfast West	0.39	2.25	121	3
East Antrim	3.99	15.46	107	0

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
East Londonderry	0.63	4.76	150	51
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	3.73	26.23	541	326
Foyle	1.91	11.35	301	29
Lagan Valley	0.95	5.03	154	36
Mid Ulster	2.74	36.98	474	10
Newry & Armagh	7.27	80.05	1,008	81
North Antrim	1.57	8.76	272	0
North Down	0.78	7.69	143	18
South Antrim	2.83	18.46	268	0
South Down	7.17	23.47	649	0
Strangford	0.63	8.41	181	0
Upper Bann	13.33	66.92	357	154
West Tyrone	0.58	5.40	179	48

Table 2: Invest NI Jobs Promoted by PCA in 2009-10

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast East	7.00	31.13	434	135
Belfast North	4.37	35.18	522	324
Belfast South	14.01	55.99	676	700
Belfast West	0.59	5.17	107	8
East Antrim	0.52	3.21	109	21
East Londonderry	0.73	4.32	160	4
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1.85	11.74	270	35
Foyle	14.99	60.96	338	47
Lagan Valley	2.36	11.04	244	73
Mid Ulster	6.93	53.36	352	312
Newry & Armagh	2.64	17.88	202	45
North Antrim	2.07	8.23	91	107
North Down	0.96	5.84	201	5
South Antrim	1.96	9.24	170	79
South Down	1.79	11.83	226	14
Strangford	2.08	9.23	175	56
Upper Bann	12.76	59.69	780	250
West Tyrone	1.26	7.50	217	8

Table 3: Invest NI Jobs Promoted by PCA in 2010-11

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast East	11.84	61.11	1,003	77
Belfast North	3.29	21.30	491	13

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast South	8.08	55.72	975	2
Belfast West	0.04	0.20	83	0
East Antrim	1.69	14.57	177	0
East Londonderry	0.39	2.84	188	2
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1.22	18.70	330	6
Foyle	1.64	10.78	439	0
Lagan Valley	3.84	29.59	336	3
Mid Ulster	0.89	8.58	303	5
Newry & Armagh	5.65	39.12	714	7
North Antrim	5.48	37.09	163	1,212
North Down	0.24	1.63	88	5
South Antrim	6.00	50.26	767	7
South Down	0.57	5.68	210	0
Strangford	0.32	2.68	109	11
Upper Bann	1.12	10.99	197	32
West Tyrone	0.29	1.79	167	0

Table 4: Invest NI Jobs Promoted by PCA in 2011-12

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast East	1.92	14.17	274	0
Belfast North	1.38	13.01	468	0
Belfast South	7.62	66.15	1,025	4
Belfast West	1.76	19.62	295	0
East Antrim	0.41	2.09	144	0
East Londonderry	0.61	2.66	171	0
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	1.29	9.99	270	0
Foyle	2.41	24.71	397	0
Lagan Valley	2.68	19.78	381	123
Mid Ulster	3.47	31.23	660	20
Newry & Armagh	1.15	11.27	264	0
North Antrim	0.77	7.95	179	0
North Down	1.15	7.66	154	0
South Antrim	1.30	10.31	272	0
South Down	1.37	9.73	291	0
Strangford	0.65	5.35	169	0
Upper Bann	0.54	3.87	224	0
West Tyrone	0.70	4.03	201	0

Table 5: Invest NI Jobs Promoted by PCA in 2012-13

PCA	Total Assistance £m	Total Planned Investment £m	New Jobs	Safe Jobs
Belfast East	1.35	8.92	216	3
Belfast North	1.33	10.98	244	0
Belfast South	7.95	78.03	1,220	24
Belfast West	2.14	16.51	375	1
East Antrim	2.55	18.65	520	0
East Londonderry	1.23	9.46	166	45
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	2.28	16.72	491	9
Foyle	3.67	21.90	468	93
Lagan Valley	2.12	12.08	278	8
Mid Ulster	5.55	36.72	820	7
Newry & Armagh	1.31	12.22	309	0
North Antrim	0.95	7.66	210	0
North Down	0.35	2.40	103	0
South Antrim	2.07	11.16	256	68
South Down	0.65	4.16	125	15
Strangford	2.44	21.01	167	68
Upper Bann	4.08	28.52	519	20
West Tyrone	5.21	36.47	678	0

Notes to tables 1 To 5:

1 Jobs Promoted figures include the Regional Start Initiative (formerly the Enterprise Development Programme), which does not offer financial assistance but provides advice and guidance to individuals wishing to start a new business.

2 Jobs Promoted represents the number of jobs expected to be created by the project.

3 Jobs Safeguarded represents the number jobs that would have been lost if the project was not supported.

4 A further £1.9m was offered to promote 193 jobs, the location of which have not yet been determined.

5 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.

Health and Safety Executive: Farm Incidents

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of farm incidents investigated by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in each of the last five years, including the number of fatalities in each year and the funding costs of the HSE.
(AQW 29727/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below gives the number of fatal incidents, HSENI investigations and total funding for the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) in each of the last five financial years.

Regrettably there have been 31 work related fatalities which have occurred on farms in Northern Ireland during the last 5 years. All of these fatalities have been investigated by HSENI.

In relation to non fatal accidents, as the majority of those working in the industry are self employed, a very high proportion of non fatal incidents on farms are not reportable to HSENI under the Reporting of Incidents Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999. However, where major injury incidents are reported they are investigated by HSENI.

Year	Fatal Incidents	Investigations	Total HSENI Funding[2]
2013/14	3[1]	111	£6,468,000
2012/13	11	17	£6,465,000

Year	Fatal Incidents	Investigations	Total HSENI Funding[2]
2011/12	9	21	£6,233,000
2010/11	6	11	£6,352,000
2009/10	2	10	£6,064,000

1 Figures to date (21/1/2014)

2 Total HSENI funding is shown for the financial years 2009/10 to 2013/14

Going for Growth: Recommendations

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made in formulating and funding the Going for Growth policy recommendations of the Agri-Food Strategy Board; and to detail the timescale to which her Department is working.
(AQW 29729/11-15)

Mrs Foster: This matter remains under consideration at the Executive.

Tourism: Irish Community in the USA

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) any proposals it may have to promote tourism to the Irish community in the USA during 2014; and (ii) the total cost of the plans.
(AQW 29755/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The United States is an important tourism market for us.

Tourism Ireland will spend £8.6 million on marketing both Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland in North America in 2014. This will include marketing to a variety of target sectors including the Irish diaspora community.

Opportunities for promoting Northern Ireland throughout the year include:

- The Toronto Irish Film Festival.
- The annual Ireland Fund Canada St Patrick's Day luncheon,.
  The USA PGA Merchandising Show in Orlando Florida.
- Sales blitzes in Atlanta, Florida, Texas, Chicago/Boston and in Canada.
- At food fairs in Austin, Texas and Aspen, Colorado.
- The Barclay's Championship PGA Golf tour and at the Deutsche Bank PGA Golf Championship in Boston.

Strategic Partnerships

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the strategic partnerships that have been forged to ensure adequate infrastructure is in place to service any potential new business investment.
(AQW 29783/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Northern Ireland's investment proposition is based on a number of factors, such as its talented and loyal workforce, advanced telecoms and transport infrastructure, high skilled business clusters, the pro-business environment, competitive operating costs and proximity to major markets.

Any perceived weaknesses or reasons not to locate highlighted by potential investors are captured primarily by the Invest Northern Ireland's Investment Managers and overseas business development executives. Invest NI has a range of mechanisms in place to raise and address significant strategic issues, such as infrastructure, that may impact on attracting potential investment.

Invest NI's Chief Executive is a member of the Northern Ireland Economic Advisory Group which consists of a focused group of experts in economics, business and skills who provide advice on the key issues impacting the economy and the measures required to address these issues.

In addition, Invest NI is represented on a wide range of cross Departmental bodies and working groups. For example, there are regular formal meetings between DETI, DEL and Invest NI to discuss skills issues and the development of policies and practices to address skills shortages in specific areas.

In terms of Infrastructure Northern Ireland has world class communications infrastructure with fast reliable road, rail, air and telecoms links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the world. London is one hour away by air from Belfast, with Dublin only two hours by road or rail. There are daily direct flights to a variety of European business locations such as Paris and Amsterdam. In addition Project Kelvin provides a transatlantic link for excellent communications throughout the region.

Invest NI continues to liaise with a number of other Government Departments. For example:

- The Department of Regional Development over key issues of access and, in particular, air route access to Northern Ireland;

- The Department of Social Development over the implementation of those elements of the Jobs Fund initiative which are focused on Neighbourhood Renewal Areas;
- The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure over the development and implementation of support for the Northern Ireland Creative Industries sector; and
- The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development over the development and implementation of agri-food strategies.

Electricity: Regulatory Framework

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the justification of the Regulatory Framework, which is preventing an increase in electricity infrastructure investments.
(AQW 29785/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The EU Third Package of energy legislation (IME 3) published in 2009 sought, among a range of objectives, to harmonise the powers and independence of regulators at a national and EU level. The Regulator is responsible for considering and approving required investment in the electricity network through Price Determination arrangements. In setting Price Determinations the Regulator is obliged to strike the appropriate balance between necessary investment and the interests of consumers who will ultimately bear the costs.

Energy Prices: Unconventional Oil and Gas

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that locally extracted unconventional oil and gas will have on energy prices.
(AQW 29828/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Local unconventional oil and gas remains at the prospecting stage, and it is therefore not possible to accurately assess any future impact on local energy prices, but experience elsewhere points strongly to a downward pressure on energy prices.

Commonwealth Games 2014: Tourism

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans Tourism Ireland have to promote Northern Ireland during the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.
(AQW 29834/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The 2014 Commonwealth Games offer the opportunity to highlight Northern Ireland to local and visiting international media and participants alike.

My Department, through Tourism Ireland, will identify tour operators in relevant Commonwealth countries who are packaging trips to the Games and work to influence them to include Northern Ireland in their programmes. Tourism Ireland will also work with Games committee members and others to identify any other avenues for promoting Northern Ireland.

Whilst plans are not yet finalised, engagement with the media is underway and potential activity will be rolled out through traditional and social media in advance of, during and after the Games.

Energy: Wind Turbines and Anaerobic Digestion Facilities

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the grants and finance opportunities available to individuals who wish to install small scale (i) wind turbines; and (ii) anaerobic digestion facilities.
(AQW 29978/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department does not provide grant assistance towards the installation of renewable electricity technologies. Instead, renewable electricity is incentivised through the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) which provides a revenue stream in the form of Renewables Obligation Certificates for electricity generated by a range of technologies including small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digestion.

The Department does not keep information on finance opportunities from individual lenders; however, the Green Investment Bank will consider anaerobic digestion projects.

Invest NI: Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how many jobs have been (i) created; and (ii) promoted in Derry by InvestNI's Jobs Fund since it was set up.
(AQW 30019/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's Jobs Fund has (i) helped create 456 new jobs and (ii) helped promote 575 new jobs in the Derry City Council area since its inception in April 2011.

Trading Standards

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in relation to Regulation 3(1) of The Measuring Instruments (Liquid Fuel delivered from Road Tankers) Regulations 2006, how many companies are licensed by Trading Standards to deliver less than 500 litres in road tankers.
(AQW 30032/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Measuring Instruments (Liquid Fuel delivered from Road Tankers) Regulations 2006 do not require businesses selling liquid fuel to be licensed.

The Regulations apply to equipment for measuring fuel from road tankers first placed on the market or put into use after 30 October 2006. The Regulations do not specify that deliveries must be of a certain minimum quantity. The verification process for equipment that is subject to these Regulations does not require the Department to be notified when they are put into trade use by the operator. The Department, therefore, has no accurate figure as to the proportion of such vehicles that can legally carryout deliveries in quantities less than 500 litres. However, through its enforcement activity with the oil industry the Trading Standards Service estimates that approximately 20% of the Northern Ireland fleet can legally make such deliveries.

Invest NI: South Tyrone

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail how many jobs have been (i) created; and (ii) promoted in South Tyrone by InvestNI's Jobs Fund since it was set up.
(AQW 30047/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's Jobs Fund has (i) helped create 438 new jobs and (ii) helped promote 501 new jobs in the Fermanagh & South Tyrone constituency area since its inception in April 2011.

Invest NI: Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the firms in which the 456 jobs in the Derry City Council area have been created by InvestNI's Jobs Fund, up to December 2013.
(AQW 30103/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The table below indicates the businesses that created jobs as a result of the Jobs Fund in the Derry City Council area between April 2011 and December 2013. Due to commercial sensitivity, details of firms whose projects have not been publicly announced have been withheld. Please also be aware that for reasons of data protection, the names of individuals trading as sole traders or partnerships cannot be disclosed; therefore, this information has been included on an aggregated basis.

Business Name	Jobs Created at 31st December 2013
AXA Insurance Limited	13
Fresh Food Kitchen Products Ltd	5
Golfstoreeurope Ltd	2
Hostsure Northern Ireland Limited	13
Lucid Interactive Ltd	1
One Stop Data Limited	13
Projects Not Announced – Employment Grant	42
Sole Traders – Employment Grant	7
Sole Traders – NRA Business Start Grant	262
Sole Traders – NEET Business Start Grant	40
DEL Employer Subsidy	58

Department of the Environment

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan: Implementation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the reasons for the delay in making a decision on the implementation of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.
(AQW 28362/11-15)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The adoption of a development plan represents the final stage of the plan process and can only be done once the Department is satisfied that all the necessary statutory and procedural requirements have been completed.

The Plan was awarded a Certificate of Conformity with the Regional Development Strategy by the Department for Regional Development on 21 October 2013. An Equality Impact Assessment and a Habitats Regulations Assessment have recently been completed.

My Department has now completed its scrutiny and review of all relevant materials and processes and is satisfied that all necessary statutory and procedural requirements for adoption of the draft plan have been satisfied.

Therefore, subject to the agreement of my Ministerial colleagues, I will instruct my Department, by order under Article 8 (1) of the Planning (NI) Order 1991, to adopt and make operational the Plan.

Energy: Shale Gas

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment, given that the Royal Society Report into Shale Gas 2012 states that at present the environmental regulator does not permit fracturing below freshwater aquifers, whether such a position will be taken locally.
(AQW 29585/11-15)

Mr Durkan: No applications have been received and hence no decisions on hydraulic fracturing have yet been taken. I have publicly stated my position on hydraulic fracturing on a number of occasions. Granting permission relating to fracking operations will only take place when it has been supported by very strong evidence which indicates that fracking is safe for public health and the environment. I believe to do otherwise, given the scale of ongoing research, would be reckless and irresponsible. I have yet to see that evidence.

That is why I have directed my officials in NIEA to work with the EPA in Ireland to take forward a major programme of research to examine the potential impact of fracking on the environment. This programme of research is currently being progressed and the outcomes of this all-island research will help assist the NIEA in making these important regulatory decisions.

Waterways: Pollution

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to ensure that Departments work together to combat the pollution of waterways with refuse such as cooking fat and oils, coffee granules and other food waste, as well as small non perishables being washed down domestic pipes.
(AQW 29718/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I fully recognise the need for Departments to work together on important issues such as the pollution of waterways by cooking fat and oils and other food waste.

My Department has recently completed a consultation on the introduction of restrictions on the landfilling of food waste. One of the policy proposals consulted on was the proposed introduction of a ban on the non-domestic discharge of food waste into the public sewer network in order to ensure the value of this important resource is realised and in response to the detrimental effect food waste is having on the sewer network.

The policy was developed by the Department working closely with the Department of Regional Development and NI Water. This close liaison will be maintained during the post consultation process and in further policy development.

Recent media coverage has highlighted the implications of disposing of fats, oils and grease and other inappropriate items into the sewerage system, which can ultimately lead to sewer blockages, out of sewer flooding and water pollution.

I understand that NI Water recently hosted a “Partners Against Pollution” event on 29 November 2013 which explored opportunities for environmental stakeholders in Northern Ireland to develop partnership approaches to prevent widespread abuse of the sewerage system through raising the profile of education and awareness. Officials from my Department and other Government Departments and Agencies were in attendance at this event. A key theme to emerge was the importance of ensuring that the voluntary sector and government bodies work in tandem to achieve this common goal.

The inappropriate disposal of household items and food waste is a problem for NI Water both in financial and reputational terms, yet it is largely caused by lack of public understanding.

My Department will continue to work alongside NI Water, local councils and other Departments, including the Department of Regional Development, in highlighting the impact of such practices on the water environment and in progressing solutions to this issue and in providing advice, education and guidance for the general public and businesses on the proper disposal of food waste and household items.

Planning Service: Aerial Photography

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether Planning Service use aerial photography; (ii) if so, how often it is used; (iii) what the cost of aerial photography has been in each of the last three years; and (iv) for what purposes is aerial photography used.
(AQW 29778/11-15)

Mr Durkan: While DOE Planning makes use of aerial photography on a regular basis, it can be difficult to quantify. It is used in the normal course of work for a range of activities such as planning enforcement and identifying breaches of planning control, assessing planning applications and work associated with the preparation of area plans.

The Department makes regular use of the range of free aerial photography which is available on the internet for example; Google Maps, Google Earth and Bing Maps. It also has access to online aerial photography from Land and Property Services (LPS), which is supplied as part of the Northern Ireland Mapping agreement (NIMA).

On some occasions, staff may also require aerial photography from Ordnance Survey/LPS directly. While it is not possible to provide an exact figure for these costs, they have not been significant in the last three years.

The Department may also make use of other methods to obtain aerial photographs for specific cases if required, such as hiring of a plane to capture the required information. Table 1 below outlines the cost to the Department for such activities in the last three years;

Table 1

Year	Cost (£)
2011	362
2012	374
2013	350

Taxis: Dual Tariffs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment whether Belfast public hire plated taxis are permitted to have dual tariffs programmed into their meters.
(AQW 29800/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I can confirm that Belfast Public Hire plated taxis are permitted to have dual tariffs programmed into their meters. The first tariff, the regulated fare, must be displayed when the driver is providing a public hire service. The secondary, lower, tariff can be used when the vehicle has been pre-booked and operating on a private hire basis.

Ravenhill Stadium: Driver and Vehicle Agency Enforcement Officers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment on how many occasions, between March 2013 and September 2013, Driver and Vehicle Agency Enforcement Officers have attended Ravenhill Rugby Ground on Mount Merrion Avenue, Belfast, for the purposes of making an assessment.
(AQW 29848/11-15)

Mr Durkan: DVA Enforcement Officers have attended Ravenhill Rugby Ground on three occasions between March 2013 and September 2013 for the purposes of assessing compliance with Taxi Operator Licensing requirements.

Taxis: Touting

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many private hire taxi drivers have been prosecuted for taxi touting at Central Station, Belfast, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29849/11-15)

Mr Durkan: DVA has no records of any private hire taxi drivers being prosecuted for taxi touting at Central Station, Belfast.

Ravenhill Stadium: Driver and Vehicle Agency

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28436/11-15, whether any of the Driver and Vehicle Agency officers involved in the four test purchase booked their taxi via Ravenhill Rugby Ground staff; and if not, where they booked their taxi and were these details collected.
(AQW 29850/11-15)

Mr Durkan: DVA Enforcement Officers did not book their taxis via Ravenhill Rugby Ground staff but rather upon leaving the rugby ground they proceeded to Mount Merrion Avenue where fonaCab taxi marshals made provision for a booking and in conjunction with their drivers recorded the necessary booking particulars.

Council Websites

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what guidance or regulations are in place regarding the domain names for council websites.
(AQW 29858/11-15)

Mr Durkan: There is no specific guidance or regulation on this matter which councils must adhere to, unless the new council name ends in '.gov.uk'. I understand that the UK Cabinet Office has produced guidance for NICS Departments wishing to use domain names ending in '.gov.uk'. Councils are not required by regulation to use a '.gov.uk' domain naming convention, but if they do, they must adhere to this guidance. I understand a number of Statutory Transition Committees have already registered

domain names for their new council in preparation for April 2015. However, the final decision on the name of the new council domain names rests with the new successor councils appointed following the local government elections in May 2014.

Taxis: Disability Discrimination

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment (i) whether he is aware of an article published in The Independent on Sunday on12 January 2014 regarding of people with a disability being charged extra for taxi services in Middlesborough, and specifically to note operators have been warned that this is discriminatory practice; (ii) if this practice is evident amongst local private hire taxis; and (iii) whether his Department would view this current practice as discriminatory.
(AQW 29881/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I am aware of the article in question and the action taken to remind operators of their duties under the relevant equalities legislation in place in Britain. I have asked officials to liaise with Disability Action and the Inclusive Mobility & Transport Advisory Committee to consider if further advice should be provided by my Department to operators in Northern Ireland regarding their responsibilities around these issues.

The Member will be aware that private hire taxi fares are not regulated in NI. Further, my Department is not aware that the practice is evident amongst private hire taxi operators. Over the past 12 months, there has been one complaint made to DVA in relation to a private hire taxi driver allegedly over-charging a disabled customer. During the investigation by DVA, of which the relevant operator was informed, the allegation was denied and the investigation concluded that no further action should be taken.

I would reiterate my previous statements in my responses to AQW 28439/11-15 and AQW 29126/11-15 that the Equality Commission has advised that DDA legislation makes it unlawful for organisations such as transport service providers, including taxi operators, to discriminate against disabled people in the way in which they provide or do not provide their services.

Taxis, Belfast: Registration

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many private hire taxis are currently registered in Belfast; and of those, how many cater for (i) seven passengers; and (ii) are wheelchair accessible.
(AQW 29882/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Departmental records show that 1,119 private hire taxis have a registered keeper postcode within Belfast (BT1-BT17), of which 38 are licensed to carry 7 passengers or more.

It is not possible to say how many of these vehicles are wheelchair accessible as currently there is no legislative requirement for any taxi to be wheelchair accessible unless it is to be licensed as Belfast Public Hire. Therefore, taxi vehicles operating as private hire or as public hire outside Belfast do not have to comply with the legislative wheelchair accessible vehicle specification.

However, I am bringing forward new legislation that will remove this anomaly. From September 2014, all taxis advertising as wheelchair accessible will have to comply with the legal specification for a wheelchair accessible taxi. In addition, the new regulation will update the current specification for a wheelchair accessible vehicle to one more suited to accommodate modern wheelchairs and the safety and comfort of wheelchair users.

Please note these figures are not part of official statistics and have not been subject to data validation.

Taxis: Dual Tariffs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment whether dual tariffs are permitted in private hire taxis; and if so, in what circumstances this can be applied.
(AQW 29884/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Within the current taxi licensing regime private hire taxi fares are unregulated; therefore there is no requirement to adhere to a particular fare tariff, tariff structure or to use a taximeter.

The number of tariffs installed in taximeters in such taxis is therefore a matter for the taxi operator.

Taxis: Regulation Breaches

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment whether departmental consideration has been given to the images and evidence posted on the Belfast Public Hire Taxi Twitter account which appears to show regulation breaches by private hire sector taxis; and if so, what action will be taken.
(AQW 29885/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The images posted on the Belfast Public Hire Twitter account do not provide any evidence to ascertain whether there are any regulation breaches being committed by private hire sector taxis. They do however raise a possible issue with regard to directing traffic but that would be a matter for the PSNI to consider and take action where they feel appropriate.

Energy: Unconventional Oil and Gas

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether unconventional oil and gas development will feature in the new strategic planning policy framework.
(AQW 29918/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I will be publishing the draft Strategic Planning Policy Statement (dSPPS) for public consultation on 4th February 2014.

The dSPPS will be pitched at a broader and more strategic level than existing PPS documents so as to afford councils the flexibility in bringing forward detailed operational planning policy, through new local development plans, tailored to the needs and opportunities of their local areas.

The dSPPS will mainly involve a consolidation of existing planning policies including the prevailing Minerals Policy, within 'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland (PSRNI)'. However, the more recent issue of unconventional hydrocarbon extraction will also feature in the SPPS.

I propose to use the SPPS consultation to take into account everyone's views prior to finalising the SPPS in time for the transfer of planning functions to local government.

Mills Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment given the findings of the Mills Report (i) for his assessment of whether the failure of his Department's Strategic Planning Division to take effective enforcement action between 2000-2011 has been pivotal in enabling this unprecedented environmental crime; (ii) for his assessment of the Strategic Planning Division's view in 2009 that it had no grounds to take formal enforcement action because it was in receipt of a retrospective planning application; (iii) why it was considered that the Planning Appeals Commission would be an impediment to formal enforcement action; and (iv) whether he intends to initiate an independent public inquiry into why his Department repeatedly ignored warnings of environmental harm, including from other competent authorities.
(AQW 29919/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The report by Chris Mills highlighted many issues with enforcement of waste crime in Northern Ireland including the resourcing needed to provide a robust system, the systems of communication that need to be improved and the overall approach to enforcement of this nature. While it is appreciated that a review of the previous investigations may have highlighted areas for improvement, it is important to note that the operator of the site is the person responsible for the breach, for the infilling and for the failure to meet his responsibilities. The Department's Strategic Planning Division has undertaken numerous site visits and carried out enforcement investigations in relation to this site since 2000 and have secured retrospective applications and compliance through negotiation and formal enforcement action. It is important to remember that these activities developed from minor infringements and it is the cumulative situation that we are now seeing. As each assessment of the situation demonstrates further non compliance the approach of the SPD enforcement unit so too increases. The Department has a range of enforcement powers at its disposal to remedy non compliance and the use of those powers will be reassessed following the Mills Report findings.

Breaches of planning control are not offences and the Department can secure a remedy through a number of approaches. These approaches are detailed in the Department's Planning Policy Statement 9. The approaches range from a written warning to formal enforcement action including stop notices. The approaches require consideration and are based on a number of factors including whether the development is or can be made acceptable. Unauthorised development is not removed or ceased simply because it is unauthorised. The submission of a retrospective application allows the Department to assess, control and mitigate development allowing the economy to continue but at the same time protecting the environment. Formal enforcement action, retrospective applications and written warnings are all approaches that can be taken by the Department.

The ultimate aim of any enforcement action is to remedy a breach. This can be achieved through negotiation or through formal enforcement action, i.e the offender can be advised to cease or legally required to cease. Upon issuing an enforcement notice, the recipient has the opportunity to appeal to the Planning Appeals Commission. This can often lead to lengthy periods of delay, during which the enforcement notice has no effect. The Department may consider that informal enforcement action is a more expedient remedy to ensuring a breach ceases.

The Department in processing applications and investigating enforcement cases will take into account the comments and advice of relevant authorities, however, the Department is the decision maker and the final decision rests with the Department. It is the role of professional planners to consider, challenge where necessary and balance the plethora of advice and representations received in processing cases. The Mills report has highlighted a number of areas where the Department can improve. The Department will be putting in place an action plan to address the issues raised in the report and to reorganise structures to become better, more proactive, more responsive and more coherent.

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Medical Advisers

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time doctors, licensed by the General Medical Council, are employed by the Driver and Vehicle Agency as Medical Advisers; and whether (a) medical records can

be accessed; and (b) medical assessments can be made, by personnel who are not qualified medical practitioners licensed by the General Medical Council.
(AQW 29957/11-15)

Mr Durkan:

(i) and (ii) The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) do not employ doctors. Applications for driver licences which require medical investigation are referred to the Department of Finance and Personnel's (DFP) Occupational Health Service (OHS) who are contracted by the Department to provide professional medical advice.

(a) Medical records provided in connection with a driving licence application are processed by a dedicated section within DVA Driver Licensing in Coleraine. The records are treated as confidential and are accessible only by the staff who have a business need to view them and, where expert medical opinion is required, by OHS doctors or consultants contracted to provide specialist medical advice to OHS.

(b) Where an applicant for or a holder of a driving licence notifies the Department of a medical condition staff in the DVA's Medical & Vocational section assess the application using guidelines agreed with OHS. This process enables applications where there are minor conditions not requiring further investigation to be filtered out. Where medical assessment is required the application is referred to OHS.

Where necessary, OHS will seek further medical evidence from the applicant's doctor or consultant, or refer the applicant to an independent specialist consultant for examination. Following consideration of the relevant medical evidence, including that provided by the doctor, consultant or independent specialist consultant, OHS will make a recommendation to DVA as to the applicant's fitness to drive.

While the decision to grant, refuse, restrict or revoke a licence lies solely with the Department, in practice DVA does not act outside the OHS recommendation.

Equality Commission

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 28439/11-15, (i) whether he consulted the Equality Commission about this reply; (ii) if so, what was the Commission's advice; and (iii) if not, whether he will undertake to meet with Equality Commission to canvas its views.
(AQW 29974/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I can advise that the Equality Commission were not consulted about my reply: bespoke advice to taxi operators is available to all on the Commission's website.

Given the issues in the media in recent weeks, I have asked officials to confirm with the Commission that the advice to taxi operators on the Commission's website remains current.

Taxis: Wheelchair Users

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment whether taxi companies are legally obliged to provide wheelchair accessible vehicles.
(AQW 29975/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Currently there is no legislative requirement for any taxi to be wheelchair accessible unless it is to be licensed as Belfast Public Hire (yellow plate). Therefore, taxis operating as private hire or as public hire outside Belfast do not have to comply with the legislative wheelchair accessible vehicle specification, regardless of whether or not they are advertising themselves as wheelchair accessible.

In September 2014 the Department intends to introduce new legislation for taxi vehicles which will address this issue. This legislation will ensure that all taxis advertising as wheelchair accessible will have to comply with the legal specification for a wheelchair accessible taxi. If they do not, they will be guilty of an offence. In addition the new legislation will update the current specification for a wheelchair accessible vehicle to one more suited to accommodate modern wheelchairs and the safety and comfort of wheelchair users.

I have set out the legislative requirements on taxi operators as regards provision of wheelchair accessible vehicles in my answer to question AQW 29977/11-15.

Mills Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail all the recommendations of changes made by his Department to the Mills report.
(AQW 30000/11-15)

Mr Durkan: As I stated on 18 December last year when I released the Mills Report, I will be providing a full response to the report. This will include a response and actions in relation to all of Mr Mills' recommendations. I expect to provide this response in the next month.

Taxis, Belfast: Registration

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 29566/11-15, to explain the disparity in the figures put forward by departmental officials to the Committee for the Environment on Thursday 12 December 2013, who advised that around 300 public hire taxis were operating in Belfast; and on what basis officials based their information.
(AQW 30050/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My officials have advised that the figure of 437 vehicles licensed as Belfast public hire quoted in AQW 29566/11-15 is indeed correct, but that it was misread by them as 347 during the 12 December 2013 meeting.

There are a number of vehicles licensed as Belfast public hire (yellow plates) which are in private hire fleets and do not sit at ranks in Belfast; this was the basis on which officials reduced the misread figure of 347 to an estimation of 300 vehicles working as Belfast Public Hire from ranks.

I have asked my officials to inform the Committee Clerk of this incorrect reading of the figure.

Mills Report

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, in light of the findings of the Mills Report, whether he will be bidding to the Department of Finance and Personnel for the estimated £250 million required to clean up illegal waste sites; and where such quantities of illegal waste can be disposed off safely.
(AQW 30070/11-15)

Mr Durkan: DOE is currently commissioning experts to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the major illegal dump at Campsie. This will provide advice on the best environmental management options for dealing with the waste, including possible disposal options and including cost estimates.

It is critical to note that in this and any other cases of illegal waste sites, DOE will pursue the polluters with the full force of the law to make them pay for clean-up costs.

In instances where full clean-up costs cannot be recovered, I will investigate other funding options.

Habitats Directive

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether the Habitats Regulation Assessment carried out on planning application K/2013/0072/F (i) was assessed against an established ecological baseline for the Owenkillew Special Area of Conservation; (ii) whether that baseline was informed by the outcome of the required review of extant planning permissions likely to have a significant effect on the integrity of this European Site; and (iii) whether any such review of extant permissions has been carried out.
(AQW 30071/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Habitat Regulations Assessment undertaken on the planning application was assessed against the conservation objectives of the SAC as is required by the Habitats Directive. The Directive does not use the term ecological baseline. The assessment was determined using information from a variety of sources. These include ongoing NIEA monitoring of the protected species, habitats, water quality and morphology, Loughs Agency habitat survey data, preliminary results and data from the INTERREG IVA Freshwater pearl mussel project and information supplied by the developer. The legislation does not require a review of permissions that have been completed. The Department has not undertaken a full review of extant permissions but reviews these on a case by case basis. In this case there were no other significant uncompleted planning applications in the area to review.

Councils: Cluster Costs

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment how he intends to apportion the costs of the new Shadow Councils between the existing Councils in a particular cluster.
(AQO 5349/11-15)

Mr Durkan: My Department issued specific guidance to Statutory Transition Committees and their constituent councils on 9 January 2014 setting out the process for apportioning the new council costs by total population, as this is the most equitable and accurate solution.

In arriving at this decision, I took into account the views raised at the Regional Transition Committee meeting on 27 November 2013, by considering three separate options.

The option I chose was the apportionment of costs on the basis of total population of the new district. This provides for costs to be apportioned on the basis of total population. This option gives the most accurate representation of the population, as it includes groups such as children and those not registered to vote, since councils provide services for these groups of people too. Defrayal of costs on the basis of this option will ensure that the existing councils will be able to prepare their annual budget for 2014/15 on the basis of this approach without having a further wait for agreement on a method of cost apportionment.

The option of using costs apportioned on the basis of the tax base, as measured by the Gross Penny Rate Product (GPRP) was considered, but this method assumed that the only method of paying for reform was through rates, and this is not the case.

The option of allowing existing councils in each cluster to have the option of selecting the apportionment method to be used was also considered. However, as the purpose of the shadow period is to give the new councils the time and resources to take the key decisions necessary to ensure their effective operation from 1 April 2015, I felt that it would be preferable to avoid any undue doubt in relation to how they will be funded.

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan: Publication

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 29781/11-15, to detail the expected date of publication of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.
(AQW 30142/11-15)

Mr Durkan: As you will be aware from previous correspondence, my Department has progressed the Plan through the remaining statutory and procedural processes.

Subject to the agreement of Ministerial colleagues, I will instruct my Department, by order under Article 8 (1) of the Planning (NI) Order 1991, to adopt and make the Plan operational.

Taxi Operator Licences: Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 29620/11-15, to detail the number of drivers that are operating under each of the licences outlined.
(AQW 30155/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The number of drivers affiliated to each operator licence at 24 January 2014 has been provided below:

Name of Operator	No. drivers
A Cabs	27
A1 Taxi Derry	25
Anthony Carton	1
Barry O'Neill	1
BE-KAB	18
Bernadette Doherty	1
Biju John	1
Brendan Gourley	1
Brendan O'Neill	1
Brian Patrick Keenan	1
City Cabs (Derry) Ltd	283
Culmore Taxis	72
Damian Griffiths	1
Daniel McLaughlin	1
Feeny Cabs	1
Brown's Taxi	1
Waterside Taxi	32
Declan O'Donnell	1
Derry Taxis LTD	42
Nippy Taxis	31
Eamonn Denis Burke	1
Edward Burke	1
Eglinton Taxis	11
Elite Executive Travel	1
Eoighan McCauley	1
C F B Taxis	1
George Hegarty	1

Name of Operator	No. drivers
Gerard John Moore	1
GMC Taxi	1
DMK Taxi	1
Gerard Thomas Conaghan	1
Gregory Brady	1
Gregory Feeney	1
Hugh Colm McIntyre	1
Tony Morrison Taxi Service	1
SEA - MC	1
James Gerarde Harkens	1
James Grieve	1
Call A Cab	18
James McCarron	1
John Gerard McGinley	1
John Hutton	1
JJ's Taxi	1
John Joseph Robinson	1
J L Taxi	1
John Parke	1
John Sweeney	1
Foyle Taxis	146
Joseph Ebbs	1
JS Cab Services	1
Kenneth Laurence Bradley	1
Sunvale Taxis	1
Kieron Brian Coyle	1
Laurence McGowan	1
Liam Farren	1
Link Cabs	13
Glassagh Taxis	61
Swift Cabs	16
City Tours	3
Michael's Taxi	1
Michael Brolly SNR	1
Michael Browne	1
MC Taxi	1
Michael Harkin Wedding Cars	1
Michael McGrath	1
Mr Santhosh Vazhangattil	1
Neil Benedict Campbell	1
Niall Martin McGilloway	1
Oliver Lynch	1

Name of Operator	No. drivers
Patrick Barton	1
Patrick Doherty	1
3D Limos	3
Patrick Killen Taxi's	1
Paul McMullan	1
Paul Vincent Mullan	1
Pauline Gallagher	1
Peter Hutton	1
Peter Joseph Fleming	1
Raymond McCafferty	1
Rijumon Varghese	1
Robert Cooke	1
Bob's Easy Park	4
K Cab	1
R K Taxis	1
Sean Doherty	1
Terence McDermott	1
The Taxi Company NI Limited	224
Thornhill Taxis	58
Tony Begley	1
V Cab	1
William Gill	1
William Joseph Havlin	1
Sackville (Coop) Taxis	16
W R Ross	1
Total Drivers	**1,177**

Please note these figures are not part of official statistics and have not been subject to data validation.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by his Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29541/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Details of the third sector organisations who provide services to the public to which my Department currently provides funding are provided overleaf.

Organisation	Value of contract
Business in the Community	£100k
Royal National Institute of Blind People	£25k
Somme Association	£47k pa
East Border Region: Energy Efficiency & Micro Generation	£141k
Centre for Cross Border Studies	£170k

Organisation	Value of contract
SALUS: Action Mental Health	£59k
East Border Region: Action for Biodiversity	£148k
North West Region Cross Border Group	£533k
Sabhal Mor Ostaig	£62k
North East Partnership: Business Improvement Districts	£93k

Rates Relief: Land and Property Services

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of applications to the Land and Property Services for Rates Relief that are still awaiting conclusion (i) one month; (ii) two months; (iii) three months; (iv) four months; and (v) over four months from the date of the initial application.
(AQW 29660/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The total number of applications to Land & Property Services for Rates Relief* that are still awaiting conclusion from the date of the initial application are; (i) one month - 507; (ii) two months - 549; (iii) three months - 468; (iv) four months - 320; and (v) over four months - 1,648. The total claims awaiting completion currently stands at 3,628**.

* The total number includes applications for Rate Relief and Housing Benefit. Claimants are assessed for both, depending on circumstances.

** Includes 136 applications received, to date, in January 2014

Inflation: Local Rate

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the local inflation rate of (i) food; and (ii) energy, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29693/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Inflation rates are not produced on a regional basis.

Northern Ireland Civil Service: Vacant Positions

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) location; and (ii) number of vacant posts in the Northern Ireland Civil Service at (a) Administrative Assistant; (b) Administrative Officer; (c) Executive Officer II; (d) Executive Officer I; (e) Staff Officer; and (f) Deputy Principal grades, broken down by Department.
(AQW 29726/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The information requested is set out in the following table.

AQW 29726/11 - Location & Number of Vacant Posts in the NICS AT AA, AO, EO2, EO1, SO & DP at 14 January 2014 ***

	AA	Location	AO	Location	EOII	Location	EO1	Location	SO	Location	DP	Location
DARD	4	1 Coleraine	8	1 Londonderry	7	1 Ballymena	10	1 Armagh	8	Stormont	3.6	0.6 Cookstown
		1 Enniskillen		7 Stormont		1 Enniskillen		1 Belfast				3 Stormont
		2 Stormont				1 Newtownards		1 Craigavon				
						4 Stormont		7 Stormont				
DCAL	0		3	Belfast	1	Belfast	2	Belfast	2	Belfast	0	
DE	1	Bangor	1	Bangor	2	1 Bangor	3	Bangor	7.5	Bangor	2	1 Bangor
						1 Londonderry						1 Londonderry
*DEL	0.5	Belfast	13.6	1 Bangor	17.4	14.4 Belfast	24.12	22.12 Belfast	32	1 Armagh	5	Belfast
				10.6 Belfast		1 Coleraine		1 Downpatrick		25 Belfast		
				1 Larne		1 Newry		1 Londonderry		1 Larne		
				1 Lisburn		1 Omagh				1 Lisnagelvin		
										1 Lurgan		
										2 North West		
										1 Portadown		
*DETI	2	Belfast	0		2	Stormont	1	Belfast	3	1 Belfast	2	1 Belfast
										2 Stormont		1 Stormont
DFP	3	Belfast	25	22 Belfast	5	Belfast	10	2 Bangor	17	Belfast	2	1 Bangor
				2 Londonderry				8 Belfast				1Belfast
				1 Stormont								
DHSSPS	3	Stormont	4	Stormont	2	Stormont	5	Stormont	0		5	Stormont
DOE	3	2 Belfast	15.6	0.5 Ballymena	6	4 Belfast	5	3 Belfast	22	20 Belfast	6	Belfast
		1 Lisburn		12.5 Belfast		1 Coleraine		2 Coleraine		2 Coleraine		
				1 Coleraine		1 Londonderry						
				0.6 Londonderry								
				1 Omagh								

*DOJ	0		8	5 Belfast	12	7 Belfast	4	1 Belfast	11	2 Belfast	4	1 Belfast
				1 Omagh		1 Bangor		2 Carrickfergus		2 Londonderry		1 Carrickferrgus
				1 Londonderry		2 Carrickfergus		1 Stormont		2 Carrickfergus		2 Stormont
				1 Carrickfergus		2 Stormont				5 Stormont		
DRD	3	1 Belfast	2	1 Belfast	3	2 Coleraine	4	2 Belfast	10	9 Belfast	8	Belfast
		2 Coleraine		1 Enniskillen		1 Omagh		2 Coleraine		1 Ballymena		
DSD	26	2 Antrim	105	104 Belfast	20	14 Belfast	22	18 Belfast	51	1 Ballymena	7	6 Belfast
		1 Ballymena		1 Limavady		6 Londonderry		4 Londonderry		50 Belfast		1 Londonderry
		15 Belfast										
		5 Limavady										
		1 Lisburn										
		1 Londonderry										
		1 Magherafelt										
OFMDFM	0		1	Stormont	0		3	Stormont	3	Stormont	0	
PPS	0		2	Belfast	7	Belfast	3	1 Belfast	4	1 Ballymena	1	Belfast
								2 Londonderry		3 Belfast		
Total	**45.5**		**188.2**		**84.4**		**96.12**		**170.5**		**45.6**	
Total Vacancies	**630.32**											

Notes

*** DOJ Current vacancies at 1 January 2014 (latest information available).

* DEL 11.5 of the vacancies listed (0.5 AA, 1 AO, 3 EO2, 4 EO1 and 3 SO) are currently on hold awaiting the outcome of staffing reviews.

* DETI Information includes vacancies in HSENI.

Rates: Vacant Domestic Properties

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the amount generated in rates payments from owners of vacant domestic properties in the year ended 31 March 2013.
(AQW 29794/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Domestic properties move in and out of occupancy on an ongoing basis. From 1st October 2011, vacant domestic property rating liability changed from zero to full liability, with the exception of a number of prescribed exclusions.

In the year ended 31st March 2013 a total of £11.1 million was receipted for vacant domestic properties.

Procurement

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the total value of procurement for the most recent consecutive five years for which data is available.
(AQW 29842/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Since 2002 Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) has provided the Procurement Board with details of procurement expenditure by departments and their agencies, NDPBs and public corporations. This information is provided by departments and is published on CPD's website – www.DFPNI.gov.uk/CPD.

A summary table of total expenditure between 1st April 2007 and 31st March 2012 is attached. Figures for 2012/2013 are currently being finalised and will be published when available.

Year	07/08 year	08/09 year	09/10 year	10/11 year	11/12 year
Total	£2.2b	£2.4b	£2.3b	£2.7b	£2.6b

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the role and functions which the Northern Ireland Statistic and Research Agency undertake relating to the Net Fiscal Balance Report.
(AQW 29845/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has no role in the production of the Net Fiscal Balance Report.

Pleural Plaques

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether any funds have been set aside to compensate sufferers of the asbestos-related lung condition, pleural plaques.
(AQW 29866/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The aim of the Damages (Asbestos-related Conditions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 is to ensure that a claim in negligence can be made with regard to certain asymptomatic asbestos-related conditions, including asymptomatic pleural plaques. However, the Act does not provide for an automatic payment of damages, nor does it establish an administrative compensation scheme, similar to the time-limited scheme which was introduced in England and Wales.

As individual claimants are expected to pursue claims under the customary rules of the law of negligence, no funds have been set aside centrally to compensate people who have been diagnosed with pleural plaques. However, individual Departments may have set aside funds to meet claims for which they are responsible.

Business Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 1996

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what consideration has been given to bringing the provisions of the Business Tenancies Order into line with provisions in Great Britain in terms of requiring a house owner's consent before a company owning solar panels on the roof of the property can renew their lease at the end of the twenty year term.
(AQW 29902/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Business Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 gives business tenants in Northern Ireland a measure of security of tenure. The corresponding legislation in England and Wales enables parties to "contract out" of the protection of its legislation. In Northern Ireland, however, the 1996 Order contains an absolute prohibition on any agreement which purports to "contract out" from the security of tenure regime. Scotland has never introduced a comprehensive system of business tenancy protection legislation.

It is by no means clear whether solar panel agreements would come within the terms of the 1996 Order or the corresponding legislation in England and Wales.

The Northern Ireland Law Commission recently undertook a review of the 1996 Order, and, in the context of that review, considered in some detail the case for and against removing the absolute prohibition on contracting out. However ultimately, it recommended an exemption in respect of complex transactions, rather than absolute market freedom.

My Department is considering the terms of the recommendation. However, even if it was to be implemented, it would not bring the provisions of the 1996 Order into line with the provisions in England and Wales. As the Commission has recently reviewed the 1996 Order I have no plans, at this stage, to undertake a further review.

Rates: South Belfast

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the rates collected in the South Belfast Constituency Area in 2006 and 2007, broken down by ward.
(AQW 29907/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The information requested is not available.

Rates: South Belfast

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether there has been a significant rise in rates collected in the South Belfast constituency area following the implementation of the Rates Amendment Order 2006.
(AQW 29910/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The information requested is not available.

Drug-related Deaths

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the cause of each drug misuse death in 2013, including the drugs involved.
(AQW 29944/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: There were 75 deaths due to drug misuse registered in Northern Ireland in 2012, which is the latest available data.

Table 1 overleaf details the cause of death and a breakdown of the drugs involved, as recorded on the death certificate.

Table 1: Deaths Registered Due to Drug Misuse1, by Cause of Death and Associated Drugs2, Northern Ireland, 2012

Underlying Cause (ICD-10 codes)	**Mental and behavioural disorders due to drug use (excluding alcohol and tobacco) (F11-F16, F18-F19)**	**Accidental poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances (X40-X44)**	**Intentional self-poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances (X60-X64)**	**Poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances, undetermined intent (Y10-Y14)**
Total Number of Deaths	13	18	4	40
Drugs taken	■ Codeine ■ Diazepam ■ Dihydrocodeine ■ Heroin ■ Lorazepam ■ Methadone ■ Morphine ■ Tramadol	■ 4-Methoxyamphetamine ■ Amitriptyline ■ Buprenorphine ■ Chlorpheniramine ■ Chlorpromazine ■ Cocaine ■ Codeine ■ Diazepam ■ Dihydrocodeine ■ Dothiepin ■ Escitalopram ■ Fentanyl ■ Flecainide ■ Heroin ■ MDA ■ MDMA ■ Methylethylcathinone ■ Morphine ■ Oxycodone ■ Promethazine ■ Propranolol ■ Temazepam ■ Tramadol ■ Zopiclone	■ Codeine ■ Cyclizine ■ Flentanyl ■ Mirtazapine ■ Morphine ■ Oxycodone ■ Sertraline ■ Temazepam ■ Tramadol	■ Alprazolam ■ Carbamazepine ■ Chlordiazepoxide ■ Citalopram ■ Clozapine ■ Cocaine ■ Codeine ■ Diazepam ■ Dihydrocodeine ■ Dosulepin ■ Duloxetine ■ Flentanyl ■ Heroin ■ MDMA ■ Methadone ■ Methylethylcathinone ■ Mirtazapine ■ Morphine ■ Olanzapine ■ Quetiapine ■ Sertraline ■ Temazepam ■ Tramadol ■ Trazodone ■ Venlafaxine ■ Zolpidem ■ Zopiclone

1. Classified as a death where the underlying cause of death is recorded as one of the following ICD10 Codes: F11-F16, F18-F19, X40-X44, X60-X64, Y10-Y14; and a drug controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is also mentioned on the death certificate.

2 Drugs listed may have been mentioned on more than one death certificate, but have only been listed once in each category. For example, if heroin is recorded on five death certificates, it has only been listed once.

Family Law

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current access rights that grandparents have to their grandchildren, including whether there are plans to make amendments to access rights.
(AQW 29979/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: Our law does not set out who may or may not have contact with a child. It does, however, allow a court to make a contact order in favour of a named person and that order will detail the contact arrangements. Ordinarily, a grandparent will need the court's permission to make an application for a contact order. In considering whether to grant permission the court will take a number of matters into account, including the applicant's connections with the child. In the coming months I hope to elicit views on the issue of contact, with a view to determining whether any legislative amendments are required.

Drug-related Deaths: Banbridge, Lurgan and Portadown

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many drug related deaths have been reported in (i) Portadown; (ii) Lurgan; and (iii) Banbridge, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29998/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The table overleaf shows the number of drug related deaths registered between 2010 and 2012 in District Electoral Areas within Craigavon and Banbridge Local Government Districts.

Table 1: Number of Drug Related1 Deaths Registered in Northern Ireland by District Electoral Areas within Craigavon and Banbridge, 2010 - 20122

Local Government District	District Electoral Area	Year of Registration		
		2010	2011	2012
Craigavon	Central	3	1	3
	Loughside	0	1	1
	Lurgan	2	1	1
	Portadown	0	1	0
Banbridge	Banbridge	0	1	4
	Dromore	0	2	1
	Knockiveagh	0	0	0
All Drug Related Deaths in Northern Ireland		**92**	**102**	**110**

1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes:

F11-F16, F18-F19 - Mental and behavioural disorders due to drug use (excluding alcohol and tobacco)

X40-X44 - Accidental poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.

X60-X64 - Intentional self-poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.

X85 – Assault by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.

Y10-YI4 - Poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances, undetermined intent.

2 Mortality data for the 2012 registration year are the latest available. Provisional data for 2013 will be available in summer 2014.

Drug-related Deaths: Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many drug related deaths have been reported in the Upper Bann Constituency in the last twelve months.
(AQW 29999/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: There were nine drug related1 deaths registered in the Upper Bann Constituency in 2012, which is the latest available data.

1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes:

F11-F16, F18-F19 - Mental and behavioural disorders due to drug use (excluding alcohol and tobacco)

X40-X44 - Accidental poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.

X60-X64 - Intentional self-poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.

X85 – Assault by drugs, medicaments and biological substances.

Y10-YI4 - Poisoning by drugs, medicaments and biological substances, undetermined intent.

Commercial Debts Legislation

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel in relation to the Late Payment of Commercial Debts Legislation can he (i) confirm whether it is his Department or the Department of Business Innovation and Skills which is the competent authority; and (ii) to list all guidance issued by his Department since August 2002 relating to the Late Payment Legislation.
(AQW 30042/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The Department of Business Innovation and Skills is the competent authority in this area.

Since August 2002, DFP has issued the following guidance relating to late payment:

DAO(DFP)19/02: Late Payment of Commercial Debts Regulations 2002 (August 2002)

DAO(DFP)12/08: Supporting Businesses: prompt payment of invoices (November 2008)

DAO(DFP)04/13: Prompt payment of invoices (March 2013)

Rates Debt

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 29607/11-15, to detail (i) whether the bad debt of £33.8 million was assumed for 2013/14; (ii) whether the debt was added into the overall rate requirement; (iii) what happens to any recovery of bad debt; and (iv) whether the assumption in the following year is discounted to reflect any recovery.
(AQW 30102/11-15)

Mr Hamilton:

(i) The £33.8 million which was set aside for write-off during the Estimated Penny Product (EPP) calculations was calculated using various provision percentages for different categories of rating debt, bankruptcy and liquidation trends, and the age of debt. Once the write-off amount for each Council is set, LPS will not write-off more than the estimate unless approval from the Council is given.

(ii) The debt which is forecast to be written-off in 2013/14 is a 'loss' in the EPP calculation and therefore is accounted for in the striking of the District Rate.

(iii) When LPS recovers a debt which has been previously written-off, the amount which is recovered is subsequently written back onto the account. In the Actual Penny Product (APP) calculation, write-ons are netted off against write offs.

(iv) In setting the estimated write-off LPS looks at debt profile and previous trends which include write ons and so the estimated write- off will take account of subsequent recovery.

North Down: Office Space

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many offices are available in the North Down constituency; and to detail the square footage of 'Grade A' office space.
(AQW 30131/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: My Department does not hold the information requested.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust: Emergency Doctors

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what action he has taken to tackle the shortage of emergency doctors available in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) how much has been spent on recruitment campaigns for emergency doctors for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; and (iii) how successful were these campaigns.
(AQW 29714/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Part (i): My Department has taken a range of measures over the past few years to address the shortage of doctors in a number of specialties. The current shortage of doctors in emergency medicine is a UK wide problem which has made it very difficult for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to fill these posts. My Department continues to work closely with the Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency and with Trusts to address this issue..

Part (ii): The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust reports that during the financial year 13/14 to date it has incurred expenditure of £3,956 on two recruitment campaigns for emergency doctors at consultant and speciality doctor grades.

The management costs associated with this recruitment activity have not been separately identified above. Such costs are difficult to identify separately as the recruitment activity is embedded within the respective management team roles.

Part (iii): The Trust reports that the campaign in July 2013 to appoint Specialty Doctors (9 vacancies) in emergency medicine yielded 3 applicants and 2 appointments were made. In January 2014 further advertisements were placed for both Consultant and Speciality Doctor posts in emergency medicine.

Ambulance Service: Speeding Fines

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what liaison has taken place between his Department, the Department of Justice and the PSNI to ensure that ambulances are not subject to fixed penalty speeding fines whilst in pursuit of their work.
(AQW 29723/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not engaged with the Department of Justice or the PSNI on the issue of fixed penalty speeding fines for ambulances as it is not necessary to do so.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) is legally required to adhere to the requirements of the Road Safety Act 2006 which stipulates exemptions that may be applied to ambulance emergency response vehicles relating to “speeding” and “traffic control signals”.

However, Fixed Penalty Notices can be issued if speed cameras do not register the blue lights on ambulances engaged on emergency activity. In that case, NIAS checks the details against its records and, if appropriate, advises the Fixed Penalty Processing Centre that an ambulance was on emergency activity and no further action is taken. If it transpires the ambulance was not on emergency activity, its driver is then subject to the same road traffic restrictions as other drivers and is liable to a Fixed Penalty Notice.

Ovarian Cancer Awareness Campaign

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to introduce an Ovarian Cancer Awareness campaign to educate women on the symptoms of the condition during the official Ovarian Awareness Month.
(AQW 29740/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Public Health Agency (PHA) is currently developing a cancer awareness campaign for Northern Ireland. In taking forward this public information campaign the PHA has advised they need to take various points into consideration including an evidence review to determine which specific tumour sites are included and evaluating current cancer awareness campaigns being conducted throughout England and Scotland as a guide to the development of the Northern Ireland campaign.

Public information campaigns are just one element of a communications approach that can be utilised to raise awareness of particular issues. With specific regards to ovarian cancer awareness, the PHA and the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board are currently working closely with GPs and specialists from across the HSC to develop an agreed management pathway for patients suspected of having ovarian cancer. The aim of the pathway is to ensure that all patients presenting with symptoms or signs of ovarian cancer are swiftly investigated and are able to access specialist cancer care rapidly.

The referral pathway will reflect the evidence-based approach as set out in NICE guidance for ovarian cancer. It is expected that the pathway will be issued this month (January 2014).

Fire and Rescue Service: Implementation of EU Directive

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what impact the implementation of EU Directive 561/2006 will have on the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, including job losses, potential of voluntary severance payments and the reduction in available staff.
(AQW 29768/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) has advised that there has been no adverse impact as a consequence of this EU Directive. NIFRS also state that there have been no job losses, nor reduction in available staff, as a consequence. NIFRS does not currently operate a voluntary severance scheme

NIFRS continue to monitor the situation on an ongoing basis.

Ambulance Service: Allowances

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the Five Hours Out of Station meal and subsistence allowance is available to all Ambulance Service personnel in every Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 29797/11-15)

Mr Poots: Day meal subsistence allowance is available to all Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) staff employed under Agenda for Change Terms and Conditions of Service provided they are away from base for 'more than five hours'.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Trainee Advanced Clinical Practitioners

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many trainee Advanced Clinical Practitioners are in place in each Health and Social Care Trust; and to list the positions available to the trainees when they qualify, including the location.
(AQW 29810/11-15)

Mr Poots:

Western Trust

The Western Trust has one Advanced Nurse Practitioner working within Neonatal the Services at Altnagelvin. In addition they are 2 trained Advanced Nurse Practitioners in Paediatrics. Advanced Nurse Practitioner posts will only be available when additional investment is secured to develop this service and establish substantive posts.

South Eastern Trust

The South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust currently has no Advanced Nurse Practitioner Trainees. The Trust has two Advanced Nurse Practitioners (ANP) working in Neonatology and, as part of its workforce planning for Emergency Department services, is considering an ANP role in this speciality. On completion of training it is envisaged that these practitioners would work in a Level 1 Emergency Department environment where they would be part of a medical rota supporting a Consultant Led Team.

Northern Trust

The Northern Trust have 2 WTE Advanced Neonatal Nurse Practitioners.

Southern Trust

The Southern Trust has two nurses in training to become Advanced Paediatric Nurse Practitioners (APNP). There are two APNP posts available within the Trust when they successfully complete their programme.

These two staff will augment the APNP workforce already practising within the Trust, as well as the Advanced Neonatal Nurse Practitioners in post in Craigavon Area Hospital.

Belfast Trust

There are three Advanced Paediatric Nurse Practitioners within Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children and two nurses in training for the Advanced Nurse Practitioner role in Emergency care.

Advanced Nurse Practitioner posts will only be available when additional investment is secured to develop this service and establish substantive posts.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Agency Staff

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how long agency staff must work in a Health and Social Care Trust before they are offered a temporary contract.
(AQW 29811/11-15)

Mr Poots: Employment as an Agency Worker in a Health and Social Care Trust does not confer a right to a temporary contract with that Trust. The contract of employment for an Agency Worker is the responsibility of the employing Agency.

Health and Social Care Trusts: Scans

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) outpatient; and (ii) inpatient (a) MRI; and (b) CT scans take place on a daily basis in each Health and Social Care Trust; and whether this figure includes weekends.
(AQW 29812/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is not possible to provide information on a daily basis covering an extended period of time. As such the most recent week, prior to the question being asked, has been provided i.e. 6th January – 12th January 2014.

HSC Trusts were instructed to count one unit of activity for each scan carried out. If multiple areas of the body were investigated using the same scan, this would be counted as one unit of activity i.e. no multiplier was to be applied.

The number of outpatients MRI scans during week commencing 6th January 2014 at each HSC Trust is outlined in the table below:

Number of outpatient MRI scans carried out during week commencing 6th January 2014P

HSC Trust	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Belfast	56	54	46	50	40	0	0	**246**
Northern1	18	19	22	13	7	20	20	**119**
South Eastern	52	32	24	36	22	0	0	**166**
Southern	20	15	25	12	20	10	10	**112**
Western	37	29	33	42	28	0	0	**169**

Source: HSC Trusts P Data is provisional

The number of inpatient MRI scans during week commencing 6th January 2014 at each HSC Trust is outlined in the table below:

Number of inpatient MRI scans carried out during week commencing 6th January 2014P

HSC Trust	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Belfast	10	17	10	25	15	5	4	**86**
Northern1	5	3	3	2	7	0	0	**20**
South Eastern	6	17	15	4	5	0	0	**47**
Southern	7	10	4	14	9	0	2	**46**
Western	3	5	7	11	11	0	0	**37**

Source: HSC Trusts P Data is provisional

The number of outpatients CT scans during week commencing 6th January 2014 at each HSC Trust is outlined in the table below:

Number of outpatient CT scans carried out during week commencing 6th January 2014P

HSC Trust	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Belfast	111	120	120	105	113	21	12	**602**
Northern1	48	72	33	57	50	0	0	**260**
South Eastern	50	59	60	71	50	9	5	**304**
Southern	40	35	49	23	36	0	0	**183**
Western	52	44	56	57	46	0	0	**255**

Source: HSC Trusts P Data is provisional

The number of inpatients CT scans during week commencing 6th January 2014 at each HSC Trust is outlined in the table below:

Number of inpatient CT scans carried out during week commencing 6th January 2014P

HSC Trust	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Belfast	65	60	47	45	66	22	15	**320**
Northern1	36	44	48	43	41	26	24	**262**
South Eastern	27	20	26	29	33	5	15	**155**
Southern	32	43	42	35	41	36	25	**254**
Western	36	36	40	39	30	20	15	**216**

Source: HSC Trusts P Data is provisional

The number of MRI and CT scanners in each Health and Social Care Trust is provided in the following table:

HSC Trust	Number of MRI scanners	Number of CT scanners
Belfast	7	9
Northern	1	4
South Eastern	2	4
Southern	1	3
Western	2	4

Source: HSC Trusts

The working hours of MRI and CT scanners varies across hospitals even within each HSC Trust. The core working hours for MRI and CT scanners are mainly Monday to Friday between 8:00am and 5:00pm although some scanners may only carry out a few sessions per week dependent on the size of scanner or funding available. Additional activity can also be carried out in the evenings and at weekends to meet elective demand or to provide out of hours and emergency on-call services.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Early Closures

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what discussions have taken place with the Ambulance Service about the early closure of the Lagan Valley and Downe Hospitals Emergency Departments; and what formal arrangement are in place to deal with the early closures.
(AQW 29814/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) held discussions with representatives from Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts, including the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) Trust about the early closure of the Lagan and Downe Hospitals Emergency Departments (EDs). Discussions also took place about the contingency arrangements being put in place to deal with the anticipated impact resulting from the changes.

The HSCB has that advised the following contingency arrangements have been put in place:

South Eastern HSC Trust

Downe and Lagan Valley Hospitals

- Direct admissions will be facilitated through GP Out Of Hours on both sites.
- In Lagan Valley, the GP Out of Hours service will be able to make direct contact with the doctor on duty via mobile phone. If required a consultation with the Consultant on-call will be available.
- For direct admissions to the Downe Hospital, the GP Out of Hours doctor will see patients at home or in the Out of Hours centre, which is co-located with the ED, and will hand over patients for admission to the in-house medical team.
- 6 additional beds will be opened in Lagan Valley to facilitate direct admissions and support timely transfers back from other hospitals. This has the potential to be increased to 10 beds if required.
- Existing repatriation protocols for Lagan Valley and Downe are currently being reviewed; no major changes are likely.

Ulster Hospital

- 2 additional nurses will be rostered from 12 noon until 12 midnight on Saturdays and Sundays in the ED;
- 10 additional beds have been opened to support winter pressures; and
- elective (planned) admissions were capped at 55 per week (currently 75) from week beginning 6 January 2014. This will be reviewed on an on-going basis.

Out of Hours

- Additional shift at Downe and Lagan Valley to be provided.

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service

- Additional Crews
- 1x A&E (from 08.00 to 20.00) on Saturday and Sunday in Downpatrick;
- 1x A&E (from 08.00 to 20.00) on Saturday and Sunday in Lisburn;
- 1x Intermediate Care Vehicle (ICV) (from 11.00 to 19.00) on Saturday and Sunday in Comber; and
- 1x ICV (from 11.00 to 19.00) on Saturday and Sunday in Lisburn.

Additional Hospital Ambulance Liaison Officers (HALO)

- 1x HALO at Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) from 12.00 to 18.00 on Saturday and Sunday;
- 1x HALO at Ulster Hospital from 12.00 to 18.00 on Saturday and Sunday; and
- 1x HALO at Craigavon Area Hospital from 12.00 to 18.00 on Saturday and Sunday.

Belfast HSC Trust

- 6 additional inpatient beds;
- 2 additional ED nurses in RVH at weekends to cover 12 hour day time period both Saturday and Sunday;
- 2 additional ED senior doctors in RVH at weekends to cover 12 hour day time period both Saturday and Sunday; and
- enhanced acute medicine, social work, radiology and laboratories.

Southern HSC Trust

Craigavon Area Hospital

- 1 additional Emergency Nurse Practitioner (ENP) and one additional band 5 nurse per ED shift;
- 4 additional inpatient beds.

Daisy Hill Hospital

- 1 additional ENP Saturday and Sunday 8am-8pm.

Northern Trust

- The Trust will monitor the position and liaise with NIAS but does not anticipate significant change for its area as a result of the changes at Lagan Valley and Downe.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Waiting Times

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the mechanism for recording Accident and Emergency waiting times differs from the rest of the UK; and why the mechanism used elsewhere has not been adopted to facilitate service comparison.
(AQW 29816/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised the mechanism to record emergency care waiting times is broadly similar in each of the four UK jurisdictions with only minor differences in how these are measured, mainly due to the slightly different ways in which the services are provided in each region.

Information on performance against the emergency care waiting times targets in the four UK regions are broadly comparable but when making comparisons across regions cognisance must be taken of the minor differences that exist, for example in Scotland and Wales, community emergency care departments or community casualty departments that are GP or nurse led are included. In England, attendances at “Walk-in Centres” for minor ailments are also included.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Staffing

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why Emergency Department staff from the Downe and Lagan Valley Hospitals are not concentrated into one location at weekends, rather than closing both departments at weekends because of staff shortages.
(AQW 29817/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust considered a number of options to address the difficulties arising from the shortage of medical staff. The option to open the emergency departments from 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and close them at weekends was selected because it minimises locum requirements and is sustainable in the short to medium term. The Trust has indicated that the decision to maintain emergency department services at both hospitals under the current arrangements better serves the needs of all of the South Eastern Trust population.

Western Health and Social Care Trust: Income

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 29081/11-15, whether, in the event of the targeted income of £320k per annum not being reached, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, or any other agency within his Department, will have to make up any of the shortfall in revenue.
(AQW 29818/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Western Trust, like any other Trust or Arms Length Body, is required to live within available resources whilst also ensuring that services are delivered in a safe, sustainable and effective way.

Any shortfall in an organisation’s savings delivery plans or income projections would be primarily managed by the organisation, through the development of alternative plans and by taking any other steps to ensure financial breakeven is secured. In doing so, it is paramount that front-line services are protected and that patient/client safety is not compromised.

Fire and Rescue Service: Training

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the funding which has been apportioned to Large Animal Rescue Training for Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service personnel, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29840/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below details the funding apportioned to Large Animal Rescue Training for NIFRS personnel in each of the last 3 years

Year	Total Cost
2010/11	£46,187
2011/12	£38,320
2012/13	£36,464

Fire and Rescue Service: Training

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service personnel have received Large Animal Rescue Training, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29844/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below details the funding apportioned to Large Animal Rescue Training for NIFRS personnel in each of the last 3 years

Year	Total Cost
2010/11	£46,187
2011/12	£38,320
2012/13	£36,464

Staff Suspensions

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of staff in (i) his Department; (ii) the Health and Social Care Board; and (iii) each Health and Social Care Trust, that have been suspended, over each of the last three financial years, including the (a) average length of suspension; (b) number of staff reinstated following suspension; and (c) payments made to suspended staff.
(AQW 29869/11-15)

Mr Poots:

(i) DHSSPS

Financial year	Number Suspended	Average length of Suspension	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff
2012/2013	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
2011/2012	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
2010/2011	0	N/A	N/A	N/A

(ii) HSC Board

Financial year	Number Suspended	Average length of Suspension	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff
2012/2013	0	N/A	N/A	N/A
2011/2012	1	2 months	N/A	£3,261
2010/2011	0	N/A	N/A	N/A

(iii) Each HSC Trust

South Eastern HSC Trust

Financial year	Number Suspended	Average length of Suspension*	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff*
2012/2013	35	58 days	30	£56,515
2011/2012	3	89 days	1	£22,041
2010/2011	1	1	1	N/A

* In the event of a suspension crossing two financial years the days and costs have been distributed within the appropriate financial years. Please note: This will count the employee in each of the financial years.

Western HSC Trust

Financial Year	Number Suspended	Average length of suspension*	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff
2012/2013	33	4 months	12	£358,149
2011/2012	9	5 months	2	£84,265
2010/2011	16	10 months	7	£403,217

* The estimated total length of suspension is noted in months (regardless of whether it spanned 2 financial years)

Belfast HSC Trust

Year	Number Suspended*	Average Length of suspension	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff**
2012/2013	27	5 Months	25	£220,881
2011/2012	23	4 Months	22	£191,196
2010/2011	20	6 Months	20	£220,887

* Figures are for staff suspended with pay. Figures for staff on unpaid suspension is not held centrally

** estimated

Northern HSC Trust

Financial Year	Number Suspended	Average length of suspension	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff
2012/2013	9	266 days	4	£156,008
2011/2012	7	354 days	3	£131,569
2010/2011	6	462 days	2	£166,412

Southern HSC Trust

Financial Year	Number Suspended	Average length of suspension	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff*
2012/2013	22	108 days	10	£164,401
2011/2012	17	68 days	6	£63,295
2010/2011	20	79 days	5	£66,569

* estimated

NIAS Trust

Financial Year	Number Suspended	Average length of suspension	Number of staff reinstated	Payments made to suspended staff
2012/2013	1	232 days	0	£28,036
2011/2012	3	167 days	3	£40,973
2010/2011	10	180 days	9	£234,673

Interpreting and Translation Services

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 18449/11-15, (i) for an update on the review of Interpreting and Translation Services; (ii) to detail the options which were available for a more cost effective means of delivering translation services; and (iii) to outline his Department's position on each of these options.
(AQW 29871/11-15)

Mr Poots: The public consultation in relation to the Review of Future Arrangements for Language Interpreting and Translation Services ended on 13 December 2013. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has undertaken an analysis of the 44 consultation responses and is scheduled to consider the outcome of this process at its Board meeting on 13 February 2014.

The options considered by the Review included:

- Do nothing;
- Transfer the management of the language interpreting service to another Trust;
- Transfer the management of interpreting and translation services to a regional shared service provided by the Business Services Organisation; and
- Transfer the management of the interpreting and translation services to the Health and Social Care Board, the Public Health Agency or an external third party within the private or voluntary sector.

The review also considered the potential to rebalance the proportion of interpreting activity, such as increasing the proportion of telephone interpreting rather than face to face interpreting.

Given that the above issues are still under consideration by the HSCB, it is not appropriate for the Department to comment further at this stage.

Hospitals: Staff Guidance

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what guidelines are in place for hospital staff when using Tomography machines on patients who have Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillators.
(AQW 29872/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is the responsibility of clinicians to advise their patients about their suitability for diagnostic tests according to their individual clinical condition; this includes diagnostic techniques such as computed tomography (CT). Currently there is no UK policy or advice guidance in relation to CT and implantable cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs) however there is no indication of any national guidance alerts relating to cardiac device management during CT.

Operators of this type of specialised machinery are appropriately trained to ensure the safety of patients according to the manufacturer's equipment specifications and professional instruction and recommendations.

Mid Ulster Hospital: Plans

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail his Department's (i) current; and (ii) future plans for the Mid Ulster Hospital.
(AQW 29892/11-15)

Mr Poots: The commissioning of hospital services is the responsibility of the Health and Social Care Board. The Northern Health and Social Care Trust Population Plan indicates that the Mid-Ulster Hospital, along with the other community hospitals, has an important role to play in developing more local provision particularly in relation to community/primary care-led services.

Autism: North Belfast

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources have been invested to support people diagnosed with autism and their families in North Belfast; and to outline his Department's policies for assisting these families and the charities that support them.
(AQW 29894/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available specifically for the North Belfast constituency area.

The Belfast HSC Trust has advised that £395k is allocated to provide post-diagnostic interventions by Trust staff within both Children and Adult Autism services. In addition, the Belfast Outcomes Group, mandated by the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnership, have also invested approximately £120k to assist the voluntary and community sector in Belfast to support children with autism and their families in 2013.

Autism services are underpinned by a range of DHSSPS policies and strategies. The foremost of these is the cross-departmental Autism Strategy (2013 – 2020) and Action Plan (2013 – 2016) which I launched in the Assembly on 14 January 2014. The Strategy and Action Plan document includes a summary of these policies and planned actions.

Autism Strategy and Action Plan: Funding

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional funding will be provided by his Department to support the Autism Strategy 2013-2020 and Action Plan 2013-2016.
(AQW 29895/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board is investing £500k across 2013-15, to further support Adult ASD-specific service capacity within Health and Social Care Trusts.

Within the Autism Action Plan (2013 – 2016), a key health and social care action is the completion of a regional validation exercise of both the Children and Adult's Autism Care Pathways, by March 2014. When I review these reports – if areas of specific need are identified – I will consider the appropriate action to take for the delivery of effective Autism Services within Health and Social Care.

In addition, my Department has submitted a proposal to have funding approved through the NI Executive's 2014/15 Government Advertising Programme to deliver a public awareness element of a broader campaign to raise awareness and understanding of autism.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients that attended the Royal Victoria Hospital Accident and Emergency Department, broken down by residents in each local council area, on each day from 4 to 9 January 2014.
(AQW 29916/11-15)

Mr Poots: Between 4th and 9th January 2014, there were 1,329 attendances at the Royal Victoria emergency care department, similar to the number who attended during the same period in 2013 (1,328). Information on the number of attendances at the Royal Victoria emergency care department, during each period is detailed in Table 1 (4th – 9th January 2014) and Table 2 (4th – 9th January 2013) for each day by local council area.

Table 1: Number of Attendances at the Royal Victoria Emergency Care Department, during each Day by Local Council Area (4th - 9th January 2014)

Local Council Area[1]	04/01/ 2014	05/01/ 2014	06/01/ 2014	07/01/ 2014	08/01/ 2014	09/01/ 2014	Total
Antrim	2	2	1	5	5	3	**18**
Ards	1	1	1	1	2		**6**
Armagh		1	1	1		1	**4**
Ballymena		1	1	1	2		**5**
Ballymoney		1					**1**
Banbridge	3	3	2	1	1	1	**11**
Belfast	133	113	157	150	144	108	**805**
Carrickfergus	6	6	6	8	7	4	**37**
Castlereagh	8	12	16	12	18	6	**72**
Coleraine					1		**1**
Cookstown				1			**1**
Craigavon	2	1	3		1		**7**
Derry				4	1	2	**7**
Down	6	3	3	4	3	2	**21**
Dungannon	1	2			2		**5**
Fermanagh			1	1	1		**3**
Larne	3	2	3	1		2	**11**
Lisburn	37	41	46	33	26	27	**210**
Magherafelt			1	1	1	3	**6**
Newry & Mourne			1		1	1	**3**
Newtownabbey	16	12	12	15	12	11	**78**

Local Council Area[1]	04/01/ 2014	05/01/ 2014	06/01/ 2014	07/01/ 2014	08/01/ 2014	09/01/ 2014	Total
North Down	2	3	3	3	1	3	**15**
Omagh	1						**1**
Strabane				1			**1**
Northern Ireland	**221**	**204**	**258**	**243**	**229**	**174**	**1,329**

Source: Symphony

1 Local Council Area has been derived from the patients home postcode.

Table 2: Number of Attendances at the Royal Victoria Emergency Care Department, during each Day by Local Council Area (4th - 9th January 2013)

Local Council Area1	04/01/ 2013	05/01/ 2013	06/01/ 2013	07/01/ 2013	08/01/ 2013	09/01/ 2013	Total
Antrim	4	2	3	4	4	3	**20**
Ards	4			1	3	2	**10**
Armagh				1		1	**2**
Ballymena	1	1	1	2	1	2	**8**
Banbridge	3	1	2	1	2	2	**11**
Belfast	141	110	112	142	138	120	**763**
Carrickfergus	8	4	5	10	9	4	**40**
Castlereagh	16	10	9	17	11	13	**76**
Coleraine	1				1		**2**
Cookstown			1	1	2	1	**5**
Craigavon	2		1	1	3		**7**
Derry	1			1	1		**3**
Down	4	3	1	5	3	6	**22**
Dungannon		1	1	1	3	1	**7**
Fermanagh					2		**2**
Larne	1	3	3	5	4	2	**18**
Lisburn	36	33	35	47	41	35	**227**
Magherafelt	1	2	2	4	3	1	**13**
Moyle	1						**1**
Newry & Mourne	2	1		2	2	1	**8**
Newtownabbey	17	10	8	11	14	8	**68**
North Down	5	1		4	1		**11**
Omagh			1	2		1	**4**
Northern Ireland	**248**	**182**	**185**	**262**	**248**	**203**	**1,328**

Source: Symphony

1 Local Council Area has been derived from the patients home postcode.

Cervical Cancer Prevention

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action he will take to improve cervical cancer prevention for the 22 percent of women who have not been screened, particularly those in the age cohorts of 25-29 and 60-64 who have the lowest uptake.
(AQW 29924/11-15)

Mr Poots: Screening for cervical cancer is offered to all eligible women aged 25-49 every three years, and to those aged 50-64 every 5 years.

Approximately 120,000 women are screened each year in Northern Ireland. There has been a steady increase in the proportion of eligible women attending for cervical screening, across all the age cohorts. The coverage, which is the percentage of eligible women who have been screened in the previous 5 years, was 78.04% at end March 2013 compared to 73.45% at end March 2008.

The coverage is slightly lower in the age cohorts of 25-29 and 60-64. Raising awareness of cervical cancer prevention through screening is an important step in addressing this. There are a number of ongoing initiatives.

All women invited for screening by the regional call recall centre receive an information leaflet with their invitation letter to support them in making an informed decision on participation. Individual GP practices have also taken specific steps to improve access to screening for their population based on local need, for example providing walk-in appointments with the practice nurse.

A four-year action plan (2012-2015) to help promote informed choice in cancer screening has been developed by the PHA, and is currently being implemented. It contains a number of actions on promoting cervical screening including among the hard to reach groups.

Opportunities are also taken at a regional level to promote the screening programme through local media releases at key times of the year, such as during Cervical Cancer Awareness Week in January.

Autism: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources have been invested in North Down for supporting people diagnosed with autism and their families, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29930/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not available specifically for the North Down constituency area.

The South Eastern HSC Trust has advised that £650k was allocated for autism assessment, diagnosis and intervention services in 2013/14 across the whole Trust. This does not include support provided to families, children and adults with Autism through other programmes of care within SEHSCT, the Family Support Hubs or through voluntary organisations with whom the Trust has contracts.

The Trust also advise that the breakdown of resource allocation for the previous five years is not readily available.

Carers: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many registered carers in North Down are over 60 years old.
(AQW 29931/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not available.

Cancelled Clinics: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many clinics in North Down were cancelled in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29932/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Quarterly Outpatient Activity Return (QOAR), which is the present methodology for the collection of consultant-led outpatient activity, was introduced by my Department's Hospital Information Branch from the beginning of 2008/09, as a direct result of a comprehensive review of collection of outpatient activity undertaken in 2007/08. Primarily the methodology changed from the reporting of the number of clinics held and cancelled to the reporting of the number of appointments held and cancelled.

The only hospital that falls within North Down constituency is Bangor Hospital. The number of cancelled outpatient appointments at Bangor Hospital in each quarter of the last five years, is shown in the table overleaf. These figures represent the number of outpatient appointments that were cancelled by the patient (CNA) and whom gave advance warning to the hospital and the number of outpatient appointments that were cancelled by the hospital.

When assessing the level of cancelled outpatient appointments, it is more appropriate to consider these in the context of the total number of outpatient attendances, in order to provide a more comparative trend analysis. This involves the calculation of a standardised measure of patient cancelled appointments, which is called a CNA rate and a standardised measure of hospital cancellations, which is called a hospital cancellation rate. These rates are also presented in the table below.

Number of outpatient appointments cancelled by the patient and by the hospital from 2008/09 – 2012/13

Financial Year	No. Of Patient Cancelled Outpatient Appointments	Could Not Attend (CNA) rate	No. Of Hospital Cancelled Appointments	Hospital Cancellation rate
2008-2009	1807	11.1	3158	17.9
2009-2010	1738	10.8	2649	15.6
2010-2011	1664	11.0	3243	19.5
2011-2012	1464	11.3	1752	13.2
2012-2013	1176	9.2	1071	8.4

Source: Quarterly Outpatient Activity Return (QOAR) Part 1

1 The CNA rate is calculated as follows: (Number of could not attend appointments/(Number of outpatient attendances + Number of could not attend appointments))*100

1 The Hospital Cancellation rate is calculated as follows: (Number of hospital cancelled appointments/(Number of outpatient attendances + Number of hospital cancelled appointments))*100

Details of cancellations by specialty, if required, are available online in the Northern Ireland Hospital Statistics: Outpatient Activity Statistics 2012/13, available at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/ni_hospital_statistics_-_outpatient_activity_2012-13.pdf

Ambulance Service: Response Times

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average ambulance response time in (i) Bangor; (ii) Holywood; and (iii) Donaghadee.
(AQW 29933/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department's current performance indicator for ambulance response times is that 72.5% of all Category A (life-threatening) calls are responded to within eight minutes, with no less than 67.5% in any Local Commissioning Group (LCG).

Performance against this indicator is detailed in the table below for each month since April 2013.

LCG	Apr 2013	May 2013	Jun 2013	July 2013	Aug 2013	Sept 2013	Oct 2013	Nov 2013	Dec 2013
Belfast LCG	75.7%	83.0%	85.0%	83.9%	83.4%	85.9%	84.9%	83.3%	76.9%
Northern LCG	58.0%	58.8%	61.5%	56.6%	62.1%	62.6%	65.0%	61.4%	59.3%
South Eastern LCG	57.2%	66.3%	68.4%	64.1%	65.1%	61.4%	68.2%	62.4%	59.6%
Southern LCG	60.3%	62.6%	63.3%	65.7%	64.4%	63.9%	65.7%	65.7%	60.1%
Western LCG	64.0%	66.8%	66.4%	65.9%	66.1%	72.1%	71.5%	69.0%	62.9%
Northern Ireland	63.8%	68.7%	69.8%	68.4%	69.3%	70.8%	72.1%	69.6%	64.7%

Health and Social Care Trusts: High Dependency Cots

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many High Dependency cots are available each Health and Social Care Trust; (ii) whether all of the cots are currently available; (iii) whether there has been a reduction in number of cots within in the last two years; and (iv) if so, for what reason.
(AQW 29935/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of High Dependency cots which were either occupied or available for use at each Health and Social Care Trust at midnight on 17th January 2014, is given in the table below.

HSC Trust	Cots Occupied	Additional Cots available for use
Belfast	5	2
Northern	2	0
South Eastern	4	0
Southern	1.25*	3
Western	4	2

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

* At midnight on 17th January 2014, Southern HSC Trust had one occupied high dependency cot. In addition to this a level 2 high dependency cot which is designated as a high dependency cot 25% of the time was also occupied. This has been represented in the table above as 1.25 occupied cots.

All Health and Social Care Trusts reported that there has been no reduction in the number of cots within the last two years.

Defibrillators: Training

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what training his Department provides to teachers on the use of defibrillators.
(AQW 29972/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has no statutory responsibility to offer training to individuals or organisations that purchase their own defibrillators.

When individuals or organisations purchase a defibrillator ideally they should be advised about training and maintenance of the machine by the supplier. This is an area that has been considered as part of the regional resuscitation strategy for Northern Ireland which is currently out for consultation until the 14 February 2014.

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the ministerial meetings on health issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council.
(AQW 29988/11-15)

Mr Poots: Since 2007, under the auspices of the British-Irish Council, Ministerial meetings on Misuse of Drugs were held on 20 November 2008 in London, 24 February 2010 in Douglas and 29 June 2012 in St Helier.

In the same time period, under the auspices of the North –South Ministerial Council, Ministerial meetings in the Health and Food Safety sector were held on the 28 November 2007 in Dublin, 28 May 2008 in Belfast, 10 June 2009 in Dublin, 25 November 2009 in Belfast, 2 June 2010 in Armagh, 10 November 2010 in Newry, and 20 July 2011, 2 February 2012, 18 July 2012, 21 November 2012 and 18 October 2013, all in Armagh.

Prosthetic Knees

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the makes and models of prosthetic knees available to Health Service patients.
(AQW 29989/11-15)

Mr Poots: The makes and models of prosthetic knees available are shown on the attached list. In addition, a final prosthesis prescription is based solely on the right, best fit and best outcome for the patient, commensurate with their assessed clinical need.

Makes and models of prosthetic knees available via the Regional Prosthetic Service, Musgrave Park Hospital

- Endolite Stabilised knee with Pneumatic swing phase control and manual knee lock
- Endolite Stabilised knee with Pneumatic swing phase control
- Medi NOP4 knee
- Medi NKFM1 knee
- OrthoEurope 2SA104 knee
- OrthoEurope 2UK101 Ultimate knee
- OrthoEurope 2SR500 Sensor knee
- Ossur RKN10006 Rheo Knee
- Ossur Total knee 2100
- Ossur Total knee 2000
- Ossur Total knee 1900
- Otto Bock 3R33 knee
- Otto Bock 3R106 knee
- Otto Bock 3R60 EBS knee
- Otto Bock 3C98-2 knee
- Otto Bock 3R17 knee
- Otto Bock 3R36 knee
- Otto Bock 3WR95 Aqualine knee
- Otto Bock 3R80 knee
- Otto Bock 3R92 knee

Legal Highs: Health Consequences

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the range of possible health consequences of legal highs.
(AQW 29990/11-15)

Mr Poots: Substances referred to as “legal highs” have a psychoactive effect but are not currently covered by the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, the term “legal highs” can be misleading, and we therefore refer to them as New Psychoactive Substances.

Many of these substances are new and often have no safety or toxicity data. This makes it very difficult to make an assessment of the active chemical in any New Psychoactive Substance and to give an accurate picture of potential side-effects and dangers. Indeed, there are many different types of New Psychoactive Substances – some act like stimulants, others as depressants. In addition, ingredients and effects can change from batch to batch – and when tested some of these substances have been found to contain illegal drugs.

However, I have no doubt there is a potential for very serious and potentially tragic consequences for anyone taking any substance that has not been prescribed for them. Users have no way of knowing exactly what they are taking and health risks are likely to range from being out of control and/or passing out, through to increased risk of cardiac arrest and overheating, potentially up to overdose and death. In addition, these substances can decrease inhibitions, act as a depressant and increase the risk of suicide, self-harm, and poor mental health.

Legal Highs: Incidents

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many legal high related incidents have been recorded at hospitals in each Health and Social Care Trust over the last five years.
(AQW 29991/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of legal high related incidents recorded at hospitals is not available.

Legal Highs: Research

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he is aware of any research which shows a link between the usage of legal highs and illegal drug use.
(AQW 29992/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not undertaken or commissioned any research on the links between the usage of so-called “legal highs” and illicit drug use. The term “legal highs” falsely implies that these substances are safe, and are legal for human consumption. They are not necessarily safer than illegal drugs – in some situations their affects can be more devastating. We therefore refer to them as New Psychoactive Substances.

Given that this is an emerging issue, and the sensitive/illegal nature of drug consumption, it is difficult to find out detailed information about these substances and their users. However, I am concerned that the availability of these substances, and particularly in “head shops” on our high streets, may help normalise drug misuse within our society. Indeed, these substances may be a “gateway” to the further misuse of drugs.

I recently raised this issue with the Home Secretary, setting out my concerns about the accessibility of New Psychoactive Substances and seeking a more robust and consistent approach to addressing this issue across the UK. In response to this, the Home Office has now announced a review of how the UK’s legislative response can be enhanced beyond the existing measures of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. I am pleased that the review will be informed by a range of evidence, including the various international approaches I highlighted to the Home Secretary, including those adopted by the Republic of Ireland, the USA and New Zealand. It is anticipated that this review will be completed by Spring 2014.

I believe it is essential that we take a consistent approach across the UK for any efforts to be effective and I welcome the fact that NI will be part of this review.

Organ Donation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what percentage of people on the organ donar list are (i) adults; and (ii) children.
(AQW 30018/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested has been supplied by NHS Blood and Transplant, which is the organ donation organisation for the UK and is responsible for matching and allocating donated organs. A key part of this work involves managing the registrations of people on the NHS Organ Donor Register.

The information is shown in the following table –

Northern Ireland registrants on the NHS Organ Donor Register by age (as at 22/1/2014)

	Age at 22/1/2014
Child (<18)	8508 (1.48%)
Adult	565958 (98.52%)
Total	574466

Dementia Diagnosis: Rates

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what are the rates of dementia diagnosis in each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 30041/11-15)

Mr Poots: Under the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract, the total number of GP-registered patients diagnosed with dementia is recorded.

The raw prevalence of dementia in each Health and Social Care Trust is shown in table 1 below. The number of patients on the dementia register in each Health and Social Care Trust area has been derived based on the location of the practice. It should be noted that patients may not reside in the same HSC Trust in which their practice is located.

Table 1: Raw prevalence of dementia per 1,000 registered patients, 2013.

HSC Trust	Raw prevalence of dementia per 1,000 registered patients
Belfast	6.82
South Eastern	7.99
Northern	6.05
Southern	5.64
Western	5.89
Northern Ireland	**6.43**

Register sizes are taken from the Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS) as at National Prevalence Day, 31 March 2013. The prevalence is calculated based on the number of patients on the dementia register as a proportion of the full GP registered list for Northern Ireland as at January 2013.

Hospitals: Avoidable Visits

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many initiatives to reduce avoidable trips to hospital are currently operational in each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 30084/11-15)

Mr Poots: In addition to the nationwide "Choose Well Campaign", the Local Commissioning Groups in the five HSC Trusts have put in place, or are in the process of establishing, a wide range of initiatives to reduce avoidable trips to hospitals. These include, for example, initiatives to allow GPs to access consultants directly by telephone or email for advice in relation to certain specialties; patient education programmes to help manage long-term conditions; streamlined referral pathways and a greater range of services available in community settings.

The NI Ambulance Service is also putting in place a series of protocols on a phased basis which will allow paramedics to assess and treat patients at the scene and avoid transport to hospital.

In addition, GPs are incentivised to participate in external peer reviews of secondary care outpatient referrals, emergency admissions and A & E attendances. The reviews will include, if appropriate, proposals for improvement to access arrangements in the practice in order to reduce avoidable outpatient referrals, emergency admissions and attendances.

Cancer Drugs: Accessibility

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether a patient's address has an impact on their accessibility to cancer drugs.
(AQW 30089/11-15)

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland patients have equal access to cancer and any other drugs that are clinically suitable, irrespective of their address.

Multiple Sclerosis: Treatment

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the anticipated start and completion dates for the review of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's decision to make teriflunomide available on prescription to people with relapse remitting multiple sclerosis.
(AQW 30113/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department's review of NICE Technology Appraisal TA303 on teriflunomide for treating relapsing forms of multiple sclerosis commenced on 6 December 2013 on receipt of a near-final version of the guidance. Additional material was provided when the guidance was published on 22 January 2014 and the review is expected to be completed by 18 February 2014, 4 weeks after publication. As soon as the local review is complete, the endorsement decision will be published on the Department's website.

Children: Complex Medical Needs

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether a hospital admittance of a child with complex medical needs automatically triggers a review of their care package.
(AQW 30141/11-15)

Mr Poots: The DHSSPS guidance, Developing Services to Children and Young People with Complex Physical Healthcare Needs (2009), sets out an integrated care pathway for the treatment of children and young people with complex healthcare needs, including a planning model which considers the changing needs of these children and their families. Any change in the child's circumstances which may impact upon their care should be assessed and addressed.

Therefore, while admittance of a child to hospital may not automatically trigger a review of their care package, when the child is being discharged, an assessment should be made of any possible change in the child's healthcare needs which would impact on the level of care required at home.

Vaccination

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the approval of the Bexsero meningococcal B vaccine for its potential use in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 30150/11-15)

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK, vaccination policy is informed by the work of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). JCVI is an independent expert advisory committee that advises the four UK Health Ministers. In formulating its advice and recommendations, the Committee's aim is to ensure that the greatest benefit to public health is obtained from the most appropriate vaccination and immunisation strategies.

JCVI had invited comments on their interim statement regarding the Men B vaccine published in July 2013. They have since issued an update in October in which they advised that they received a number of detailed comments which were considered by JCVI and its meningococcal sub-committee. The submissions received included references to new and recently published evidence and further analyses are necessary to respond fully. The required analyses are being commissioned and will be completed as quickly as possible. I will consider the JCVI recommendation once I have received it.

Cancer Drugs: Funding

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the assistance his Department gives to patients seeking funding for cancer drugs.
(AQO 5386/11-15)

Mr Poots: During 2012/13 more than £40 million was spent on cancer drugs and treatments in Northern Ireland with additional expenditure on the costs associated with cancer care, for example palliative and primary care costs.

The decision about suitable treatments for cancer patients is the responsibility of the patient's clinician. The Health and Social Care Board has responsibility for commissioning specialist drugs, including cancer drugs, in line with guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.

For patients who require treatment that falls outside the normal range of services commissioned by the Board their clinician may apply for an individual funding request.

Legal Highs: Progress Against

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made to tackle legal highs.
(AQO 5387/11-15)

Mr Poots: Substances referred to as "legal highs" have a psychoactive effect but are not currently covered by the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, I prefer not to use the term "legal highs" as it can be misleading, and we therefore refer to them as "New Psychoactive Substances".

I recently raised this issue with the Home Secretary, setting out my concerns about the accessibility of New Psychoactive Substances and seeking a more robust and consistent approach to addressing this issue across the UK.

In response to this, and other concerns raised, the Home Office has now announced a review of how the UK's legislative response can be enhanced beyond the existing measures of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. I am pleased that the review will be informed by a range of evidence, including the various international approaches I highlighted to the Home Secretary, including the Republic of Ireland, the USA and New Zealand. It is anticipated that this review will be completed by Spring 2014.

I believe it is essential that we take a consistent approach across the UK for any efforts to be effective and I welcome the fact that NI will be part of this review.

Healthcare Staff: Language Skills

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions are being taken to ensure that healthcare professionals have appropriate language skills for communicating with patients.
(AQO 5388/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is a fundamental obligation of all HSC organisations that employ or contract with healthcare professionals to assure themselves of their fitness for the post at appointment. This includes their ability to communicate effectively with patients. I consider that current recruitment and appointment processes fulfil these requirements.

It is important however that we continue to enhance existing processes. For example, my officials are currently working with Health colleagues in England to introduce amendments to the Medical Act which will strengthen the powers of the General Medical Council and enable them to carry out proportionate checks on doctors from the EU where there is concern around their English language capability.

I remain strongly committed also to ensuring that those patients, clients and service users who do not have English as a first or competent second language are able to access health and social care services here in Northern Ireland. A key feature in this is the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Interpreting Service which has over 400 face to face interpreters in a range of 35 ethnic minority languages helping to facilitate effective and meaningful communication between HSC professionals and those service users not proficient in English.

Autism: Support

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what actions are being taken to support people with autism.
(AQO 5390/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Autism Strategy (2013 - 2020) and Action Plan (2013 - 2016), which I launched in the Assembly on 14 January 2014, outlines the Executive's commitment to improving services and support for people with autism and their families, throughout their lives.

Key actions for my Department and the HSC include:

- autism awareness – training for relevant frontline staff and raising awareness via a public campaign;
- enhancing health and wellbeing for people with autism and their families;
- building on existing early intervention and family support services for children, as outlined in the Six Steps of Autism Care Pathway;
- regional validation review of autism care pathways; and
- developing adult ASD-specific service capacity in HSC Trusts.

Mortuaries

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the opening and closing times of mortuaries during the week, at weekends and Bank Holidays.
(AQO 5391/11-15)

Mr Poots: The opening times for the mortuary at the Ulster Hospital are 8.30-16.30 Monday to Friday and 8.30-12.30 at weekends and Public Holidays.

The mortuary at Altnagelvin Hospital is open from 9.00-16.30 every day while the mortuary at the South West Acute hospital opens from 9.00- 17.00 each day.

The mortuary at Causeway Hospital is open 24 hours a day, all year round. The opening times of the mortuary at Antrim Hospital are 9.00-17.00 Monday to Friday (release of bodies' service available until 20.00) and 8.00-13.00 at the weekends and Public Holidays.

The Craigavon Area Hospital mortuary opening times are 9.00-1900 Monday to Friday, and 9.00-18.30 at weekends and Public Holidays, while opening times at Daisy Hill Hospital are 1200-18.30 Monday to Friday, and 9.00-18.30 at weekends and Public Holidays.

The Belfast Trust mortuary is open Monday to Friday 9.00-17.00 and Saturday 9.00-12.30.

Outside the above opening times an on-call service is provided for each of the mortuaries.

Downe Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of how the weekend closure of the Downe Hospital Accident and Emergency department will impact on the waiting times at the Ulster Hospital.
(AQO 5392/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am advised that, to date, there is no evidence that the temporary changes to the opening hours of the Downe Hospital's emergency department is having a significant impact on attendances at the Ulster Hospital. The situation will continue to be monitored by the Health and Social Care Board and the South Eastern Health and Social CareTrust.

Organ Donation

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his position on the introduction of a soft opt-out system of organ donation.
(AQO 5393/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am giving careful consideration to the findings in the Public Health Agency's report on public attitudes towards organ donation, including the possible introduction of a soft opt-out system, and will make a statement on my Department's policy position in the near future.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the actions taken following the recent crisis at the Emergency Department of the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast.
(AQO 5394/11-15)

Mr Poots: The major incident at the Royal Victoria Hospital declared by the Belfast Trust was not a crisis. It was a planned response to a higher than normal rate of patients attending the Emergency Department who required admission. The Emergency Department returned to normal service within a matter of hours. The Belfast Trust has an ongoing programme of reform to improve the emergency service at the hospital.

Western Health and Social Care Trust: Income

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 29081/11-15, whether, in the event of the targeted income of £320k per annum not being reached, the Western Health and Social Care Trust, or any other agency within his Department, will have to make up any of the shortfall in revenue to a private company or operator.
(AQW 30300/11-15)

Mr Poots: Neither the Western Trust nor the Department is required to make up any shortfall in the targeted income of £320k per annum to a private company or operator.

Department of Justice

Patrick John McDaid: Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total Legal Aid costs incurred in the case of Patrick John McDaid following his conviction and subsequent appeal, broken down by (i) legal firm/solicitor, (ii) junior counsel and (iii) senior counsel.
(AQW 29743/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): A Legal Aid Certificate was granted for representation by solicitor only for proceedings in the Magistrates' Court.

The total fees:	£1,074.00

A Legal Aid Certificate was granted for representation by a solicitor, senior and junior counsel for proceedings in the Crown Court.

The total fees:	Solicitor	£9,007.85
	Senior counsel	£4,464.00
	Junior counsel	£3,412.80
	Total	**£16,884.65**
	Grand total	**£17,958.65**

Fees have not been paid on foot of Mr McDaid's subsequent appeal.

Marian McGlinchey: Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to provide the total costs in the prosecution and defence of Marian McGlinchey following her recent admissions and sentencing, including a breakdown of the costs associated with (i) Legal Aid broken down

by (a) legal firm/solicitor; (b) junior counsel; and (c) senior counsel, including all additional expenses claimed; (ii) prosecution costs; and (iii) any additional costs incurred since the case entered the court system.
(AQW 29750/11-15)

Mr Ford: Legal Aid was granted on 22 July 2011 for proceedings in the Magistrates' Court for representations by solicitor and junior counsel in relation to charges of "providing money/property for use in terrorism".

The total fees were:

Solicitor	£9,137.71
Junior Counsel	£1,050.00

Following committal to the Crown Court in respect of this charge, a certificate was granted for representation for solicitor, senior counsel and junior counsel at the Crown Court. The defendant was convicted and all fees remain outstanding for all representatives with the exception of the senior counsel who was initially instructed but who was unable to continue representing the defendant.

Total fees:	First senior counsel	£720.00

2 Legal Aid was granted on 27 September 2012 for Magistrates' Court proceedings for representation by a solicitor and junior Counsel in relation to charges of "aid/abet addressing a meeting sec 12(3) of the Terrorism Act". A claim has been received from the junior counsel who withdrew from the case.

Total fees	£601.01

No other fees have as yet been paid.

Following committal on the aid/abet charge, a Crown Court certificate for representation by solicitor, senior Counsel and junior Counsel was granted. To date no claim from any of the legal representatives involved in these Crown Court Proceedings have been received.

The PPSNI have provided the following prosecution costs covering two prosecutions:

Senior Counsel	£21,546.00
Junior Counsel	£10,773.60
Senior Counsel	£22,732.00
Junior Counsel	£12,652.00

Court Case 13/122971

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the charges in case number 13/122971 at Dungannon Magistrates Court were committed whilst on bail for other matters, and if so, to detail (i) when was bail was granted; (ii) the court; and (iii) the terms set.
(AQW 29787/11-15)

Mr Ford: This case is currently scheduled for hearing and I am unable to provide a substantive answer to this question at this stage of the proceedings.

Legal Aid: Expert Witnesses

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 28698/11-15, what process is used to determine the amount paid to an expert witness through Legal Aid for evidence provided in legal proceedings.
(AQW 29820/11-15)

Mr Ford: The amounts paid to expert witnesses for evidence provided in legal proceedings on behalf of a legally assisted person are determined on a case by case basis depending on the circumstances of each case.

Fees are determined by reference to the General Authorities, documents which specify the fees charged below which a member of the legal profession may engage an expert without seeking prior approval from the Commission.

Where necessary, ie if the amount exceeds the limits in the General Authority or the expert type is not listed in the General Authority, the Commission will seek full reasons why the engagement of the expert is required and, in such cases will routinely request that the solicitor provide three quotations to ensure that no other comparable expert is available at the standard rates.

The Commission has published guidance in respect of the engagement of expert witnesses in criminal proceedings.

If a request for authority to engage an expert witness in civil proceedings is considered by the Commission to be unusual either in terms of the nature of the request or the amount it will be considered as an "unusually large expense" under the

provision of Regulation 15(7) of the Legal Aid (General) Regulations (NI) 1965, and the request will be considered by an internal Panel within the Commission.

The General Authorities and guidance documents are available on the Commission's website at www.nilsc.org.uk.

Police: Officers Retired due to Injury

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice whether he is aware, or has sought any details from the Chief Constable, of how many police officers who have retired as a result of an injury on duty hold the designation permanent with no further reviews.
(AQW 29867/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have not sought any information from the Chief Constable regarding the numbers of police officers who have retired as a result of an injury on duty. My Department, as I advised in my answer to AQW/23798/11-15, does not have any role in the review of Injury on Duty Awards.

Under Regulation 35(1) of the PSNI and PSNI Reserve (Injury Benefit) Regulations 2006 the Policing Board is legally obliged to arrange periodical reviews of the degree of disablement of an Injury on Duty award.

Court Case 13/056715

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the trial in case number 13/056715 that was aborted at Craigavon Crown Court on 14 January 2014 due to inaccurate interpretation of the victim's evidence, whether an investigation will be carried out into how a non-registered interpreter was able to be involved in a case to this level before the lack of registration was discovered; and to detail the terms of reference for the investigation.
(AQW 29883/11-15)

Mr Ford: An investigation into the matter has been commenced by the DOJ Contract Manager. The investigation is being conducted under the terms of the contract with the current service provider, and is ongoing.

Consultancy Fees

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice to detail how much money has been spent by his Department on consultancy fees in each of the last two years, including a breakdown of each consultancy firm used.
(AQW 29908/11-15)

Mr Ford: Expenditure by the Department of Justice, including its Agencies but not its arm's length bodies, on consultancy fees in each of the last two financial years is shown in the table below. The names of consultancy firms have been withheld in line with DOJ policy.

2011/12	£418,927
2012/13	£108,575

Court Case 13/056715

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the trial in case number 13/056715 that was aborted at Craigavon Crown Court on 14 January 2014, to detail all costs to date of the case, including (i) Legal Aid; (ii) prosecution; (iii) translation/ interpretation services; and (iv) jury expenses.
(AQW 29940/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below details the estimated cost of case number 13/056715 from the start of the proceedings in the Magistrates' Court on 26 August 2011 to 14 January 2014 based on information available as at 22 January 2014.

Cost Type		**Estimated Cost (£)**
(i)	Legal Aid1	8,695
(ii)	Prosecution2	6,840
(iii)	Prosecution Interpreter costs3	300
(iv)	Court Interpretation costs4	8,083
(v)	Jury expenses5	785
(vi)	Court (Judiciary and Staff Costs)	3,890
(vii)	PSNI costs	1,703
(viii)	Facilities (e.g. Courtroom Accommodation)	595
Total		**30,891**

1 The legal aid cost relates to a co-defendant. Costs in respect of the main defendants have not yet been received.

2 The total cost to the PPS is not yet available. An estimate of costs for counsel has been provided.

3 Estimate for prosecution interpreter cost.

4 Expenses for interpreters received to date.

5 Expenses for jurors received to date.

Judicial Reviews

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many Judicial Reviews are currently listed in the court system.
(AQW 29941/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below details the number of Judicial Reviews listed for hearing as at 17 January 2014.

	Number
Applications for leave to apply for Judicial Review	34
Applications for leave to apply for Judicial Review under appeal	4
Applications for Judicial Review	65
Judicial Reviews under appeal	4
Total	**107**

Source: Integrated Court Operations System (ICOS)

Prisons: Drugs

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of searches for drugs that have taken place in each prison in the last two years; and on how many of those searches have illegal drugs been found.
(AQW 29955/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) conducts searching on prisoners, their visitors and staff as well as area searches. The purpose of searching is to uncover any illicit articles and prevent any breaches of security. In addition NIPS gathers intelligence on the use of drugs within prison which leads to searching resources being directed as appropriate. In this context it is not possible to detail the number of searches which were solely and specifically for drugs.

The total number of finds of illicit drugs for each of the last two years is set out in the table. These figures include prescription medication which was not legitimately held.

	Maghaberry	**Magilligan**	**Hydebank**
2012	234	104	115
2013	521	123	254
Total	**755**	**229**	**369**

Rural Crime: Discussions

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice to detail the recent discussions he has held with the Chief Constable regarding increases in rural crime and the steps required to combat it.
(AQW 29956/11-15)

Mr Ford: I hold regular meeting with the Chief Constable during which we discuss a range of issues including rural crime. You will be aware that reducing the opportunities to committee crime and make rural communities safer is a key strand of the Community Safety Strategy, “Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities”.

A Business and Rural Crime Action Plan is in place and is being delivered by my Department, working in partnership with PSNI and a range of other key statutory and business sector partners. A key outcome of that work has been the establishment of the Rural Crime Unit, an initiative supported by my Department, Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and NFU Mutual.

The Rural Crime Unit was formed in a direct response to concerns regarding rural crime and to assist in identifying how best to target resources to reduce crime incidents. The Unit provides a dedicated resource to identify trends and patterns in rural crime to assist District Commanders in making operational decisions and to target their resources and initiatives accordingly.

The information provided by the Unit has also allowed partners from the Rural Crime Unit Steering Group to support crime prevention initiatives aimed at encouraging farmers to take steps to help protect their property. This work was recently evidenced by the announcement of a funding package to encourage farmers in theft hotspots to fit security devices to their machinery.

At a local level, Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) have also developed Action Plans to address local community concerns, which include the development of tailored solutions to address rural crime where appropriate. Actions being delivered include Farm Watch schemes, trailer marking, 4 Tier Security Schemes, CCTV schemes and Neighbourhood Watch Schemes

Fines: Imprisonment

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of people that have been imprisoned for failure to pay fines in Fermanagh and South Tyrone.
(AQW 29995/11-15)

Mr Ford: The number of people who have been imprisoned for failure to pay fines with addresses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone for the last three years is set out in the table below.

2011	2012	2013
51	76	8

Legal Highs: Discussions

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with the PSNI to determine the prevalence of the use of legal highs.
(AQW 29996/11-15)

Mr Ford: Department of Justice officials have regular discussions with the PSNI and a range of other partner organisations regarding the prevalence of new psychoactive substances, inappropriately known as legal highs. Official surveys on illicit drug prevalence now include questions on such substances in order to gain a greater understanding of the extent of use.

The Department of Justice, DHSSPS, the PSNI, and the Public Health Agency have developed and introduced an informal early warning system – known as the "Drug and Alcohol Monitoring and Information System" (DAMIS) – which seeks to identify new substances or drug trends at an early stage, and provide information and advice to key stakeholders.

Legal Highs: Criminalisation

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the criminalisation of the sale and distribution of legal highs.
(AQW 29997/11-15)

Mr Ford: The term "legal highs" can be misleading, and we therefore refer to them as New Psychoactive Substances. While these substances have psychoactive effects they are not currently covered by the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The legislation associated with the misuse of drugs in Northern Ireland is a reserved matter for Westminster.

In December 2013, in response to the growing concern regarding the adequacy of existing legislation to respond to the challenge presented by new psychoactive substances, the Home Office announced that it would lead a review looking at how the legislative response can be enhanced to maximise its impact and improve the enforcement response. It is anticipated that this review, together with recommendations will be completed by Spring 2014.

It is vitally important that there is a consistent and uniform response to this issue and as the outcome of this review is awaited, my Department continues to engage with key stakeholders to respond to this issue.

Most recently, you may be aware that Environmental Health Officers from Belfast City Council, supported by the PSNI, have pro-actively utilised the General Product Safety Regulations 2005 in responding locally to this issue and I understand that a Court case is currently being progressed.

Animal Welfare

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current sentencing guidelines in cases of animal welfare offences.
(AQW 30024/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Lord Chief Justice, in his Programme of Action on sentencing, is enhancing the structures by which the Judiciary ensure consistent and appropriate sentences. Under this Programme, sentencing guidelines for a number of animal welfare offences heard in the Magistrates Courts have been developed. These are published on the Judicial Studies Board website (www.jsbni.com/Publications/sentencing-guides-magistrates-court).

Ticket Touting: Legislation

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Justice whether legislation exists to prevent ticket touting.
(AQW 30074/11-15)

Mr Ford: Ticket touting legislation only exists or previously existed in Northern Ireland by way of legislation from other parts of the United Kingdom law, and only in respect of certain national and international sporting events. Ticket touting is currently illegal in respect of the upcoming Commonwealth Games under section 17 of the Glasgow Commonwealth Games Act 2008.

It was also previously illegal under section 31 of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games Act 2006 though that ceased to have effect once the Games finished.

Chief Constable: Criteria

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice to outline why he chose to amend the criteria for the post of Chief Constable.
(AQW 30320/11-15)

Mr Ford: In May 2013 the Policing Board wrote to the Department identifying a number of issues relating to the current criteria which they wanted the Minister of Justice to consider.

Following the request from the Policing Board, and given that reforms in these areas had been made in England and Wales in recent years, I initiated consultation at the Police Advisory Board – which includes the Policing Board, the PSNI and Staff Association. I also sought views on the matter from the Justice Committee and the Equality Commission.

The focus of responses largely centred on the criterion relating to the mandatory requirement for 2 years service outside of the current force. It was also suggested that there may be some equality issues in preventing some senior officers from applying for a post they may otherwise be eminently suitable for on the basis that they have not served elsewhere for two years. The Equality Commission suggested that this requirement may be indirectly discriminatory against women, those with dependents, and those with a disability unless it could be objectively justified as an essential requirement for the post.

A draft of my Determination has been issued to Police Advisory Board members for any further representations which I will then consider.

Prisons: Women's Facility

Ms Boyle asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the plans for a purpose built women's prison.
(AQO 5401/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I informed the Assembly on 21 October 2013, I remain committed to having a separate prison for women. However, that will not happen in the near future. My intention is to develop a new, separate facility for women offenders combining both custodial provision for those women requiring secure custody and facilities for those women for whom a community based approach is more appropriate.

NIPS Officials are currently progressing a business case for a purpose built facility for women that will be subject to Department of Finance and Personnel scrutiny. However, the current planning assumption is that the development of a new women's facility will fall into the next Budget period. Therefore funding will be determined as part of the Executive's next Budget process.

I am pleased to advise that NIPS officials are in the process of finalising a business case for the development of a step-down facility for women on the Hydebank Wood site for women prisoners nearing the end of their sentence and getting ready to return into the community. I am also pleased to inform the House that work on the upgrade of Ash House infill commenced recently, to provide a range of additional educational, training and support services for female prisoners with a planned completion date of summer this year.

Flag Protests: Costs

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Justice how much the flag protests and civil unrest have cost his Department to date.
(AQO 5402/11-15)

Mr Ford: The flag protests and civil unrest have placed, and continue to place, a financial, and indeed a more general, burden or cost on many different sectors.

The estimated cost to PSNI incurred in policing flag protests and related civil unrest from 3 December 2012 to 31 March 2013 is £21.9m (this includes opportunity costs, in other words duty time, of £9.7m). There is also the ongoing cost to police the protest at Twaddell which until 31 December 2013 stands at £5.45m (this includes opportunity costs of £1.6m). These costs impact significantly on the PSNI's ability to undertake other work on behalf of the community.

In terms of the cost to my Department, there are a number of costs which have been incurred in processing and detaining individuals through the court and prison system. These include court time, remand costs and the additional costs associated with those individuals sent to prison. However identifying these costs could only be achieved at a disproportionate cost to the public purse. Other costs would include the cost to the legal aid budget. Given that nearly 400 people have been charged in connection with the protests and associated disorder the cost will be significant.

Compensation Services has advised that they have paid in the region of £250,000, to date, in terms of criminal damage claims associated with the flags protests. This sum is expected to increase as further claims are resolved.

There are also wider costs to local businesses, especially in Belfast, where uncertainty around protests have impacted heavily, particularly in the run up to Christmas 2012. Images of the flags protests and associated disorder were seen across the United Kingdom and Ireland and further afield. The reputational damage that such scenes can cause, the related impact to the economy should not be underestimated.

But the greatest cost of all is arguably to our community. As I have said before, everyone has the right to protest peacefully but there can be no excuse for the scenes of violence we have witnessed. The vast majority of the community are committed to democracy and the rule of law and it is essential that we continue to work together to tackle underlying issues and build a truly shared society for all.

Legal Aid: Savings

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice to outline the savings that have arisen from the reduction in criminal legal aid fees since its introduction in 2011.
(AQO 5403/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since devolution, my Department has implemented a comprehensive programme of criminal legal aid reform. Changes to Crown Court fees introduced in June 2011 will deliver £18.3m in annual savings, while changes to legal aid funding for representation in the Crown Court introduced in 2012 will deliver a further £1.5m in annual savings.

Due to the length of time required for old cases to work through the system, these savings will not be fully realised until 2015-16.

Driving Offences: West Belfast

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Justice what actions arose from the multi-agency discussions following the recent incidents of 'death driving' by young people in West Belfast.
(AQO 5405/11-15)

Mr Ford: A number of Criminal Justice Agencies, including the PSNI, the Probation Board and the Youth Justice Agency, met with community organisations and local representatives on 6 January 2014 and again on 20 January to discuss the disturbing events that occurred on the Falls Road on New Years Eve.

I welcome the involvement and commitment of all those who took part in these multi-agency discussions and would assure the member that my Department remains committed to tackling car crime across Northern Ireland.

In terms of outcomes, the Agencies represented are committed to work in partnership with the local community as they implement a range of operational measures focused on prevention and detection.

For example I can advise that the Department of Justice is a partner in an inter-agency project, led by Belfast City Council that aims to build relationships and reach out to disengaged youth in the Lower Falls Area who may be engaged in car crime and anti-social behaviour. The Department has contributed £25,000 to the project.

Rural Crime: Sentencing Guidelines

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the upsurge in livestock and agricultural machinery theft, particularly in the Newry and Armagh constituency, whether he has any plans to review the sentencing guidelines for people convicted of these crimes.
(AQO 5406/11-15)

Mr Ford: The legislation governing these crimes (Theft (Northern Ireland) Act 1969) already provides significant deterrent penalties. Anyone convicted of theft is liable, on conviction on indictment, to imprisonment of up to 10 years. Indeed, certain specified offences can attract a public protection sentence under which an offender is liable to imprisonment for an indeterminate or extended period, with future release determined by the Parole Commissioners.

Sentencing within this legislative framework is a matter for the judiciary and it is important that the independence of the judiciary is maintained. In making these decisions, judges take into account the law, sentencing guidelines, and all the relevant circumstances in each case. I realise that sometimes the sentence handed down in an individual case can fall short of victim and public expectations. That is why I have been working with the Lord Chief Justice on issues of transparency and consistency of sentencing.

Under his Programme of Action, the Lord Chief Justice established a Sentencing Group to enhance the guidance available to the judiciary, through oversight of the development and publication of sentencing guidelines. Guidelines for theft and burglary offences heard in the Magistrates Courts have been developed and are published on the internet, as are the various guideline judgments for theft and burglary offences heard in the Crown Court.

Legal Aid: Reform

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his proposals to reform legal aid.
(AQO 5407/11-15)

Mr Ford: The strategic objectives for my proposals to reform legal aid are:

- To improve access to justice;
- To bring legal aid expenditure within budget; and
- To improve governance and accountability for expenditure of public money.

The current proposals for reform of legal aid are about ensuring that the people who need help receive levels of advice and representation that are appropriate, but this needs to be affordable.

Since launching my Departmental Action Plan in July 2012, I have completed significant reforms in relation to Criminal Legal Aid which are yielding significant savings in the region of £20million per year. A further reform to Crown Court Fees has been subject to consultation and may yield further saving of up to £5.6million. In addition my Department has undertaken consultations of proposals for reforms to publicly funded legal Representation in the Civil and Family Courts, changes to Financial Eligibility for Civil and Criminal Legal Aid and proposals to introduce standard fees in the Civil Courts. It is envisaged that these reforms may save up to a further £18million per year. All of these projects will contribute to my strategic objective of bringing legal aid expenditure within budget.

In line with the recommendation in the Access to Justice Review, I have also consulted on the status of the Legal Services Commission. I will shortly introduce legislation to the Assembly to close the Commission and to transfer its functions to an Agency of the Department of Justice.

Prisons: Annual Reports

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 29154/11-15, why the Annual Reports of the Independent Monitoring Boards for Maghaberry, Magilligan and Hydebank Wood Prison and Young Offenders Centre were only published electronically.
(AQO 5408/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Annual Reports of the Independent Monitoring Boards (IMB) have been published only in electronic form since 2010. Hard copies are available on request from the IMB Secretariat.

Domestic Violence: Public Awareness

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice what steps can be taken to increase public awareness of the campaign against domestic violence.
(AQO 5409/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department is fully committed to raising awareness of domestic violence and recently endorsed the PSNI Crimestoppers campaign – "Behind Closed Doors." The focus of this campaign was to encourage family, friends and neighbours to report in confidence incidents of domestic violence and abuse known to them.

Domestic violence is an unacceptable crime and members should be aware that the Health Minister and I launched a consultation exercise on a new joint domestic and sexual violence and abuse strategy on 15 January. That consultation exercise will run until 11 April and I look forward to receiving the views of the community and especially any comments that victims or their families may wish to make.

The "Prevention and Early Intervention" strand of the draft strategy clearly indentifies the need to raise awareness and promote zero tolerance to such violence.

Department for Regional Development

Translink: Top 20 Bus and/or Rail Stations

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the top twenty bus and/or rail stations in order of the number of passengers using them.
(AQW 29406/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Translink officials have advised me that the top twenty bus and/or rail stations in order of the number of passengers using them are as per the table below:

Station	Passenger Flows 2012/13	NIR / Ulsterbus
Europa / Great Victoria Street Bus & Rail Station *	8,416,333	Ulsterbus & NIR
Bangor Bus & Rail Station *	2,997,637	Ulsterbus & NIR
Belfast Central	2,277,588	NIR
Ballymena Bus & Rail Station *	1,831,818	Ulsterbus & NIR
Coleraine Bus & Rail Station *	1,792,222	Ulsterbus & NIR
Londonderry Bus Station	1,559,500	Ulsterbus
Lisburn Buscentre	1,405,100	Ulsterbus
Newry Buscentre	1,367,000	Ulsterbus
Lisburn Railway Station	1,341,296	NIR

Station	Passenger Flows 2012/13	NIR / Ulsterbus
Omagh Bus Station	1,163,900	Ulsterbus
Portadown Railway Station	988,270	NIR
Botanic Railway Station	924,515	NIR
Lurgan Railway Station	901,388	NIR
Carrickfergus Railway Station	750,743	NIR
Enniskillen Bus Station	741,200	Ulsterbus
Downpatrick Buscentre	649,100	Ulsterbus
Laganside Buscentre	607,700	Ulsterbus
Dungannon Bus Station	549,750	Ulsterbus
Antrim Bus & Rail Station *	531,583	Ulsterbus & NIR
Newcastle Bus Station	506,700	Ulsterbus

Note: The figures for bus and rail stations represent flows rather than passenger journeys. Bus and rail stations located on the same site are added together.

It is important to say that comparing bus and rail station flows is very difficult because of the bus stop network used by large numbers of people.

Street Lighting: Cost

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 29426/11-15, to detail the cost of electricity used for street lighting in each district, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29534/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department pays for street lighting electricity for all of Northern Ireland through a single monthly invoice. It is not possible to accurately apportion expenditure by Council district, however, the table below provides details of expenditure on street lighting electricity across Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years:

2008 - 09 £'000	2009 - 10 £'000	2010 - 11 £'000	2011 - 12 £'000	2012 - 13 £'000
11,107	8,083	9,536	10,199	10,323

Parking: Residents' Schemes

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide an update on the introduction of legislation regarding Residents' Parking Schemes.
(AQW 29679/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is currently developing a number of residents' parking schemes.

Within the Greater Belfast area, Roads Service officials are giving priority to schemes in the Lower Malone and Rugby Road/College Park Avenue areas of Belfast, both of which are well advanced in terms of design and consultation. Formal consultation on the proposals is scheduled to take place in Spring 2014.

Informal consultation is also currently underway to determine if residents' parking proposals for the Donegall Pass and Sandy Row areas have broad local support.

Officials are also drafting the necessary subordinate legislation for the provision of residents' parking schemes in Massereene Street and Clarke Court in Antrim, as well as for the Bogside area of Londonderry, with the aim of introducing these schemes in 2014.

Greencastle Pier Road, Kilkeel: Repairs

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Regional Development what action is being taken to repair the damage caused by recent storms to the Greencastle Pier Road, Kilkeel.
(AQW 29681/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A 30 metre section of the Greencastle Pier Road was damaged during the recent storms and my Department hopes to complete these repairs within the coming weeks, subject to a positive outcome to consultation with officials from the Loughs Agency.

Parking: Residents' Schemes, Derry City Council Area

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 29139/11-15, to detail the areas considered suitable for the introduction of residents' parking schemes in the Derry City Council area.
(AQW 29730/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In October 2007, surveys were undertaken in seven Derry City Council areas: Northland 1, Northland 2, Clarendon Area, Rossville Street Area, City Centre South, Waterside 1 and Waterside 2, to determine their suitability for residents' parking schemes. The extent of non-resident parking was considered sufficient to justify the implementation of residents' parking schemes in four of the areas: Rossville Street, City Centre South, Clarendon and Northland 2.

Should the Member require further information, he should contact Mr Sean Mullan (Tel: 028 71321648), Roads Service Section Office, 1 Crescent Road, Londonderry, BT47 2NQ.

Baranailt Road, Claudy: Water Mains

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development how many homes at Baranailt Road, Claudy have had mains water tested for impurities in 2013, and of these, how many tests showed excessive amounts of (i) iron; and (ii) magnesium.
(AQW 29731/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that during 2013 it collected and analysed 34 water samples from nine properties in the Baranailt Road area of Claudy. Of these samples, 23 had iron levels that exceeded the regulatory standard and none had magnesium exceedances.

In order to improve the quality of the water supply in the Baranailt Road area, NIW has appointed a contractor to replace the section of the distribution main serving the affected properties. Work commenced on 18 January 2014 and is expected to be completed within a month. In the interim, the customers will be supplied through a stringer pipe which should produce an immediate improvement in water quality.

Taxis: Specified Public Service Ranks

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether all Specified Public Service Taxi Ranks are open for the purposes of collecting and leaving fares by all licensed taxi operators.
(AQW 29732/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Not all taxi ranks are open to all licensed taxi operators for the purpose of collecting and leaving fares. Taxi ranks are provided as a service whereby an intending passenger makes their way to the nearest taxi rank and takes the next available taxi.

As you may be aware, there are different types of taxi which are licensed to operate in different ways, and not all taxis are permitted to pick up fares at taxi ranks. Private hire taxis, for example, under the terms of their licence, need either to be pre-booked or accessed from a dedicated taxi depot, whereas public hire taxis are permitted to pick up fares at taxi ranks.

The Department of the Environment has responsibility for taxi licensing.

Taxis: Specified Public Service Ranks

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail all the Specified Public Service Taxi Ranks in (i) Londonderry; (ii) Limavady; and (iii) Strabane.
(AQW 29733/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Whilst there are no Specified Public Service Taxi Ranks in Limavady, details of the locations of those in Londonderry and Strabane are set out in the table below:

Town/City	Location of taxi ranks
Londonderry	William Street Foyle Street Market Street Sackville Street
Strabane	Abercorn Square Main Street

Taxis: Specified Public Service Ranks

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he is considering any legislative or administrative changes to the number or use of Specified Public Service Taxi Ranks in the next twelve months.
(AQW 29734/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that the Department of the Environment is currently carrying out a review of taxi licensing legislation including taxi accessibility and charging issues. Early discussions between officials in my Department's Roads Service and licensing officials have highlighted that the new arrangements may stipulate that only accessible taxis will be permitted to use on-street taxi ranks.

Regarding changes to the numbers of taxi ranks, officials in my Department's Roads Service are currently progressing proposals with a view to providing two additional public hire taxi ranks in Belfast; one in Botanic Avenue, close to the railway station, that will provide five spaces and another in High Street, close to the Hi Park Shopping Centre, that will provide three spaces. There is a legislative process to be completed before these ranks are confirmed, which is open to challenge from individuals/groups opposed to the creation of additional taxi ranks.

Officials are presently discussing a range of taxi-related matters with representatives of the public hire taxi industry, including a request for a change to the taxi rank in Donegall Square North, Belfast. Agreement on a potential revised layout has not yet been reached.

You may be aware that a taxi-bus service operates along some specified routes within Belfast. Officials are also considering a request for locations for taxi-bus services to operate from in both Bridge Street and North Street.

There are also plans to amend the existing taxi ranks at Merchants Quay, Newry and Main Street, Newcastle. The former is being removed as it has been under utilised over the last 10 years. In respect of the latter, it is proposed to reduce the three existing taxi rank spaces to two and replace the other with a new accessibility bay for Blue Badge holders. These matters are currently with Departmental Solicitor's Office for consideration and are likely to be formally advertised within the next 12 months.

Ballygorian Road, Hilltown: Water Mains

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development pursuant, to AQW 23965/11-15, to detail (i) the reasons for delaying the commencement date for the water mains extension on the Ballygorian Road, Hilltown; and (ii) the timescale for when work will commence and conclude.
(AQW 29737/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that commencement of the project to extend the water mains on Ballygorian Road was delayed as a result of Roads Service placing restrictions on the proposed road closure. Roads Service has a 6 week closure on the B8 Newry Road, Hilltown for resurfacing works. The scheme commenced on 13 January and is scheduled to be completed by Mid-February. The diversion route for the NIW scheme would conflict with the diversion route for the B8 resurfacing scheme, therefore it was not possible to facilitate both schemes at the same time.

NIW's project is now scheduled to commence in Mid-February and take approximately 4 weeks to complete.

Moira Train Station

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to upgrade Moira Train Station, given the investment in other train stations such as Antrim, Bangor and Coleraine.
(AQW 29751/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Moira Station is listed as a heritage building which means that there are limitations to improvement in relation to the general configuration of the premises.

Translink will shortly be starting the construction of a footbridge across the station to join the platforms. Works should be completed in the summer of 2014.

Translink is also exploring the potential for Park and Ride capacity. These investigations are at feasibility study stage and it is likely that any project arising from the study could be completed within 3 years assuming land, planning permission and funding can be obtained.

Translink is actively considering the possibility of a further shelter on the platform. A feasibility study will be undertaken.

It should be noted that in recent years there has been significant investment to make improvements to the station. Park & Ride facilities have been increased and platforms were extended to accommodate the introduction of the new Class 3000 trains. The station was also included in the network-wide work to comply with Disability Discrimination legislation and to complement the introduction of new trains as part of Translink's New Rail Vision which provided improved station facilities and accessibility features for passengers.

Kirkistown Primary School, Cloughey: Speed Limit

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the progress on the review of the 40mph speed limit at Kirkistown Primary School and the play park in Cloughey village, Strangford.
(AQW 29764/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A review of the speed limits within Cloughey Village, following consideration of all the relevant factors in conjunction with the PSNI, indicates the current 40mph speed limit remains appropriate.

However, I can confirm that the existing flashing school warning signs are to be upgraded on both approaches to the school and this work should be completed before the end of March 2014. These measures will further enhance the school's presence and heighten driver awareness.

Tamnaghmore Road, Toome: Water Pipe

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the Tamnaghmore Road, Toome, to detail (i) the number of times the water pipe has been in replaced in the last three years including the cost; and (ii) whether he plans to replace the current pipe; and if so, when.
(AQW 29777/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that (i) the water main on Tamnaghmore Road, Toome has been repaired on four occasions during the past three years at a cost of approximately £1,000. (ii) NIW has no immediate plans to replace this water main but it will be considered for inclusion in the PC15 programme which covers the period April 2015 to March 2021.

Public Hire Vehicles

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development what flexibility his officials have to allow public hire vehicles to establish ad-hoc ranks during peak times or at major events.
(AQW 29786/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is required to make a legislative order to establish any mandatory and enforceable rank for public hire vehicles. As the legislation does not provide for temporary or ad-hoc ranks, there is no flexibility to allow the establishment of such ranks for public hire vehicles.

However, my Department has on occasion allowed the temporary relocation of existing ranks to facilitate road-works, and indeed other building works, or for events, although this can only take place with the co-operation of the PSNI. As these ranks are only advisory and cannot be legally enforced, other vehicles may park in them, which can generate complaints, especially from private hire taxi operators.

Roads Service Car Parks: Fires

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 28295/11-15, what action he will take to ensure that no further fires are lit in Roads Service car parks.
(AQW 29823/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As I stated in my previous response, I do not support or condone the unauthorised use of my Department's land or property for anything other than its intended use. If permission had been sought to use the car park for this purpose, it would have been refused.

As with other unauthorised activities which it encounters, my Department must fully consider the possible consequences of taking action. For example, in the case of the removal of flags or posters this is generally done in conjunction with the PSNI after consultation and negotiation with local community representatives. My Department is not generally perceived to be best placed to lead on such consultations, but provides appropriate support and technical assistance when requested. I consider a similar approach is warranted in this situation, however, I have asked my officials to write to the organisers of this event to advise them of their legal responsibilities in this regard.

Road Safety

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to installing cat's eyes on dangerous stretches of road and corners where there may not the traffic volumes to meet the policy, but road safety could be improved at that section of the road.
(AQW 29824/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Roads Service policy allows for the installation of reflective road studs in exceptional circumstances, in support of centre and lane markings on any road prone to fog or mist, or where poor alignment exists regardless of traffic volumes.

During the development of the Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy to 2020, it was recognised that improved driver information would make a positive contribution to road safety, especially at night time on rural roads. A number of action measures were developed to help address this issue. One of these measures was to improve edge and junction visibility on rural roads, through use of a combination of reflective bollards and studs, using advances in reflective technology products.

Work is underway to implement this and other associated action measures at selected sites.

Electric Cars: Parking Bays

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of e-car parking bays which his Department has yet to paint green, in order to prevent them being used as parking spaces by other drivers, including the timescale for when this work will be completed.
(AQW 29830/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The ecar Project Team is surveying the parking bays at each of the charge points to note the exact location, the condition of surface, and any additional whitelining or signage that may be required.

Once the survey has been completed the bays will be painted as soon as possible with work to be completed by 31 March 2014. My Department has not painted any of the bays to date.

Agreement from property owners will be required for charge points located on private property.

Roads: Gritting

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the provisions in place should residents wish to grit the minor roads in their own locality.
(AQW 29831/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Whilst the Roads Service winter service policy targets the majority of the available resources on the busier main through routes, it also provides for the provision of salt bins or grit piles for use by the public, on a self-help basis, on other routes that do not qualify for inclusion in the salting schedule. As a result, residents have access to grit should they wish to treat the minor roads in their own locality.

Approximately 4,800 salt bins and almost 50,000 grit piles are currently provided on Northern Ireland's minor roads with replenishment carried out on an ongoing basis during cold spells.

Door-2-Door Transport Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department reprocured the Door-2-Door Transport Service following his decision to put in place an interim service managed by Disability Action from 1 April 2013.
(AQW 29835/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Currently my Department is undertaking an evaluation of the transport policies and schemes initiated by the Department to promote social inclusion. The outcome of the evaluation will assist my Department to develop proposals to meet the transport needs of elderly and disabled people across Northern Ireland. At this time it is planned to maintain an interim scheme (The Disability Action Transport Scheme) with Disability Action.

Door-2-Door Transport Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current days and times the Door-2-Door Transport Service is available.
(AQW 29836/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Door-2-Door scheme ended on 31 March 2013.

The interim Disability Action Transport Scheme, operated by Disability Action since 01 April 2013 is available from 7.30am until 11.30pm daily Monday to Saturday and from 8.00am until 8.00pm on Sunday. On Public Holidays the service will run as follows:

New Year's Day	**No Service**
17th March	9.00am - 5.00pm Service
Easter Monday	9.00am - 5.00pm Service
Easter Tuesday	9.00am - 5.00pm Service
May Day (1st Monday in May)	9.00am - 5.00pm Service
May Bank Holiday (last Monday in May)	9.00am - 5.00pm Service
12th July	No Service
13th July	No Service
August Bank Holiday (last Monday in August)	9.00am - 5.00pm Service
Christmas Day	No Service
Boxing Day	No Service

Door-2-Door Transport Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the hourly wage of drivers employed by the Door-2-Door Transport Service.
(AQW 29837/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Door-2-Door scheme ended on 31 March 2013.

An interim scheme, the Disability Action Transport Scheme (DATS) is being provided by Disability Action. The issue of wages or hourly rates is an operational matter for Disability Action who believe the actual rates of pay is commercially sensitive information.

Disability Action has however advised me that the drivers who transferred from Moneymore Coaches (in administration), previously Chambers Coach Hire Limited did so under TUPE arrangements and that the rate of pay they now receive is greater that what they received previously.

Door-2-Door Transport Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the hourly wage of drivers employed by the Door-2-Door Transport Service, when it was operated by Moneymore Coaches.
(AQW 29838/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: This information is not available as it is not held by my Department.

The issue of wages and hourly rates was an operational matter for Moneymore Coaches (in administration) previously Chambers Coach Hire Limited. The Door-2-Door scheme ended on 31 March 2013 and I understand that the administration was formally closed in October 2013.

Door-2-Door Transport Service

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the days and times the Door-2-Door Transport Service was available when operated by Moneymore Coaches.
(AQW 29839/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The days and times for the Door-2-Door Transport scheme when it was operated by Moneymore Coaches (in administration) were:

- Monday to Sunday, 7.30am to 11.30pm

The service did not operate on New Year's Day, 12th and 13th July, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. A reduced service (9am to 5pm) operated on other Bank and Public Holidays, Christmas Eve and the days between Boxing Day and New Year's Day

Taxis, Belfast: Annual Budget

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current annual budget for Belfast Public Hire Taxi Ranks.
(AQW 29854/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department does not have a separate budget set aside and does not monitor expenditure specifically in relation to Belfast Public Hire Taxi Ranks. Any works considered necessary are catered for within the normal traffic management or maintenance allocations.

Cycling: Departmental Unit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the proposed frequency of meetings of the departmental cycling unit.
(AQW 29855/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Cycling Unit is a work group within my Department which is developing an ongoing programme of work as it aims to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery. Staff within the Cycling Unit meet internally on a daily and ongoing basis and have met with various other stakeholders since the creation of the Unit in November 2013.

The Cycling Unit looks forward to meeting with the Committee for Regional Development and the All Party Group on Cycling in due course.

Cycling: Departmental Unit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development who will be responsible for organising meetings of the departmental cycling unit.
(AQW 29856/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Cycling Unit is a work group within my Department which is developing an ongoing programme of work as it aims to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery. Staff within the Cycling Unit

meet internally on a daily and ongoing basis. In addition, the Cycling Unit will both organise meetings with other bodies and attend meetings organised by them. The Unit has arranged to meet with the Committee for Regional Development and looks forward to meeting with the All Party Group on cycling at its invitation.

The Cycling Unit has also had meetings with Belfast City Council staff, Government Departments, Sustrans and various other stakeholders and groups interested in cycling and walking as a means of sustainable transport.

Moira Train Station

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are plans to repair or upgrade the pavements surrounding the Moira Train Station.
(AQW 29861/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can confirm Translink is exploring the potential for Park and Ride capacity at the station. These investigations are at feasibility study stage and it is likely any project arising from the study could be completed within 3 years assuming land, planning permission and funding can be obtained. Subject to the outcome of Translink's study, my Department's Roads Service will review the current footway provision in this area to ensure appropriate facilities are provided.

Translink has provided overspill parking at the nearby 'Tannery' to offer customers safe and secure parking.

Moira Train Station

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there are any plans to increase the size of the car park at Moira Train Station to meet the demand placed on the facility by daily commuters.
(AQW 29862/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink is investigating a number of sites around Moira station to provide additional Park and Ride capacity. These investigations are at early feasibility study stage and it is likely that any project arising from the study would be completed within 3 years assuming land, planning permission and funding can be obtained.

Translink has provided overspill parking at the nearby 'Tannery' to offer customers safe and secure parking.

Moira Train Station

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development whether consideration has been given to health and safety issues in relation to commuters parking their vehicles on the roadside adjacent to Moira Train Station.
(AQW 29863/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that, whilst officials in my Department are aware that some drivers park their cars partially on the footpath at this location, as they do at many other locations, no specific safety issue has been highlighted.

I can confirm Translink is exploring the potential for Park and Ride capacity at the station. These investigations are at feasibility study stage and it is likely any project arising from the study could be completed within 3 years assuming land, planning permission and funding can be obtained.

Translink has provided overspill parking at the nearby 'Tannery' to offer customers safe and secure parking.

Translink: Newry to Bangor Train Service

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development how he plans to deal with the severe overcrowding on the Newry to Bangor train service during peak hours.
(AQW 29864/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that during peak hours Monday-Friday NI Railways operates 6 trains per hour in both directions between Lisburn-Great Victoria Street and Bangor. Highest passenger loadings are experienced between Lisburn and Belfast between 08:00-08:30 hours and 17:00-17:30 hours. During these times two mornings and one evening train is operated as a 6-carriage unit.

There have been isolated occasions when, as a result of engineering issues, there is a shortage of available trains. In these occasional circumstances a 6-carriage unit is replaced with a 3-carriage unit.

Translink: Newry to Bangor Train Service

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has considered adding additional carriages to the Newry to Bangor train service during peak hours to help meet the demand of daily commuters.
(AQW 29865/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: For normal timetabled services the standard 3-carriage unit is sufficient. For exceptionally heavily loaded services e.g. 07:40 and 08:00 Portadown to Belfast services, NI Railways join two 3-carriage units together to form a 6-carriage train.

All of NI Railways new trains are now in service. They have proved very popular and passenger numbers continue to grow across the network. NI Railways believes it has sufficient trains to meet current demand.

Roads: Weather Conditions

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development, in relation to the 12 and 13 January 2014, to detail (i) the methods that were used to ascertain if there would be frost; (ii) the time that resources were deployed to deal with the frost and black ice; (iii) the roads that were gritted, including whether this included the regular road network; and (iv) the number of accidents reported as a result of the road conditions.
(AQW 29876/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am responding on the basis the Member's question relates to roads within the Upper Bann constituency, which is covered by Roads Service's Southern Division.

My Department utilises specialised Met Office winter service forecast services that advise officials of the likelihood of winter hazards across Northern Ireland. Under these arrangements, the Met Office uses information from weather stations, which are located at 21 strategic locations across Northern Ireland, along with its own Meteorological data to provide specialised winter service forecasts, which are then transmitted to Roads Service Duty Engineers' computers. This data is then assessed along with local information from scouting reports, in certain circumstances, to ascertain the likelihood of ice forming. Officials responsible for the delivery of winter service, monitor Met Office forecasts on a 24 hour basis and respond to the predicted weather forecasts and updates that are received.

On 12/13 January decisions regarding what gritting actions were required for the network were made based on the weather forecast and actual conditions being experienced on the network. Monitoring of actual conditions was carried out using data from remote monitoring stations and from driven inspections by scouts.

During the evening of 12 January and morning of 13 January 2014, Roads Service Southern Division did not salt the roads on the salted network. However, I can confirm that on the morning of 13 January 2014, following reports of frost and ice affecting parts of the roads network, Roads Service carried out selective salting to target roads where difficult driving conditions had been reported. Treatment commenced between 07:00 and 08:30 from various depots across the Division in response to the reports received. Details of the routes treated are set out in the table below.

List of Roads in Southern Division where Responsive Gritting was Carried Out on Morning of Monday 13 January 2014

Depot	Location
Craigavon	Carn Road and Carn roundabout. Dungannon Road from the Birches roundabout into Portadown stopping at the Garvaghy Rd roundabout. Gilford Road, Portadown into Gilford, including the Mullahead roundabout and Moyallon Road. Plantation road from Gilford into Lurgan including Gilford Road, Flush Place roundabout and through the Flush Place junction in direction of Lurgan town stopping the grit just beyond the junction. Church Place, Lurgan (around the church). Goodyear roundabout, Ballynamoney Road and Kilvergan Road, Lurgan.
Armagh	A51 Hamiltonsbawn Road starting from Armagh Depot to the Roundabout at the Armagh Road/ Portadown Road junction in Tandragee. This route includes the following roads: ■ A51 Hamiltonsbawn Road between Armagh and Hamiltonsbawn; ■ A51 Marlacoo Road between Hamiltonsbawn and Marlacoo; and ■ A51 Armagh Road between Marlacoo and Tandragee. Between the Armagh Depot and the Newry Road Roundabout in Armagh then onto A28 between Armagh and Newry at the 5 Ways Roundabout. This route includes the following roads: ■ A28 Newry Road between Armagh and Markethill; and ■ A28 Gosford Road/ Armagh Road between Markethill and Newry.

Depot	Location
Corbet	A50 Banbridge to Scarva to Poyntzpass to Newry to Rathfriland. Knockgorm to Diamond to Dromara to Ballinahinch to Dromara. A50 to Banbridge to Broken Bridge Road to Milltown Road to Banbridge Town Centre to Old A1 to Outlet to Lurgan Road. A50 to Leitrim to Castlewellan to Moneyslane to Rathfriland to Dromara. B3 Loughbrickland to Poyntzpass to Scarva to Loughbrickland to Banbridge. B10 Banbridge to Rathfriland to Loughbrickland.
Newry	A25 from Newry to Kilcoo via Rathfriland returning B8 Hilltown. A25 Newry to Newtownhamilton Road. B78 Markethill Road. C213 & C214 through Whitecross.
Castlenavan	Comber Road Killyleagh between Killyleagh and Comber. Carrickmannon Road from Ballygowan to Raffery.

With regard to your request for information on the number of accidents reported as a result of road conditions, my Department does not hold this information. This information is held by the PSNI, who may be able to assist you with this query.

Roads: Weather Conditions

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what technology is used to ascertain weather conditions for gritting purposes.
(AQW 29877/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department uses the services of the Met Office to ascertain the weather conditions to inform decision-making in relation to gritting actions. Specialised Met Office winter service forecasts are utilised to inform Roads Service officials of the likelihood of winter hazards across Northern Ireland. Under these arrangements, the Met Office uses information from weather stations located at 21 strategic locations across Northern Ireland, along with its own meteorological data, to provide specialised winter service forecasts which are then transmitted to the Roads Service Duty Engineers' computers.

Roads Service officials take informed decisions based on Met Office forecasting and with the help of latest technology, including ice sensors linked to its weather stations, and thermal mapping of all roads on the salted network.

Ballymena Train Station: Park-and-ride Facilities

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans are in place to increase the capacity of the Park and Ride Scheme at Ballymena Train Station.
(AQW 29886/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following a Strategic Review of Park & Ride, my Department established a Park & Ride Programme Board which is responsible for prioritising the implementation of Park & Ride and Park & Share projects in line with the Department's strategy.

The Programme Board produced a 'Park & Ride Strategic Delivery Programme 2013-15'. This Programme plans to create at least an additional 1,000 Park & Ride and Park & Share spaces across Northern Ireland. To date over 600 additional spaces have been provided under the Programme. Ballymena Train Station is included in the Programme.

I have liaised with Translink officials who have advised me they are actively assessing how best to provide additional Park & Ride spaces at Ballymena. They need first of all to acquire land required for the project. They are also keen to link the provision of Park and Ride with plans to develop a new bus and rail station at Ballymena. Both projects are within the Translink Corporate Plan for 2014/2015 which assumes the necessary approvals and funding will be secured.

Taxis, Belfast: Ranks

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's plans to (i) increase; and (ii) modernise the number of Public Hire Taxi Ranks in Belfast.
(AQW 29896/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my response to his related question, AQW 29900/11-15.

Taxis: Donegall Square North, Belfast

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the impact of modernising the Public Hire Taxi Rank in Donegal Square North, Belfast, including the eradication of the current overranking.
(AQW 29897/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Officials in my Department's Roads Service have some concerns over proposals put forward by representatives of the taxi industry for taxi ranks in this area and, to date, agreement on a potential revised layout has not yet been reached. I need to be satisfied that any proposed change can be made without compromising the safety of all road-users, including users of other forms of public transport as well as pedestrians and cyclists.

The matter of over-ranking is perhaps one for the taxi industry to address, as it is just not possible to provide the number of taxi ranks in Donegall Square North that would be needed to accommodate every public hire taxi in Belfast. Officials have only very recently been asked to consider the provision of a feeder rank close to the existing rank in Donegall Square North. Whilst officials have not as yet had time to explore this request, changes could have an impact on existing kerb-side usage, as well as on adjacent businesses and premises.

I would also refer the Member to my response to his related questions, AQW 29899/11-15 and AQW 29900/11-15.

Taxis, Belfast: Ranks

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how much his Department has spent on Public Hire Taxi Ranks in Belfast, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29898/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service does not categorise or monitor expenditure specifically in relation to Belfast Public Hire Taxi Ranks.

I would also refer the Member to my response to his related question, AQW 29854/11-15.

Taxis: Donegall Square North, Belfast

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans his Department has to modernise the Public Hire Taxi Rank in Donegal Square North, Belfast.
(AQW 29899/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Officials have some concerns about the proposal put forward by representatives of the taxi industry for taxi ranks in this area and, to date, agreement on a potential revised layout has not yet been reached.

I would also refer the Member to my response to his related question, AQW 29900/11-15.

Taxis, Belfast: Ranks

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on departmental proposals to build new and modernise existing taxi ranks in Belfast, as proposed in 2009-10.
(AQW 29900/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is presently taking forward proposals to provide two additional public hire taxi ranks in Belfast, one in Botanic Avenue, close to the railway station, that will provide five spaces, and another in High Street, close to the Hi Park Shopping Centre, that will provide three spaces.

These proposed ranks will be subject to a legislative process and will be open to challenge from those opposed to the creation of additional taxi ranks.

I understand that, whilst the proposed rank in High Street has had the support of some representatives of the public hire taxi industry, it does not find favour with other taxi representatives who have proposed alternative facilities in High Street and Bridge Street. Officials will be seeking clarification from the various parties in the coming weeks before deciding on how best to proceed.

Officials are presently discussing a range of taxi-related matters with representatives of the public hire taxi industry, including a request to alter the taxi rank in Donegall Square North and to provide a new feeder rank nearby. Officials have some concerns about the proposals and agreement on a potential revised layout has not yet been reached.

European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: Report

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development, following the publication of a report from the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages on 15 January 2014 and the findings that there have been delays and obstructions over the provision of bilingual street signs and tourist information, whether his Department will carry out a full investigation to address the report's findings.
(AQW 29914/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Department for Regional Development has no responsibility for the erection of street name plates including bilingual street name plates. City, Borough and District Councils are empowered by Section 11 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to allocate postal numbers to houses and buildings in their districts, and to name any new road or street.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has lead responsibility for co-ordinating responses to the Fourth Evaluation Report from the Committee of Experts of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages. My Departmental officials will therefore assist DCAL to address any relevant issues, as required.

Larne Harbour: Passenger Numbers

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the falling number of passengers using Larne Harbour, what action he will take to ensure that the train timetable from Larne Harbour coincides with ferry departure and arrival times to help promote more sustainable and better integrated transport.
(AQW 29917/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: NI Railways operate regular hourly train services between Belfast and Larne, with the majority of trains connecting to/from Larne Harbour. This means every ferry arrival/departure reasonably connects with a train.

The current ferry service operates between Larne Harbour and Cairnryan but there is no direct onward rail connection in Scotland. As a result NI Railways now sell very few boat-rail connections to Great Britain. Nevertheless with an hourly rail service operating all day, all departing/arriving ferries will have a reasonable rail connection within Northern Ireland.

Delivering Social Change: Audiovisual Announcements on Buses

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the status the bid for Delivering Social Change funding to install Audio Visual Announcements on buses that would promote equal access to public transport for blind and partially sighted users.
(AQW 29948/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following completion of a successful pilot involving the provision of audio visual information systems on a number of Metro buses and at designated bus stops, the Department has continued to explore potential funding for the provision of audio visual systems on the bus network. An application to the OFMdFM Delivering Social Change Signature Project was made in June 2013. The Department is still awaiting the outcome of this application and OFMdFM is unable to confirm when a final decision on the bid will be made.

Roadside Fences: Legislation

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the required height for a fence on agriculture land that is being used as a border for a new by-pass, including the EU regulations that legislate for this.
(AQW 29950/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Requirements associated with the provision of roadside fencing are set out within the Manual of Contract Documents for Highway Works, which is jointly owned by the Highways Agency in England and the overseeing organisations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Volume one of the manual, Specification for Highway Works, sets out the various standards associated with the design and material specification for a range of fence types.

Overall heights can range from just over one metre for a wooden post and rail fence, to over two metres for a tensioned post and wire fence that is intended to stop deer passing. The type of fence specified depends on a number of factors, including the environment and the purpose the fence is meant to serve.

Speed Limits

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 29155/11-15, to detail the street names and constituencies where these schemes are operating.
(AQW 29968/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the street names and locations of the 20 mph zones implemented during 2011/12 and 2012/13 are shown in the table below:

20mph Zones implemented in 2011/12 and 2012/13

Year	Location
2011/2012	Drumannon Area, Omagh
	Lawnbrook Area, Omagh
	Drumcree Area, Cookstown

Year	Location
	Highfield Area, Magherafelt
	Derramore Avenue, Magherafelt
	Parkmore Area, Magherafelt
	Ashbrook, Strabane;
	Ferndale, Strabane
2012/2013	Castlefin Park, Castlederg
	Churchtown Park, Castlederg
	Crockett Park, Castlederg
	Hawthorn Park, Castlederg
	Hillview, Castlederg
	Young Crescent, Castlederg
	Millbrook Gardens, Casstlederg
	Currans Brae, Moy
	Carrowshee Park, Lisnaskea
	Cleenish Park, Enniskillen
2012/2013	Melmount Gardens, Strabane
	Gallows Hill Area, Omagh
	Johnston Park, Omagh
	Kensington, Shandon & Cherryvalley Area, Belfast

In addition one 20 mph zone is proposed for implementation during 2013/14, at the Langley Road Estate, Ballynahinch.

Mullaghboy Road, Bellaghy: Gritting

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the Mullaghboy Road, Bellaghy will be included in the gritting schedule, given the volume of traffic on the road, including traffic related to number of large businesses as well as school buses, and the safety concerns felt by local residents.
(AQW 30051/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased to confirm that the southern end of Mullaghboy Road, from the centre of Bellaghy to its junction with the Tamlaghduff Road, has been added to the salting schedule this season following an assessment of traffic volumes in the spring of 2013. Beyond that junction, however, traffic volumes are not sufficient to meet the criteria to warrant inclusion in the salting schedule, although there are suitable alternative treated routes available for through traffic.

Parking: Residents' Schemes, Holywood and Bangor

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed residents' parking permit scheme in Holywood and Bangor.
(AQO 5415/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has received a number of requests for Residents' Parking Schemes in various parts of Northern Ireland.

Specifically in relation to Holywood, officials are currently carrying out an initial assessment of the eligibility of residential streets within the town centre for a Residents' Parking Scheme. Consultants have been engaged and are currently undertaking surveys in a number of streets in the town centre. A summary report will issue at the end of February 2014.

You may be aware the centre of Bangor has been identified as an area of parking restraint and my Department intends to progress Residents' Parking Schemes in some residential areas in due course. However, I regret, I am currently not in a position to indicate a timescale, as this will depend, to some degree, on the successful implementation of the initial schemes being taken forward in Belfast.

Northern Ireland Water: Leadership

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures are in place to sustain the stability of the leadership of Northern Ireland Water.
(AQO 5416/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am satisfied that the Interim Chief Executive continues to provide effective leadership within Northern Ireland Water with the support of the Executive Team and the Board. My Department monitors closely the performance of Northern Ireland Water on a continuing basis.

A competition to fill the Chief Executive position on a permanent basis has just been launched. The interviews should be completed by the end of March.

Moneymore Bypass

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to a bypass for Moneymore.
(AQO 5417/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am aware that Moneymore is the remaining settlement on the Omagh to M2 east-west trunk route that has yet to feature on any programme for the provision of a bypass. However, in the context of potential future major capital works road projects, I am also aware there are many settlements along the A29 north/south Link Corridor, where traffic congestion is more significant, for example, in Dungannon and Armagh.

At this time, a bypass for Moneymore has not been identified in the Strategic Road Improvement Programme being taken forward under the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, as agreed by the Executive.

Roads Service's current Strategic Road Improvement programme is likely to take in excess of 10 years to deliver, subject to funding and the successful completion of the necessary statutory procedures. The next Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland review may provide an opportunity for Roads Service to look at the prioritisation of new schemes. At that time, a bypass for Moneymore may be considered along with other existing and proposed schemes elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

As you are aware, the Executive in June 2013, approved the allocation of £40 million for the construction of the Magherafelt Bypass and I welcome your support for the Magherafelt Bypass scheme, ahead of other potential schemes in Northern Ireland.

Transport: Belfast Hub

Ms McCorley asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposals for a Belfast Transport hub.
(AQO 5418/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Belfast Transport hub programme is expected to involve four elements: creating a state of the art multi-modal transport interchange; improvements to bus storage and maintenance facilities; centralization of Translink offices and commercial and regeneration options in the area.

A procurement exercise to appoint an integrated design team to begin work on the Master Plan is currently being undertaken by Translink for the whole site and to then take forward the preferred design solution. Tenders are due for return at the end of January 2014.

Translink has identified an extensive list of stakeholders for the project and is in the process of undertaking initial briefings. Translink is also preparing a Strategic Business Case for the whole programme and working with Strategic Investment Board to identify the most beneficial way to finance the programme.

It is currently projected that site works may begin later in 2016, subject to funding and approvals, with a construction programme running into several years depending on the extent of the agreed redevelopment and the number of works phases required to undertake construction around an operational public facility.

The project has great potential in addressing the growing Public Transport demand, creating opportunities for land development and for creating a gateway to Belfast and Northern Ireland with potential tourism, business and job benefits. It is a great opportunity for community regeneration in the area.

Trans-European Transport Network

Ms McGahan asked the Minister for Regional Development what projects his Department has identified as suitable for funding following the TEN-T Multi-Annual Call in December 2013.
(AQO 5419/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The conditionality of calls is determined by the European Commission; and it follows that each and every call has its own unique characteristics. The challenge facing not only my Department, but every Executive Department is to identify, shape and submit applications for European funding in ways that react those conditionalities and are most likely to lead to successful bids for funds from within a highly competitive arena.

I am sure that my colleagues on the Committee for Regional Development who attended the call information day in Brussels will attest to the levels of interest and degree of competition that was clearly evident at the event.

Since I took the decision to establish a dedicated European Unit in my Department last July, over 15 million pounds of competitive European funds has been awarded for the upgrade to the A8. This success clearly proves that my Department is at the forefront of the Executive's collective efforts to avail of competitive funds and that my Department has the capability to operate effectively on the European stage.

The December call for proposals relates very specifically to studies that lead to the preparation of project portfolios to be implemented in the future. It does not address works.

Given this, I have instructed my officials to prepare an application for funding for a study to identify the means by which a programme of work to develop the Great Victoria Street rail and bus station can be most effectively implemented to create 'The Belfast Hub'. Such a study would be the first step towards the establishment of a fully integrated cross-border mainline train and bus facility which would provide amenities for pedestrians, cyclists, taxis and private car users alike as well as a seamless connection to the Rapid Transit System.

The study will be instrumental in identifying and evaluating options that will deliver sustainable transport outcomes that address accessibility from both passenger and network perspectives, alleviate existing congestion issues and strengthen connections to core networks and corridors.

The closing date for applications is the 11th March, and the formal announcement on financing decisions is likely to be in the Autumn.

Translink: Passenger Numbers

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Regional Development how the number of bus and rail passengers in 2013 compares to 2012.
(AQO 5420/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I understand that in the 2013 calendar year there were over 67 million passengers journeys on bus, a small increase on the 2012 calendar year. On rail there were almost 13 million passenger journeys in 2013, an increase of over 1.5 million on the previous year.

Thus in total there were 80 million passenger journeys on Translink in the 2013 calendar year.

This confirms a positive trend on both bus and rail for that period.

Rural Roads: Improvements

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Regional Development what measures Roads Service are taking to improve the condition of rural roads so as to reduce road traffic incidents.
(AQO 5421/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In order to comply with my Department's duty of care under Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, which places it under a duty to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition, Roads Service has put in place a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety and an inspection programme to ensure roads have a satisfactory level of skidding resistance, which reduces the risk of uncontrolled skids and improves breaking efficiency. These standards are based on best practice, research, and consultation with both the public and other professional bodies and industry, and are designed to ensure a consistent service level and a safe highway, while offering value for money.

The procedures currently in operation establish frequencies for road inspections and specify response times for the repair of defects. Inspection frequencies vary according to the type of road with carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic inspected every 4 months. Response times specified for the repair of defects are dependent upon the severity of the defect and range from one calendar day, to routine inclusion in the next work programme for that particular route.

In addition, following each road traffic collision involving personal injury, my officials receive and analyse accident reports prepared by the PSNI that will highlight the specific circumstances and any contributing factors, which can be treated by engineering measures. Priority is given to those sites where accidents have occurred most frequently, or with the most significant impact, and subject to completion of the necessary statutory procedures, schemes are progressed on the basis of the available budget for such works.

My Department has invested, through a targeted collision remedial programme, approximately £3.5million since I came to office in May 2011, which has made a valuable contribution towards significantly reducing the number of fatal and serious collisions.

In addition over £20 million has now been allocated to roads maintenance as part of the January monitoring round. This additional funding will target structural maintenance on the local road network to help address the significant backlog and reduce the actual resurfacing cycles. It will also provide new drainage, some reconstruction and the resurfacing of around 160 kilometres of road.

This is a welcome boost for the public and the construction industry. Carrying out road improvements sustains hundreds of jobs every year and ensures the travelling public enjoy safer and more enjoyable journeys.

Carrickfergus Waste Water Treatment Works

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development what further investment is planned for the Carrickfergus Waste Water Treatment Works.
(AQO 5422/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that a project is currently underway at Carrickfergus Wastewater Treatment Works which will deliver approximately £900k investment in base maintenance in the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years. For the subsequent planning period covering 2015 to 2021, NIW has identified a further £2,400k of base maintenance work.

Base maintenance is capital investment and represents like for like replacement of assets rather than increasing works capacity or improving the works to meet changes to environmental standards. Carrickfergus Wastewater Treatment Works is performing satisfactorily and upgrades to increase capacity or improve compliance performance are not currently envisaged.

The base maintenance investment is in addition to the routine planned maintenance which is undertaken by NIW staff directly.

Unadopted Developments

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's progress on unadopted developments.
(AQO 5423/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department continues to make good progress on the adoption of roads and sewers in housing developments. Where possible, this has been achieved by working with developers or other responsible parties to have the new streets completed. When required, my Department has also used enforcement measures and called in guarantee bonds to fund works to bring roads and sewers infrastructure up to adoption standard.

In the twelve months up to 1 September 2013, my Department adopted over 64 kilometres of housing development roads into the public road network. The majority were completed by developers, but enforcement was also used in a number of instances where completion through the normal processes was not possible.

In the same period, officials issued 74 Article 11 enforcement notices, under the Private Streets Order, and 84 developments had their streets completed as a result of successful enforcement actions.

Good progress has also been made in tackling developments, categorised as backlog sites. In the year from 1 April 2012 until 31 March 2013, 297 backlog sites have been completed and adopted.

In summary, significant progress has been made in the adoption of new housing development roads and sewers and I remain committed to making further progress to help resolve the problem of unfinished development roads.

Weather: Funding

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has sought any additional funding in light of the recent adverse weather conditions.
(AQO 5424/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My officials are currently assessing the damage caused by the recent tidal surge, which affected not only the Ards Peninsula, but other parts of our coastline and adjoining roads.

It could be some time before the full impact is known, necessary repairs completed and the full cost realised. However, I can confirm that remedial works have already begun at some locations and additional preparatory work is underway in advance of the commencement of works at other locations.

As officials are still assessing the extent of the damage caused, specific bids for further funding may be required and will hopefully be considered sympathetically at a later date, if repairs cannot be funded from within existing budgets.

One of the most badly affected locations was Whitechurch Road, Ballywalter, where one lane of the carriageway collapsed from the impact of the tidal surge.

I am pleased to report that work to reinstate the carriageway and provide coastal protection to that section of road is progressing well and has been helped by favourable tides. I am hopeful this work can be completed and the road re-opened to through-traffic sooner than the anticipated 3 month timeframe. However, this will be dependent upon favourable weather conditions and no unforeseen difficulties being encountered. I will be in a better position to advise on this after next week, when work on the beach area should be complete.

I am also pleased my Department received an additional £20 million for roads maintenance as part of the January monitoring round. This additional funding will target structural maintenance on the local road network to help address the significant backlog, and reduce the timeframe for resurfacing works. It will also provide new drainage, some reconstruction and the resurfacing of around 160 kilometres of road.

This is a welcome boost for the public and the construction industry. Carrying out road improvements sustains hundreds of jobs every year and ensures the travelling public enjoy safer and more comfortable journeys.

Department for Social Development

Housing: East Antrim

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are waiting to be allocated housing in East Antrim, broken down by estate.
(AQW 29758/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by estate. However, the table below details the number of applicants on the waiting list at 1January 2014 for the Housing Executive District Office areas that cover the East Antrim constituency by Common Landlord Area.

Applicants first preference registered on the Waiting List as at 1 January 2014 by NIHE District Office/Common Landlord Areas

Newtownabbey [1]	**Applicants**
Abbeyglen	13
Abbeyville	32
Bawnmore/Old Mill	67
Bleach Green	16
Glenville	45
Hightown	18
Longlands	50
Rathcoole	432
Rathfern	25
Rushpark	151
Newtownabbey[1] Total	**849**

Larne	**Applicants**
Ballycarry	9
Clough/Croft/Beachland	49
Ferris Park	15
Glenarm, Glenview, Parkview/Munie	11
Glynn	14
Islandmagee	6
Linn Road	114
Magheramourne	1
Millbrook	7
Old Glenarm Road/Seacourt	27
Sallagh Park	13
Riverdale	14
Larne Town	151
Larne Total	**431**

Newtownabbey [2]	**Applicants**
Ballyclare	229
Ballyduff	122
Ballynure	7

Newtownabbey [2]	Applicants
Doagh/ Kelburn Park	21
Glenvarna/ Glengormley	127
Hyde Park/ Parkmount	13
Jennings Drive /Monkstown	1
Monkstown	123
New Mossley	139
Oakview/Roughfort	3
Old Mossley	29
Queens Park /Avenue	75
Newtownabbey [2] Total	**889**

Carrickfergus	Applicants
Carrickfergus Central	62
Castlemara	21
Davy Street	2
Drumhoy/ Salia/ Ederney	17
Dunloskin Central	10
Eden	80
Glenfield	11
Greenisland	108
Scotch Quarter/ Green Edge/ McKeens	10
Sunnylands	205
Taylors Ave	10
Victoria	87
Whitehead	85
Windmill	96
Woodburn Lower	132
Woodburn Upper	11
Carrickfergus Total	**947**

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development to publish the guidance used by examining medical practitioners to determine eligibility through medical examination for people applying for Disability Living Allowance; and when this guidance was last updated.
(AQW 29779/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The guidance used by Examining Medical Practitioners is owned by the Department for Work and Pensions. The Department for Work and Pensions have not published the guidance. Currently there are no plans to publish the guidance. My Department could not publish the guidance without the approval of the Department for Work and Pensions. The guidance was last updated in February 2013.

Examining Medical Practitioners do not determine eligibility to Disability Living Allowance. It is Decision-Makers in the Social Security Agency who determine entitlement to Disability Living Allowance, based on all available evidence including, where appropriate, information gathered through an Examining Medical Practitioner report.

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance/Employment and Support Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development whether all Atos Healthcare staff carry out medical examinations of both Disability Living Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance, or are different staff used specifically for each type of benefit examination.
(AQW 29780/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Atos Healthcare allocates their medical resource based on operational requirements. Each healthcare professional may perform different medical assessments across various social security benefit areas. Medical assessments in relation to Disability Living Allowance are currently carried out by doctors only. Medical assessments in relation to Employment and Support Allowance are completed by either a nurse or a doctor. Some medical conditions, mostly central neuropathy conditions, can only be assessed by a doctor.

Armed Forces Liaison Forum

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development whether he plans to establish an Armed Forces Liaison Forum within his Department.
(AQW 29903/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I understand that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has established an Armed Forces Liaison Forum to provide a single point of contact with Defence Medical Services and veterans' organisations. This reflects the size and complexity of the organisations providing health and social care services in Northern Ireland as well as the wide range of such services being provided to service and ex-service personnel. Given the more modest scale of Housing Executive and Social Security Agency involvement with service and ex-service personnel, I have no plans to at this point to establish an Armed Forces Liaison Forum within my Department. I will however, keep this situation under review.

Home Heating: Pay-as-you-go Oil Scheme

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on any progress on a pay as you go oil scheme.
(AQW 29904/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department undertook a pilot with Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services for a Pay as You Go for Oil system. The pilot commenced in February 2012 and the participants included Housing Executive tenants, householders who had been assisted through the Warm Homes Scheme and private referrals. The homes were in Dungannon, Coalisland, Newcastle and Camlough. The technology was installed in 17 low income households with the aim of testing the technology and the process. Carillion and the Housing Executive both completed separate evaluations of the pilot. The convenience of using the Pay as You Go for Oil system was highlighted as a major benefit. However, the results of the pilot survey were disappointing regarding the proportion of participants benefiting from lower oil costs. Whilst Departmental economists have serious concerns about the feasibility of the Pay as You Go Oil scheme from a cost/benefit perspective, I have asked officials to continue engagement with Kingspan and Carillion as they develop their proposal for a Pay as You Go oil system

Social Housing: Allocations

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development, further to his evidence provided to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 24 April 2013 and in light of the academic research commissioned by his Department, to detail (i) what steps are anticipated to assist ex-service personnel in meeting their housing needs; and (ii) how this compares with provision elsewhere in the UK.
(AQW 29905/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The team commissioned by my Department to undertake independent academic research on social housing allocations took a range of stakeholders' views and presented these in their reports, before reaching their independent conclusions on that issue.

In terms of (i) the steps anticipated to assist ex-service personnel in meeting their housing needs, I have not yet taken a view on the academic team's proposals for change. However, following my evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, my officials wrote to the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive in October 2013, setting out the Department's expectations as to how the Housing Executive currently deals with applications from members and former members of the Armed Forces. This communication set out the Department's view that the NIHE should give applications from former members of the Armed Forces fair and sympathetic consideration in accordance with the rules of the Housing Selection Scheme, including that:

- Former members of the Armed Forces should have the same priority for housing as others with a similar level of housing need.
- The NIHE should not impose residential qualifications which put applicants who have to vacate military-provided housing at a disadvantage compared with other applicants.
- Persons returning after a number of years to the area in which they lived before joining the Armed Forces should be treated no less sympathetically than any other applicant.

- The Housing Selection Scheme requirement for applicants to have a 'substantial connection' with Northern Ireland and that, to establish such a connection, any period of residence here must have been by the applicant's own choice, must not be interpreted in a way that excludes persons who have been based in Northern Ireland as members of the Armed Forces from applying under the Scheme.

(ii) Provision elsewhere in the UK varies across the jurisdictions. For example, in Scotland, residence in a local authority area because of service in the Armed Forces does not constitute a local connection for housing purposes. However, guidance issued by the devolved administration in Scotland asks housing authorities to give sympathetic consideration to applications from persons being discharged from the Armed Forces even if they have not established a local connection, as well as to applications from "former wives" of members of the Armed Forces who are required to vacate service accommodation.

In England, The Allocation of Housing (Qualification Criteria for Armed Forces) (England) Regulations 2012 require that local housing authorities do not use "local connection" as a criterion in deciding whether certain descriptions of persons connected to the Armed Forces are qualified to be allocated housing accommodation. The Housing Act 1996 (Additional Preference for Armed Forces) (England) Regulations 2012 require local housing authorities to frame their allocation schemes in such a way that certain descriptions of persons connected to the Armed Forces have additional preference for housing.

Housing Executive: Recruitment

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) number; and (ii) percentage of people described as (a) Protestant; (b) Roman Catholic; and (c) Non determined, who were recruited to the Housing Executive in each year since 2008.
(AQW 29922/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the religious composition of staff recruited to the Housing Executive since 2008.

Year	Total Recruited	Protestant		Roman Catholic		Non Determined	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
2008	127	52	40.9	51	40.2	24	18.9
2009	178	60	33.7	95	53.4	23	12.9
2010	98	47	48	40	40.8	11	11.2
2011	114	57	50	37	32.5	20	17.5
2012	69	22	31.9	34	49.3	13	18.8
2013 *	52	16	30.8	26	50	10	19.2

* During 2013 – 220 individuals were transferred to the NIHE under theTransfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (known as TUPE). An exercise to determine the community backgrounds of these individuals is currently underway as part of the annual monitoring process.

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Housing Executive: Response Maintenance Contracts

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development whether the independent Gateway Review into the management of response maintenance contracts has been completed; and if so, with what result.
(AQW 29927/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the independent Gateway Review is scheduled to take place on 1-3 April 2014 and any recommendations from the review will be available two or three weeks thereafter.

Housing Executive: Response Maintenance Contracts

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many requests for terminations of contracts have been made by contractors in respect of Northern Ireland Housing Executive response maintenance contracts which permit Low Performance Damages; (ii) how many requests were granted; and (iii) to list those granted, including the reason for acceptance.
(AQW 29928/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that in relation to (i) three contractors sought termination of their Response Maintenance contracts; (ii) only one of these requests was granted by the Housing Executive; and (iii) the reason for granting termination of the West Belfast Contract was due to the financial position and stability of the contractor (Mel Davison Construction). Several months later the contractor was placed into administration.

Housing Executive: Response Maintenance Contracts

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the current response maintenance contracts, for his assessment of the proportionality that is being applied within the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to the application of Low Performance Damages.
(AQW 29929/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that against the overall expenditure in response maintenance contracts where Low Performance Damages (LPD) can be applied the LPD taken to date represents 0.36% of the spend. The assessment of the LPD is as per the terms of the contract and the level is relatively low compared against the expenditure.

Housing Executive: Dampness

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development what measures his Department intends to take to treat damp in Housing Executive properties which are programmed for kitchen replacement schemes, in order to prevent damage to new kitchen units.
(AQW 29938/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that where they encounter dampness in their properties which are programmed for kitchen replacement schemes, they generally treat them by either dry lining the walls or utilising the services of specialists by way of an injected Damp Proof Course.

Social Housing: Double Glazing

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development what work will take place in (i) 2013/14; and (ii) 2014/15 on the replacement of double glazing windows in social housing.
(AQW 29952/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that due to the delay in appointing the double glazing and planned schemes contractors there will be no new double glazing installation or replacement schemes started in 2013/14. The double glazing contract has now been awarded and, subject to works starting on site early in the new financial year, the Housing Executive plan to address some 11,000 dwellings in line with the Programme for Government target for double glazing in social housing by March 2015. The Housing Executive's double glazing programme in 2014/15 will be focused on upgrading single glazed and partially double glazed properties up to full double glazing. There may also be a small element of replacement of existing double glazing in External Cyclical Maintenance schemes depending on condition.

Housing Executive: Computers

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how much the Housing Executive is spending on updating its computers.
(AQW 29967/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that a review which was carried out under its "Technology Refresh Strategy" concluded that a major upgrade of their desktop environment (hardware and software) was required and consequently this was included in their 2013/14 IT Work Programme and their IT budget plan.

The total cost for the upgrade is £2.044m which equates to approximately £680 per desktop. This cost includes hardware, support/maintenance over the five years, software, training, secure data destruction of the legacy hardware and delivery to a local charity.

Housing Executive: Double-glazing Contracts

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to list the contracts awarded in the current financial year for the installation of double glazing in Housing Executive properties.
(AQW 29970/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the Double Glazing Framework and the subsequent secondary competitions have now completed and that the following contractors have been successful in the following lots:

Lot 1	Belfast	PK Murphy Construction Ltd.
Lot 2	South	Bann Ltd
Lot 3	North	Dixon Contracts Ltd.

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 29596/11-15, how many cases in each category were decided at appeal after an initial refusal or reduction.
(AQW 30085/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested. The data used in the response to AQW 29596/1-15 related to the outcome of Disability Living Allowance new claims and renewals at the initial decision stage. Any subsequent

activity on a claimant's Disability Living Allowance case, such as a more advantageous reconsideration or appeal outcome, is captured separately. The IT system, used to administer Disability Living Allowance, is not configured to associate any subsequent changes in entitlement with the initial outcome decision information at an individual case level.

Fort George Site, Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the development plans for the Fort George site, excluding the North West Regional Science Park.
(AQW 30117/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The agreed regeneration plan for Londonderry – "The One Plan" – states that "the vision for the long term future of Fort George with its close proximity to the Knowledge Corridor is a prestige technology and / or knowledge intensive park. This may include a mix of office, education, research activities together with residential and leisure use".

My Department's immediate priority is to secure Outline Planning Permission for the Development Framework which will deliver the vision for the site as set out in the One Plan. An anticipated timeframe of 10-15 years to fully develop the site is identified in the Development Framework.

Once Outline Planning Permission is in place the next steps will be to:

- remediate the contamination on the site;
- undertake infrastructure works to improve access to the site and service the developable plots; and
- secure third party interest in developing the plots.

The remediation works are expected to be complete by late 2015 enabling infrastructure works and marketing of the site to then begin. The further development phases planned for the site are:

- a mixed use development on the Riverfront at the Pennyburn Inlet;
- multi storey car park;
- a mixed use development at the Southern portion of the site;
- a mixed use development on the Strand Road frontage; and
- a mixed use development adjacent to the Hibernia building where the Project Kelvin Telehouse is located.

Charitable Status

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the procedure that a commercial enterprise must follow to gain charitable status.
(AQW 30221/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Any organisation wishing to obtain charitable status in Northern Ireland is required to register with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland. It is for the Commission to determine whether that organisation is or is not a charity.

To register as a charity, an organisation must be established for charitable purposes only and be subject to the law of Northern Ireland. The charitable purposes must be exclusively charitable; an organisation cannot have some purposes that are charitable and some that are not. A charitable purpose must fall within the descriptions of purposes in the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and be for the public benefit. Charities may undertake trading or commercial activities but these must contribute directly to the furtherance of their charitable purposes.

Benefits: Christmas Bonus

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many of those eligible people have still to receive the £10 Christmas bonus with their benefits for December 2013; (ii) how many have received the payment; and (iii) to detail the reasons for the delay of these payments.
(AQW 30243/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Social Security Agency uses IT systems from the Department for Work and Pensions to administer benefits in Northern Ireland. In virtually all cases where the claimant is eligible to the £10 Christmas Bonus, it is paid automatically through these systems in December each year. Procedures are also in place to identify and pay eligible claimants whose cases are maintained clerically. A very small number of claimants who qualify because they receive Employment Support Allowance (Contribution Based) may not have received their payment automatically this year. DWP are still investigating the cause of this. All other Christmas Bonus payments were paid as normal and at the end of December 2013, 482,700 people in Northern Ireland had received the payment. If a claimant thinks they should qualify for the payment but has not received it, they can contact the Northern Ireland Pension Centre or the relevant local Social Security/Jobs and Benefits office.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Assembly Proceedings: Live Broadcasts

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission to detail any plans it has to stream live broadcasts of Assembly Proceedings to iPhones and iPads.
(AQW 29874/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): A business case has been developed to procure a new internet video streaming service that will address the issue of smartphone and tablet compatibility so that the Assembly's video and/or audio streams can be made accessible on a wider range of devices and platforms (including iPhones and iPads). The new service will also increase the number of available feeds from two to three simultaneous live streams capable of carrying video and/or audio.

It is planned that the new service will be in place for the 2014/2015 session. Members will be advised via All Party Notice once the new service is available.

Friday 7 February 2014

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

North/South Bodies: Cost

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the total cost of each of the North South bodies in each year since 2007.
(AQW 26079/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The total cost of the North South Bodies to the Executive since 2007 is as follows:

	Tourism Ireland (£000s)	InterTrade Ireland (£000s)	Loughs Agency (£000s)	SEUPB (£000s)	Safefood (£000s)	Language Body (£000s)	Waterways (£000s)
2007/08	14,538	3,436	2,647	1,251	2,019	5,590	8,204
2008/09	15,502	3,314	2,504	1,293	2,012	6,514	7,323
2009/10	15,732	3,799	2,567	1,361	2,103	6,467	5,362
2010/11	16,072	3,472	1,909	1,095	2,535	6,516	4,537
2011/12	20,031	2,877	2,312	1,138	2,075	6,258	3,675
2012/13*	15,401	3,367	2,376	1,341	2,011	5,644	4,919

(*In 2012-13 budgeting treatment for North/South bodies changed. These figures are not directly comparable with those in the previous years.)

The Bodies may receive funding or generate income from other sources, including the contribution from the Irish Government; however there is no cost to the Executive for these additional monies.

Together: Building a United Community: Work Placements

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of an additional 10,000 work placements for young people, including the timescale for implementation.
(AQW 28060/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Following the hugely successful United Youth Design Day with young people, voluntary and community organisations and other stakeholders on 23 January, we intend to draw upon contributions at that event to inform the final design of the Programme.

In addition, the Department for Employment and Learning has agreed to take on the Senior Responsible Owner role for the project and a dedicated United Youth advisor has been appointed and took up post on 13 January 2014.

A joint OFMDFM/DEL design paper will now be prepared for Ministers for consideration.

Peace Funding

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the programmes under their responsibility which have received funding from the current round of European PEACE funding.
(AQW 28102/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The projects under the responsibility of our Department that have received funding under the PEACE III programme are listed below.

Theme	1.1 Building Positive Relations at the Local Level	
	Lead Partner	**Project Name**
1.1A	Louth County Council	Louth Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Leitrim County Council	Leitrim peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Monaghan County Council	Monaghan Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Cavan County Council	Cavan Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Sligo County Council	Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Donegal County Council	Donegal Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Newry and Mourne District Council	Southern Peace & Reconciliation Local Action Plan
1.1A	Coleraine Borough Council	North East Peace and Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Lisburn City Council	Lisburn Peace & reconciliation Local Action Plan
1.1A	Magherafelt District Council	South West Peace and Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	North Down District Council	North Down, Ards, Down Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Newtownabbey Borough Council	Newtownabbey Peace & Reconciliation Local Action Plan
1.1A	Derry City Council	North West Peace and Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Belfast City Council	Belfast Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan
1.1A	Cavan County Council	County Cavan Peace Partnership Peace & Reconciliation phase 2 Action Plan
1.1A	Donegal County Council	Donegal Peace III Action Plan - Phase II
1.1A	Newry and Mourne District Council	Southern Peace III Strategy
1.1A	Newtownabbey Borough Council	CAN Peace III Partnership Phase 2 2011-2013
1.1A	Derry City Council	NW Cluster Phase II Action Plan
1.1A	Belfast City Council	Belfast Local Action Plan - Phase II
1.1A	County Leitrim Peace III Partnership	County Leitrim Phase 2 Plan 2011 - 2013
1.1A	Magherafelt District Council	Phase 2 Bid for SW PEACE III Cluster
1.1A	Monaghan CDB Peace III Partnership	Phase II Action Plan - Monaghan
1.1A	County Louth Peace & Reconciliation Partnership	Peace 3 Phase 2 Extension Plan
1.1A	Coleraine Borough Council	North East PEACE III Partnership
1.1A	Sligo County Council on behalf of Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Partnership Committee	Phase 2 Action Plan
1.1A	Lisburn/Castlereagh Peace III Partnership	Lisburn/Castlereagh Peace III Partnership Peace III Action Plan- Phase II
1.1A	North Down Borough Council	Phase II Peace III Action Plan for the North Down, Ards and Down Cluster
1.1B	Rural Community Network	The Rural Enabler
1.1B	TWN	Positive Relations Project
1.1B	Co-operation Ireland	Irish Peace Centres
1.1B	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	Intercomm Ireland Ltd	Communities and Policing in Transition
1.1B	SELB (YESIP)	Children and Young People Building Positive Relations
1.1B	EDGEHILL THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE (of Queen's University Belfast)	Edgehill Theological College Reconciliation and Integration Partnership Project

Theme	1.1 Building Positive Relations at the Local Level	
	Lead Partner	**Project Name**
1.1B	Groundwork Northern Ireland	Reconciling Communities through Regeneration
1.1B	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	From Prison to Peace: Building on Experience
1.1B	CFNI/Eiri na Greine	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI/Coiste na NIarchimi	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI/Tar Anall	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Tar Isteach	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Failte Abhaile	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Iar Chimi Ard Mhaca Theas	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Cairde	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Tar Abhaile	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Iar Chimi Doire Theas	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Failte cluain Eois	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / La Nua	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Tus Nua	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	CFNI / Abhaile Aris	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up
1.1B	Presbyterian Church in Ireland	Inter-Church Peace Programme - ICPP
1.1B	TWN	Extending Positive Relations
1.1B	Arts Council of Northern Ireland	Re-imaging Communities Programme
1.1B	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	South East Antrim - Resourcing from Conflict to Hope (SEARCH)
1.1B	Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland	Stepping Towards Reconciliation In Positive Engagement
1.1B	Co-operation Ireland	Family and Community Engagement Programme - FACE
1.1B	Edgehill Theological College Reconciliation and Integration Partnership Project	Edgehill Theological College Reconciliation and Integration Partnership Project (ETC-RIPP)
1.1B	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	Prison to Peace Partnership: A Paradigm for Peacebuilding
1.1B	Intercomm Ireland	Communities and Policing in Transition - Future Generations
1.1B	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up 11
1.1B	CFNI/Coiste na n'Iarchimi	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Tar Isteach	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Tar Anall	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Tar Abhaile	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Iar Chimi Ard Mhaca Theas	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Iar Chimi Doire Theas	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Eiri na Greine	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/Cairde	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up II
1.1B	CFNI/An Eochair	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/Charter	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/Coiste	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/Epic Belfast	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/Epic North Ulster	Prison to Peace II

Theme	1.1 Building Positive Relations at the Local Level	
	Lead Partner	**Project Name**
1.1B	CFNI/Lisburn PSP	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/North Belfast CD & Transition Group	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/North Down Community Association	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/Teach na Failte	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/The Hubb	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	CFNI/West Belfast PIP	Prison to Peace II
1.1B	Failte Cluain Eois	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up Phase II
1.1B	Abhaile Aris	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up Phase II
1.1B	La Nua	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up Phase II
1.1B	Failte Abhaile	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up Phase II
1.1B	Tus Nua	Conflict Transformation from the Bottom Up Phase II

Theme	1.2 Acknowledging and Dealing with the Past	
	Lead Partner	**Project Name**
1.2A	Seán McConville	The Irish Peace Process: Layers of Recollection and Meaning
1.2B	SAVER/NAVER	Practical steps towards reconciliation
1.2B	Cunamh	Peace In Mind/Suaimhneas Intinne
1.2B	Survivors of Trauma	A Future Together
1.2B	THe Ely Centre	Project Elohim
1.2B	Ashton Community Trust	Bridge Of Hope
1.2B	Holy Trinity Centre	Out Of Hours Community Counselling Service
1.2B	Cavan Family Resource Centre	Buandóchas (B) Counselling
1.2B	Relatives for Justice	Participative Transitional Support
1.2B	R.A,F.T. - Restorative Action Following the Troubles	Transcending Trauma
1.2B	Best Cellars Music Collective	Peace Radio
1.2B	Falls Women's Centre	Training & Employment Project
1.2B	Families Acting for Innocent Relatives	SACRED - Support and Active Carer Respite for Excluded Dependents
1.2B	The Peace Factory	P.A.Z. Peace Action Zone
1.2B	TARA CENTRE	Reconciliation: Individuals and Communites Acknowledging and Dealing with the Past
1.2B	Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre	Citizenship and Fellowship Education [CAFE]
1.2B	Victims and Survivors Trust	3 Tiers Project - Creating pathways for inclusion through active participation
1.2B	Institute for Counselling & Personal Development	RENEW-Community Challenge and change for peace & reconciliation
1.2B	Pat Finucane Centre	Legacy Project
1.2B	Trauma Recovery Network	Connecting Head and Heart
1.2B	Families Acting for Innocent Relatives	Conflict Archive Project And Border Lands Experience (CAPABLE)
1.2B	The Bytes Project	Foundation for Reconciliation

Theme	1.2 Acknowledging and Dealing with the Past	
	Lead Partner	**Project Name**
1.2B	Towards Understanding and Healing	Healing through Storytelling and Dialogue
1.2B	Gaslight Media Trust	Epilogues Facilitating Understanding of the Other
1.2B	Corpus Christi Services	Healing The Troubled Past
1.2B	Conflict trauma Resource centre	Beyond Conflict
1.2B	South East Fermanagh Foundation	The Phoenix Project
1.2B	New Life Counselling	Victims and Survivors Counselling Project
1.2B	WAVE TRAUMA CENTRE	Back to the Future - Building Peace Programme
1.2B	Crossfire Trust	restoring hope
1.2B	Northern Ireland Trade Union Education and Social Centre	DISC- Development for Inclusion and Sustainable Communities
1.2C	An Teach Bán: Centre for Peace Building	Remember and Change
1.2C	Irish Football Association	Football For All Project
1.2C	YouthAction NI	Peace Dividend For Young People
1.2C	Youth Initiatives	Crosslinks Culture Connections (CLCC or Crosslinks)
1.2C	South Armagh Rural Women's Network	Behind the Masks
1.2C	Curriculum Development Unit	Education for Reconciliation
1.2C	Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership	GOAL -
1.2C	Community Dialogue	Securing Our Future: 3 Steps to Dialogue
1.2C	Healing Through Remembering	Whatever You Say Say Something
1.2C	The Corrymeela Community	Corrymeela Facing the Future with NICRAS
1.2C	Teach Oscail	Tullacmongan/Cavanaleck Cross Border Youth Project
1.2C	taughmonagh community forum	Shared Futures
1.2C	North West Play Resource Centre (T/A The Playhouse)	Theatre of Witness
1.2C	C.A.L.M.S	Gateways to Health
1.2C	Ulster Peoples College	THE PEOPLE'S HISTORY INITIATIVE
1.2C	Diversity Challenges Ltd	'The Way We Were' - Uncovering our shared past.
1.2C	INCORE	Journeys Out
1.2C	Expac Ltd	Conflicts of Interest
1.2C	Youth Link: NI	Community Capacity Building Strategies
1.2C	Communities Connect - Dundalk institute of Technology	Deepening the peace, Widening the web - working title
1.2C	Peace and Reconciliation group	Dealing with Past, Shaping the Future (D.P.S.F.)
1.2C	Inishowen Development Partnership	YOUTH 52 - Securing the Future
1.2C	Forward Learning	Knowing Me Knowing You - An histroical and cultural adventure!
1.2C	Community Workers Co-operative - Donegal Network	Harnessing Equality for Lasting Peace (HELP) Project
1.2C	Trademark	Consolidating the peace
1.2C	WAVE Trauma Centre	WAVE- The Trauma Training Learning Pathway
1.2C	Falls Community Council	Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium
1.2D	The Pat Finucane Centre Ltd	Recovery of Living Memory Archive

Theme	1.2 Acknowledging and Dealing with the Past	
	Lead Partner	**Project Name**
1.2D	BURC	DISC II
1.2D	Belfast Interface Project	Enabling Our Future
1.2D	Relatives for Justice	Transitional Legacies
1.2D	Diversity Challenges	The Green and Blue Across the Thin Line
1.2D	YouthAction Northern Ireland	Reconciling communities - champions for change
1.2D	Expac	Future Resolutions
1.2D	YOUTH INITIATIVES	Crosslinks Legacy Project
1.2D	taughmonagh community forum limited	Legacy
1.2D	Ionad Forbartha Gnó Teo. t/a WESTBIC	Glórtha Aduaidh
1.2D	WAVE Trauma Centre	Breaking the Cycle of the Troubles Legacy for our future Generations
1.2D	WAVE Trauma Centre	Learning from the Past to educate our Future
1.2D	Latton Social Services and Development Ltd	Border Roads to Memories and Reconciliation
1.2D	Seaview Enterprises Ltd	'Mes Que Un Club'
1.2D	Irish Football Association	Football For All - 2012-2015 - Looking Back to Move Forward
1.2D	Junior Achievement Ireland	Our World
1.2D	Gaslight Media Trust	'The Arc: Acknowledging the Past, Negotiating the Present & Facing the Future'
1.2D	Justice for Innocent Victims of Terrorism	Pathways to Justice
1.2D	Healing Through Remembering	Voyager
1.2D	Tyrone Donegal Partnership	Border Lives
1.2D	INCORE	Accounts of the Conflict in Northern Ireland
1.2D	Towards Understanding and Healing	Developing and Sustaining Storytelling and Dialogue Processes
1.2D	North West Play Resource Centre	Theatre of Witness
1.2D	Falls Community Council	Pieces of the Past
1.2D	Youth Link: NI	Building Positive Sustainable and Integrated Communities
1.2D	Falls Community Council	Belfast Conflict Resolution Consortium
1.2D	Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC)	"Media Initiative for Rural Children Cross Borders" (Respecting Difference Programme)
1.2D	Monaghan Education Centre	Embracing Shared Communities
1.2D	Community Workers Co-operative - Donegal Network	Collective Action for Positive Peace (CAPP) Project
1.2D	Inishowen Development Partnership	Engage Youth
1.2D	Ashton Community Trust	Exploring the Past Together for a Better Future
1.2D	Northern Ireland Phoenix Organisation (NIPO)	Northern Ireland Phoenix Project
1.2D	Forthspring Inter Community Group	Five Decades
1.2D	VERBAL ARTS CENTRE	Crows on the Wire
1.2D	Smashing Times Theatre Company	The Memory Project
1.2D	Calipo Theatre Co	Sharp Focus - Crossing the Divide

Theme	2.2 Key Institutional Capacities are Developed for a Shared Society	
	Lead Partner	Project Name
2.2	NICVA(Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action)	Vital Links
2.2	Mediation Northern Ireland	The Most Project – International Dialogue for Civic Leadership
2.2	Early Years - the organisation for young children	International Early Childhood Network on Peace Building and Reconciliation
2.2	Groundwork NI	Democratising Governance in Transition
2.2	Northern Ireland Prison Service	Challenging Hate Crime
2.2	Forward Learning Ltd	The Thin End of the Wedge
2.2	North West Play Resource Centre	ICAN
2.2	Northern Ireland Rural Development Council (RDC)	Bric – Building Relationships in Communities
2.2	Families Acting for Innocent Relatives	EINSTEIN
2.2	Sligo Vocational and Education Committee	Developing a Shared Society Through Youth Sport
2.2	Belfast City Council	Growing a Shared City
2.2	Ashton Community Trust	Fab Lab
2.2	Maze / Long Kesh Development Corporation	Peace building and Conflict Resolution Centre
2.2	Institute of Spatial & Environmental Planning, Queen's University Belfast	Planning for Spatial Reconciliation
2.2	Community Foundation for Northern Ireland	Gender and Peacebuilding- Developing a Framework of Understanding
2.2	Early Years the organisation for Young Children	Respecting Difference in the Education Sector
2.2	The Nerve Centre	Teaching Divided Histories
2.2	Irish Congress of Trade Unions	Trade Unions & Post Conflict Society

Organ Donation

Mrs Dobson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following their statement of 5 February 2013, whether their preferred position on the updating of the Organ Donation system remains a move to a soft opt-out system.
(AQO 5108/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our position remains as conveyed in our statement of 5 February. You will be aware that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is now considering the report of the work he commissioned on attitudes towards organ donation, including an opt-out system. We are on the record as personally supporting the soft opt-out proposal and we await progress from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We will have further discussions with the Minister of Health on the best system to increase organ donation rates.

Civil Servants and Special Advisers: Gifts and Hospitality

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether, since May 2007, in relation to civil servants and Special Advisers in their Department or its arm's-length bodies receiving gifts or hospitality, there have been any requests for approval of matters that fall outside the boundaries of what is normally allowable; and if so, to detail such requests.
(AQW 28960/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There have been no requests for approval of matters that fall outside the boundaries of what is normally allowable in relation to gifts and hospitality from Civil Servants or Special Advisers.

Delivering Social Change: South Tyrone

Ms McGahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Delivering Social Change Framework in South Tyrone, including the impact it is having on addressing poverty and disadvantage.
(AQW 29887/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Delivering Social Change Framework was set up to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It represents a new level of joined-up working across Government to achieve tangible, long lasting social benefits for everyone, in particular those who need it most, across all constituencies.

The early work of the Delivering Social Change has focused on the identification of the needs of children and families to ensure the most urgent and significant problems in our society are addressed.

The initial six Signature Programmes announced in October 2012 are focusing on early interventions both to tackle issues before they develop into problems and to give children a good start in life, for example pre-natal interventions, early years interventions and programmes for those who are not in education, training or employment.

Significant progress has been made in relation to these programmes and they are beginning to make a real impact. Information in relation to activities taking place in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area has been placed in the Library of the Assembly.

Whilst these programmes are important to the Delivering Social Change framework they will not alone eradicate 'wicked' issues such as poor health, low educational attainment and chronic unemployment.

Reducing inter-generational poverty can only be achieved by all Ministers working together with a longer term view to the next Programme for Government period and the years beyond. In recognition of this, structures have been put in place under the Delivering Social Change ramework to look specifically at how the Executive can improve the long-term quality of life for our communities in the areas of health, education, employment, family and community life and cohesion.

It is only through a more joined up approach that changes in children's lives are achievable. In doing so, we believe we can help break the cycle of multi-generational poverty that blights so many communities across our society.

Childcare Strategy: Update

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Childcare Strategy.
(AQW 30112/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: On 25 September 2013 we launched the first phase of Bright Start – the Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare. The first phase of Bright Start sets out a strategic direction for the Childcare Strategy along with 15 key first actions that will be put in place to address the main childcare priorities identified during consultation and research. All of the key first actions will be initiated before the end of the current financial year.

Planning Bill

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Minister of the Environment's statement on the 22 October 2013 regarding his decision not to proceed with the Planning Bill.
(AQO 5371/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: When the DOE Minister made his statement on 22 October 2013, he made it clear that the purpose and intent of the Bill was to:

"have a better planning system that is more fit to serve the interests of ratepayers post 2015."

That is something that we can all subscribe to. We also need a planning system that allows for strategic decisions to be made in relation to investment and job creation.

Whilst disappointed that the Minister did not proceed with the Bill we are nevertheless determined to find a way forward that ensures that we get the best planning system.

We hope that a solution can be found that will allow the Planning Bill to proceed through this Assembly.

In order to help facilitate the best outcome, we met with the DOE Minister on 28 November to discuss his concerns. At that meeting we agreed that he would bring forward proposals that would facilitate the Bill being brought forward by agreement.

Once we receive his proposals it would be our intention to reconvene our meeting with the Minister to discuss the way forward.

Childcare Strategy: Update

Ms McGahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Childcare Strategy.
(AQO 5374/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In September last year, we launched the first phase of Bright Start – the Executive's Programme for Affordable and Integrated Childcare. The first phase of Bright Start sets out a strategic direction for the Childcare Strategy along with 15 key first actions that will be put in place to address the main childcare priorities identified during consultation and research. All of the key first actions will be initiated before the end of the current financial year.

Economic Pact: Fiscal Powers Review

Mr Brady asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the review of fiscal powers as part of the Economic Pact.
(AQO 5377/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There is a commitment in the Building a Prosperous and United Community document that the Government and the Executive will examine the potential for devolving specific additional fiscal powers and make recommendations by autumn 2014.

DFP has lead responsibility for this work. A first stage in taking it forward will be to examine the processes and outcomes of the work in Scotland and Wales. They will also look at academic work on this topic. This is an extremely important issue for both the Assembly and the Executive going forward.

However, it is important to recognise the progress that has already been made in this area in terms of the devolution of long haul Air Passenger Duty, and our exemption from the Carbon Price Floor. We have also moved the debate with the Westminster Government on Corporation Tax, significantly forward.

Child Poverty Act 2010

Mr F McCann asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of whether the targets set out in the Child Poverty Act will be achieved.
(AQO 5378/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The UK Child Poverty Act 2010 makes it the duty of the Secretary of State to ensure that targets in relation to relative low income, combined low income and material deprivation, absolute low income and persistent poverty are met by 2020.

The Act requires us to publish a child poverty strategy which sets out the measures which our departments propose to take for the purpose of contributing to the compliance by the Secretary of State to meet the targets above and for the purpose of ensuring that children here do not experience socio-economic disadvantage.

The Act also requires us to report annually on the measures taken by our departments in accordance with the strategy, the effects of those measures in contributing to meeting the targets above and other effects of those measures that contribute to the purpose above. We are also required to review our strategy and publish a revised strategy every three years.

We have met all of the requirements of the Child Poverty Act set out above which fall to our administration. We have not made an assessment of whether the targets which fall to the Secretary of State will be met.

On 20 January, we launched a new strategy Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People for public consultation. This represents a new Outcomes Based Approach, which uses additional indicators, in addition to the targets set out in the Child Poverty Act, to measure the impact of our actions to tackle child poverty.

Victims and Survivors Service: Review

Mr Rogers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Review of the Victims and Survivors Service is due to conclude.
(AQO 5379/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Independent Expert Assessment of the Victims and Survivors Service is expected to conclude mid-February 2014.

Delivering Social Change: Audiovisual Announcements on Buses

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the status of the Department of Regional Development's bid for Delivering Social Change funding to install Audio Visual Announcements on buses that would promote equal access to public transport for blind and partially sighted users.
(AQW 30314/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Delivering Social Change (DSC) framework was set up by the Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. It represents a new level of joined-up working across departments to drive through initiatives which have a genuine impact on the ground and achieve real, long lasting social benefits. Departments are now working together on priority issues to maximise outcomes and improve the lives of everyone, particularly those who need help the most.

Whilst work on the first wave of Signature Programmes is ongoing, proposals for further Signature Programmes, primarily linked to key strategies, are still currently under consideration by the Department. However, the totality of potential programmes significantly exceeds the budget that is likely to be available. Consequently, at this stage, only a small number of proposals will be taken forward with funding from the Delivering Social Change Fund.

It is of course possible that the Department for Regional Development may also be able to proceed with this project out of its own funds.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Single Farm Payments: Delay

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how many Single Farm Payments have been, and are expected to be, delayed due to departmental inspections.
(AQW 30012/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): In 2013 Single Farm Payment controls included Land Eligibility checks on 2,129 businesses. At 30 January 2014 there were 1257 inspected cases awaiting payment. Every effort is being made to finalise the remaining claims as early as possible, with the majority of inspections to be paid by the end of February and any remaining cases to be paid by the end of April 2014. This is two months ahead of the 2012 payments timeline, and four months ahead of the previous year, 2011.

Agri-Food Strategy Board: Representation

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail how farmers in Severely Disadvantaged areas are represented on the Agri-Food Strategy Board.
(AQW 30015/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) is made up of the Chair, eight industry members and four senior government officials. The industry members were appointed by the DARD and DETI Ministers following a competitive process carried out in accordance with the spirit of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (NI) Code of Practice. Members were selected not to represent their own particular interests but because they demonstrated the best skills to develop and advise on implementation of a strategy for sustainable growth of the whole agri-food sector. Two of those appointed are from primary production. Full details of the AFSB membership may be found on the AFSB website at www.agrifoodstrategyboard.org.uk.

In addition, the AFSB engaged in an extensive consultation process, involving up to 80 members of sectoral sub-groups, a public Call for Evidence and a website which allows members of the public to communicate with the Board.

The AFSB's Report Going for Growth recognises that each element of the agri-food supply chain must be sustainable and profitable in order for the sector to prosper and grow. The report also recognises that the industry must build on Ireland's clean, green image and that sustainability must be the cornerstone of our branding. Producers from Severely Disadvantaged Areas will make a key contribution to this.

Animal Welfare Officers: Employment

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of animal welfare enforcement officers that are currently employed.
(AQW 30025/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Councils are responsible for enforcement of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 in respect of non-farmed animals, including domestic pets and horses.

Councils currently employ nine Animal Welfare Officers. This number increased from five following a review by Councils in March 2013.

Animal Welfare: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the funding her Department currently provides to (i) local councils; and (ii) other organisations, to help combat animal cruelty and support animal welfare.
(AQW 30026/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

(i) My Department is committed to providing funding of £800,000 during the financial year 2013/2014 to support local Councils in enforcing the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 in respect of non-farmed animals such as domestic pets and horses.

(ii) My Department does not provide funding to other organisations to help combat animal cruelty and support animal welfare.

Farming: Health and Safety Measures

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total financial assistance made available to farming families for Health and Safety measures, in the last three years.
(AQW 30031/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In the last three years under the Farm Modernisation Programme my Department has awarded £3.35m of financial support to farm businesses for the purchase of items that promote safer working practices on farms.

In addition, my Department has spent in excess of £159k to date in relation to the provision of Farm Safe Awareness courses which aim to improve health and safety standards on farms and strive to significantly reduce work related deaths and injuries. These FarmSafe Awareness sessions are provided free of charge to farm family members and to date there have been 2,545 attendees.

As part of my Department's commitment to the Farm Safety Partnership, my Department has also provided £139k in funding towards the cost of the Partnership's 2013 Multimedia Campaign. My Department will also be providing an additional £111k for the 2014/15 year to extend this highly effective campaign.

Coastal Defences: South Down

Mrs McKevitt asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, following the recent storms, whether a post-event inspection programme has taken place along the coastal defences in the South Down constituency.
(AQW 30049/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Rivers Agency did undertake a serviceability inspection programme of its defences in the wake of the new year storms. This is progressing well, with inspections completed at Newry and Strand Lough, leaving the Quoile Barrage to be completed in early February 2014. More detailed structural inspections are also being progressed, with completion anticipated by the end of March 2014.

Agriculture Qualifications

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of how many young farmers would be (i) eligible; and (ii) ineligible to receive an award from the regional reserve if a Level 3 qualification in agriculture or an equivalent subject to become a requirement for young farmers and new entrants.
(AQW 30054/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under the Regional Reserve, the young farmer would have to be setting up for the first time as head of holding or to have done so within the previous five years and be no more than 40 years of age in the year of first application to the Basic Payment Scheme. A new entrant would not have to meet any age requirement, but would have to be commencing his/her agricultural activity and must not have had any agricultural activity in his/her own name or at his/her own risk in the five preceding years. The Regional Reserve will be open to applications from young farmers and new entrants from 2015 and until further CAP reform changes this provision. Therefore, I have no data on the number of individuals who in 2015 might, or in subsequent years potentially could, meet these mandatory eligibility criteria, but it would be to these individuals that any optional educational criteria could also be applied. As I have indicated in my answer to AQW 30053/11-15, in the recently closed public consultation on 'Policy Options arising from the Reform of the CAP (Pillar I Direct Payments)', I sought views on a suggestion that we would include an eligibility criterion that would require young farmers and new entrants to hold a Level III educational qualification in agriculture or a closely related subject. My rationale for suggesting an educational qualification criterion was primarily to encourage young farmers and new entrants to invest in their skills and to reward those who already have.

The consultation has now closed and I will carefully consider all responses received to this consultation before reaching a decision on the way forward.

Credit Unions: Rural Areas

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the support her Department can provide to credit unions in rural areas.
(AQW 30059/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of the great service provided by credit unions in rural areas and following a recent meeting with representatives of the Irish League of Credit Unions have asked officials for a report as soon as possible if any support can be provided to credit unions, for my consideration.

Animal Welfare Officers: Employment

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of animal welfare officers employed specifically to investigate animal cruelty.
(AQW 30065/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Councils are responsible for enforcement of the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 in respect of non-farmed animals including domestic pets and horses. They currently employ nine Animal Welfare Officers who are specifically trained and dedicated full time to this work.

Animal Cruelty: Investigations

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the funding made available to investigate animal cruelty in the last three years.
(AQW 30066/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The welfare of animals here is protected by the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. It contains a range of offences including those relating to activities which may cause an animal to suffer unnecessarily. However, it does not contain an offence specifically referred to as "animal cruelty".

My Department has committed annual funding to help Councils enforce the Act in respect of non-farmed animals. The funding available to Councils over the past three years is as follows:

2011/12	£760,000
2012/13	£780, 000
2013/14	£800,000

Animal Cruelty: Reporting

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many cases of animal cruelty have been reported in the last three years.
(AQW 30068/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The welfare of animals here is protected by the Welfare of Animals Act 2011. It contains a range of offences including those relating to activities which may cause an animal to suffer unnecessarily. However, it does not contain an offence specifically referred to as "animal cruelty".

My Department is responsible for investigating animal welfare cases in respect of farmed animals. Often cases reported do not, upon investigation, reveal unnecessary suffering. Therefore the figures for farmed animals provided in Table 1 below relate to cases investigated by my Department's Veterinary Service and where unnecessary suffering was found.

Table 1 Farmed animal's cases

Year	Number of cases investigated
2011	39
2012	54
2013	43
Total	**136**

Local Councils have been responsible for investigating animal welfare cases in respect of non- farmed animals such as domestic pets and horses since April 2012. The number of cases investigated over the past three years is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2 Non-farmed animal's cases

Financial Year	Number of cases investigated
2011/12*	N/A
2012/13	3,634
2013/14**	3,977
Total	**7,611**

* Data relating to non-farmed animals prior to April 2012 is not available.

** Number of cases from 01 April 2013 to 24 January 2014.

Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011: Custodial Sentences

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of people that have been given custodial sentences under the sentence guidelines detailed in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011.
(AQW 30069/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department brought forward the Welfare of Animals Act in 2011, which significantly increased the penalties for animal welfare offences to a maximum of 6 months imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of £5,000 on summary conviction; and on conviction by indictment to a maximum of two years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine. These penalties reflect the fact that causing unnecessary suffering to any animal is a very serious offence. Under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, my Department is responsible for investigating welfare cases in respect of farmed animals. Since April 2012 local Councils are responsible for investigating non-farmed animal welfare cases and the PSNI has responsibility in respect of wild animals, animal fighting, and welfare issues where other criminal activities are involved.

As sentencing within the legislative framework is a matter for the Judiciary, input on the number of custodial sentences awarded under the 2011 Act was sought from the Department of Justice. I am advised by the Department of Justice that

sentencing and conviction datasets are currently available only up to 2009. The Welfare of Animals Act came into force on 11 July 2011. Therefore, it has not been possible for the Department of Justice to provide the information requested.

However, I can advise that in respect of farmed animals, two cases taken by my Department under the 2011 Act have resulted in convictions, one defendant receiving a conditional discharge for 12 months and the other receiving a £250 fine. In addition, a successful prosecution was taken under the Welfare of Animals (Transport) Regulations 2006 that resulted in the handing down of a custodial sentence of 2 months imprisonment and a £5,000 fine for animal welfare offences during transportation. On appeal the sentence was reaffirmed, however the fine was reduced to £3,500.

I am also aware that since April 2012 Councils have taken four forward cases for non-farmed animal welfare prosecutions, which has resulted in a range of convictions, from suspended sentences to payment of fines and costs. There are also a number of cases currently being prepared by Councils for prosecution.

Rural Crime: Reduction

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking to reduce rural crime.
(AQW 30098/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of the concerns that levels of farm related crime are causing amongst the farming community and my Department continues to work closely with the Department of Justice and the PSNI to tackle rural crime.

I have met the Minister of Justice on a number of occasions to highlight rural crime issues and at our most recent meeting in October 2013 we discussed the sharing of information between Departments and the PSNI Rural Crime Unit. I also agreed that a representative from my Department would be appointed to sit on the Rural Crime Unit Steering Group.

My Department's Veterinary Service Enforcement Branch (VSEB) and the PSNI have been involved in a number of successful operations to recover stolen livestock and continue to jointly investigate livestock smuggling incidents with the Gardai and the Department in the south of Ireland.

VSEB has also recently carried out joint investigation visits with the PSNI to a number of premises in Fermanagh, Eglinton, Armagh and Newtownabbey in relation to stolen livestock. This resulted in one case to the recovery of ten stolen sheep and conviction of the perpetrator. Five stolen cattle were recently discovered at an abattoir and one person has been charged following a joint VSEB / PSNI investigation. Other, similar operations are being planned.

A rural crime event is planned for Dungannon Farmers Market on 3rd February 2014 at which a number of farmers are expected to bring their cattle to be freeze branded. It is hoped that this will lead to other farmers following suit.

Following a request from the chair of Newry and Mourne Policing and Community Safety Partnership, the Head of VSEB attended a meeting on 9th December 2013. This meeting was well attended and the VSEB official gave a presentation and answered questions from the audience.

Joint PSNI and DARD vehicle checks are also continuing out across the north of Ireland. The objectives of these operations are to raise awareness in relation to rural crime and to train police officers in reading ear tag and checking cattle movement documentation. Similar joint operations are taking place in the south.

Although responsibility for combating rural crime falls primarily to the Department of Justice and the PSNI, my Department, through its CAFRE advisers, support the PSNI and the farming organisations in raising awareness of measures which farmers can take to reduce incidences of rural crime. CAFRE College facilities can be used by the PSNI for workshops, seminars and meetings aimed at raising awareness of crime prevention measures among the farming community. Students on CAFRE programmes also learn about appropriate responses to rural crime through input from visiting speakers, information leaflets and participation of the College Farms in PSNI-led programmes such as Farm Watch.

My officials will also be liaising further with the PSNI about how DARD Direct Offices can be used to disseminate information to rural dwellers.

Council Areas: Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle: Spending

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has spent in the (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballymena; and (iii) Moyle council areas since May 2011.
(AQW 30116/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department does not capture routine running costs by geographical area, however information on grants and subsidies are recorded by postcode. These have been analysed by council area from April 2011 and included in the table below.

DARD Programme Spend in Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle Council Areas since April 2011

	Ballymoney £	**Ballymena £**	**Moyle £**
Less Favoured Areas	542,471	5,146,690	1,168,249
Single Farm Payments	21,468,074	53,546,819	7,451,870

	Ballymoney £	Ballymena £	Moyle £
Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme			
Rural Challenge	972	2,940	-
Rural Borewells	1,544	47,680	11,544
NI Rural Development Programme			
Axis1 Projects	485,128	1,041,977	445,342
Axis3 Projects	1,045,104	1,419,744	1,410,227
Interreg IVA Projects	213,051	111,902	-
Agri-Environment Schemes	2,031,988	7,907,511	1,767,479
Forest Service Afforestation Grants	88,027	249,309	18,922

Fish Farms: Pig and Poultry Protein

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will take immediate steps to ban the use of pig and poultry protein in feed used in fish farms.
(AQW 30120/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The European Commission is the legal authority which regulates for the prevention, control and eradication of certain Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy's (TSEs). In June 2013 the Commission amended the Regulation to allow the feeding of pig and poultry Processed Animal Proteins (PAP) to farmed fish subject to strict channelling controls and the implementation of a new Polymerase Chain Reaction test to detect the presence of pig or poultry material in feed.

EU Regulations take effect as soon as they are published by the Commission and are directly applicable here. As Minister of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, I have lead responsibility for TSE Regulations here and I am obliged to implement this change in accordance with EU rules. Prior to this change being implemented there was considerable weight of scientific evidence, as well as expert opinions from the FSA Board and the four chief medical officers in Britain and the north of Ireland in favour of the proposal. In addition, the Department engaged with industry stakeholders here who welcomed the availability of a further source of quality protein.

These new arrangements ensure that industry here has an opportunity to access the same sources of protein as businesses in other Member States, should they decide to do so. While it is anticipated that the uptake here will be limited, strict controls remain in place to protect public health and the use of pig and poultry PAP for fish feed is closely regulated by my Department.

To date I have received no applications to incorporate pig or poultry PAP into fish feed.

Fish Products: Pig and Poultry Protein

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will take steps to ensure that any fish products fed on pig and poultry protein will be banned from sale in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 30121/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The European Commission is the legal authority which regulates for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE). In June 2013, the Commission amended the regulation to allow the feeding of pig and poultry Processed Animal Proteins (PAP) to farmed fish subject to strict channelling controls and the implementation of a new Polymerase Chain Reaction test to detect the presence of pig or poultry material in feed.

As Minister for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, I have lead responsibility for TSE Regulations in NI in respect of the prevention, control and eradication of certain TSE's including controls in respect of feed for farmed animals.

Policy responsibility for food intended for human consumption including fish products rests with the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

You may wish to contact the Minister for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is best placed to respond to your query on the banning from sale of such fish products.

Fish Products: Pig and Poultry Protein

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will take steps to ensure that any fish products that have been fed on pig and poultry protein, and are sourced outside Northern Ireland, will be clearly labelled in all retail and wholesale outlets where they are offered for sale.
(AQW 30122/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The European Commission is the legal authority which regulates for Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE). In June 2013, the Commission amended the regulation to allow the feeding of pig and poultry Processed Animal Proteins (PAP) to farmed fish subject to strict channelling controls and the implementation of a new Polymerase Chain Reaction test to detect the presence of pig or poultry material in feed.

As Minister of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, I have lead responsibility for the TSE Regulations in the north of Ireland in respect of the prevention, control and eradication of certain TSE's including controls in respect of feed for farmed animals. Policy responsibility for food for human consumption including fish products rests with the Food Standards Agency.

You may wish to contact the Minister for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who is best placed to respond to your query in respect of the labelling of fish products for human consumption sourced outside the north.

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 4511/11-15 (i) for an update on the business case to appraise the options for accommodating new departmental headquarters at the Shackleton site in Ballykelly; and (ii) to detail when the outcomes of this exercise will be published.
(AQW 30125/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The business case for the relocation of my headquarters to Ballykelly is currently undergoing internal assurance. The preferred option for development points to a phased approach, with construction of 400 workstations being completed in 2016 and a second phase of around 200 workstations being completed in 2020.

When the business case has received the necessary assurances I will make it available for publication.

Tree Species: Pre-notification Legislation

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) for an update on the proposed pre-notification legislation for certain tree species, including the likely date of implementation and reasons for any delay; and (ii) whether she will provide further details on the rural, faith-based community engagement programme, announced at the North South Ministerial Council Meeting in Agriculture Sectoral Format on 13 November 2013.
(AQW 30133/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

(i) Discussions are on-going with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in relation to the co-ordinated introduction of pre-notification legislation for certain tree species. Following my statement on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in agriculture sector in the Assembly on Monday 20 January, I explained that the best approach, in plant health terms, is to protect the island as a whole and co-ordinate our actions with the south. In the meantime, administrative processes are in place to monitor plant imports from information available on shipping manifests.

(ii) There has been a long standing commitment by both Ministers at North South Ministerial Council Agriculture meetings to seek a legacy from the highly successful Rural Enabler Programme. My Department has provided funding for two Project Officers to work in rural areas promoting and supporting the involvement of churches and faith based volunteers in social action projects to alleviate poverty, social exclusion and to improve the quality of life for people living in disadvantaged rural areas.

Stolen Livestock: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many incidents of stolen livestock have been reported in the North Down area, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 30172/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table shows the number of incidents involving missing or stolen cattle in the Newtownards Divisional Veterinary Office (DVO) area in each of the last three years.

Table 1: Incidents of missing or stolen cattle

	2011	2012	2013
Number of incidents	64	97	81

The Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) database does not record information on a constituency basis, but the whole of the North Down area falls within the Newtownards DVO area.

Information is not available specifically in relation to stolen cattle, or in relation to other types of stolen livestock. This is because APHIS does not differentiate between missing or stolen cattle, and does not record information on other species of stolen livestock.

I am very aware that livestock theft causes great stress amongst the farming community. I encourage any-one who has information which might help us combat this threat to report their suspicions to my Department or the PSNI.

Areas of Natural Constraint: Consultation

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will hold a consultation on the designation of Areas of Natural Constraint.
(AQW 30307/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Over the past five years, DARD has been working in close consultation with a group involving all of the key local stakeholder organisations as the EU development of the Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) designation criteria have been developed.

DARD has also published the latest state of play on this matter on its website to make it available to a wider audience. This can be accessed at http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/grants-and-funding/common-agricultural-policy-reform.htm.

The designation procedure and criteria are fairly prescriptive but there are some issues on which further Commission clarification is necessary. No decision has been made yet regarding the final timetable for designation.

Therefore, at this stage, I cannot give a timetable for a possible consultation on this matter.

Common Agricultural Policy: Rural Development Programme Funding

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she will place the correspondence available on the debate on Common Agricultural Policy: Rural Development Programme Funding in the Assembly Library, as requested on the 20 January 2014.
(AQW 30342/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The correspondence tabled with other Departments was placed in the Assembly Library on 4 February 2014.

DARD Headquarters: Ballykelly

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the progress of the business case for the relocation of her Department's headquarters to Ballykelly, in light of the campaign to have it relocated to Strabane.
(AQW 30414/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The business case for the relocation of my headquarters to Ballykelly is currently undergoing internal assurance. The preferred option for development points to a phased approach, with construction of 400 workstations being completed in 2016 and a second phase of around 200 workstations being completed in 2020.

I can understand the disappointment felt by many local representatives across the rest of the north at my decision to relocate to Ballykelly. However, it must be understood that the relocation of the DARD headquarters represents an important first step to relocate a significant share of public sector jobs to rural locations.

As you know I recently announced that the DARD Direct Office for the North West will be in Strabane. That office will open in 2016 and will have 40 DARD posts. Together with the Rivers Agency move to Loughry, the Forest Service move to Fermanagh, the Fisheries Division to South Down and remainder of my headquarters to Ballykelly this approach supports my commitment to the redistribution of public sector jobs and to the development of rural communities.

Golf Clubs in Rural Areas: Funding

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding opportunities her Department provides to golf clubs in rural areas.
(AQW 30426/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Rural Development Programme does not provide direct, core funding to sports clubs. However, where such an organisation wishes to promote a project that benefits the wider rural community, and which is separate from their primary activity, this can considered for funding.

I am pleased to say that Axis 3 has reached 100% commitment for this programme which means it is unlikely that there will be any further calls for applications for grant aid.

Rural Development Programme: Proposals

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what proposals she has finalised regarding the Rural Development Programme for the period 2014 -2020.
(AQO 5453/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My proposals for the Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 are not yet finalised. A period of public consultation on the draft proposals for the Programme concluded on the 21 October 2013. My Department's response to the submissions received during the consultation will be published shortly. There will be further discussions with stakeholders over the coming weeks followed by a period of negotiation with the EU Commission before the proposals can be finalised.

Rural Development Programme: Cultural Heritage

Ms McCorley asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to protect rural cultural heritage through the Rural Development Programme.
(AQO 5445/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme, 49 rural heritage projects have been funded so far with an investment of £1.5m and a further 29 projects worth £4.1m are underway having been issued with a Letter of Offer.

The funding has allowed rural people to use our rural heritage to provide interesting additions to the rural tourism offering whilst preserving it. I myself have seen at first hand some examples of this when I opened projects such as the salmon fishermans restored cottage on Carrickarede and the 17th century Lissan house outside Cookstown which was awarded a grant of £250,000 from South West Action for Rural Development under the Rural Development Programme.

It is the funding available from the Programme that has acted as an enabler to get these projects on the ground. Some of the projects will have a huge impact on tourism such as the Gobbins and the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland project, the only all Ireland group looking after our railway heritage. Others are helping to give a new lease of life to our built heritage such as the Caledon Beam engine, the only such engine left in the whole of Ireland or the restoration for the use of visitors of the disused Chapel beside the Old Cross of Ardboe, an ancient Celtic Cross dating back more than 1,000 years and a significant site in Irish heritage terms.

Additionally under the Department's agri-environment schemes, participants help protect and maintain historic monument sites on their land which are vulnerable to farming practices. Across the north there are 1,394 agri-environment scheme participants currently managing historic monument sites as part of their management agreement. My Department works closely with colleagues in the Department of Environment's NI Environment Agency who have responsibility for designating historic monument sites.

Flood Defences; River Lagan

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans are in place to further strengthen flood defences on the River Lagan.
(AQO 5446/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have received clarification from Mr Beggs that he is interested in the flood defences across Belfast, including the city centre and East Belfast, especially the Sydenham area. In terms of maintenance works, Rivers Agency undertakes routine inspection and maintenance of the designated drainage network in line with its maintenance programme. In terms of flood alleviation works in East Belfast, integrated works associated with the Connswater Community Greenway Project and stand-alone works being taken forward by Rivers Agency extend from Victoria Park on the Connswater River, up to Clara Park on the Knock River, Ladas Drive on the Loop River and Montgomery Road on the Glenbrook River. Construction work is ongoing, with the final phase expected to commence this summer, and completion expected in early 2016.

Rivers Agency had already identified the risk of tidal flooding in Belfast and in light of the recent surge tides is reassessing the level of risk to determine what further measures may be needed.

For example, the Agency is working with DRD Roads Service to assess the risk to the transport network and explore opportunities for incorporating flood defences into the proposals for the York Street Interchange.

In addition, there will be a formal debrief on the handling of the coastal flooding events of early January and I shall be keen to see what emerges from that, in particular, the lessons learned.

Single Farm Payments: Remote Sensing

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when her Department started the assessment of Single Farm Payment claims on farms which were subject to a remote sensor inspection.
(AQO 5448/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Control by remote sensing involves careful examination of a satellite image or aerial photograph and comparing this with the area declared on the Single Application Form. Farmers claiming Single Farm Payment were required to submit their Single Application Forms (SAF) by 15 May 2013. The satellite images used for remote sensing (RS) inspections were captured in early summer 2013, following which Remote Sensing inspections were undertaken throughout the summer and autumn.

Some businesses required an on-farm rapid field visit (RFV) if an accurate determination could not be made from the satellite imagery or aerial photographs. These rapid field visits took place during autumn / winter 2013 and some are ongoing.

The aim is to have the majority of inspected claims paid by the end of February 2014 with the remainder paid by April 2014. This will mean that inspection cases generally will be processed much more quickly than in previous years.

Rural Crime: PSNI

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline any discussions and correspondence she has had with the PSNI regarding farm-related rural crime.
(AQO 5449/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have met the Chief Constable of the PSNI on a number of occasions and made him aware of my concerns about the level of agriculture-related crime. I explained the worry this was causing in rural areas and highlighted the need for action. The Chief Constable has recently made rural crime statistics available to DARD.

A DARD representative has been appointed to sit on the PSNI Rural Crime Unit Steering Group.

My Veterinary Service Enforcement Branch (VSEB) and the PSNI have been involved in a number of successful operations recovering stolen livestock. They share intelligence and jointly investigate incidents with the Department in the South and with An Garda Siochána.

DARD has recently carried out joint investigations with the PSNI to a number of premises across four counties in relation to stolen livestock. In one case, this resulted to the recovery of 10 stolen sheep and conviction of the perpetrator. In another, 5 stolen cattle were discovered at an abattoir and one person has been charged.

A Rural Crime event is planned for Dungannon Market on 3 February 2014. Farmers will bring their cattle to be freeze branded in the hope that others will follow suit.

Following a request from Newry and Mourne Policing and Community Safety Partnership, the head of VSEB delivered a presentation and answered questions from those who attended on 9 December 2013.

Joint PSNI and DARD vehicle checks are continuing with the objectives of raising awareness of Rural Crime, training of police officers in livestock identification and movement documentation. Similar operations are taking place in the South.

I am very aware that rural crime causes great stress amongst the farming community. I encourage any-one who has information which might help us combat this threat to rural businesses to report suspicions to my Department or the PSNI.

Rural Health

Ms Fearon asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how she is working with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to improve the health of the farming community and rural dwellers.
(AQO 5450/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is currently working on a number of such initiatives in conjunction with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and its' agencies including:-

- the Farm Family Health checks programme which provides health screening events in farmers markets and community venues and a signposting service to various physical and mental health and wellbeing services;
- the Maximising Access in Rural Areas (MARA) project aimed at maximising access to benefits, grants and local services, supporting the most vulnerable rural dwellers living in or at risk of poverty and social exclusion; and,
- the Connecting Elderly Rural Isolated pilot project, which provides a range of support services to rural older people to reduce social isolation, enhance independent living and to improve wellbeing.

Single Farm Payments: Delay

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps her Department is taking in processing delayed Single Farm Payments.
(AQO 5451/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to advise that to date we have paid Single Farm Payment to more farmers than in any previous year. 37,637 Single Applications were received for the 2013 scheme year of which 35,228 have been finalised, that is 93.6%, totalling £246.2 million.

90% of 2013 Single Farm Payments were finalised in December 2013, totalling £232.5 million. This was a significant increase from the previous year when approximately 83% of 2012 claims were paid amounting to £184.1 million.

Every effort is being made to finalise the remaining claims as early as practical, with the majority of inspections to be paid by the end of February and any remaining cases to be paid by the end of April 2014. This is two months ahead of the 2012 payments timeline.

EU Regulations (currently Article 29 of Council Regulation (EC) No. 73/2009) requires Member States to make payments in full by 30 June each year and furthermore require that payments cannot be made until verification of eligibility conditions have been finalised.

Children's Services

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the introduction of a statutory duty on government departments and public bodies to co-operate on children's services, in relation to her Department's work to improve outcomes for children.
(AQO 5452/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Children and young people make up a significant part of our rural community and Northern Ireland also has one of the youngest populations in Europe. It is vital for all of us in Government to deliver for our young people, and as DARD Minister this is an area that is very close to my heart. My Department is fully committed to the statutory Section 75 duties to promote equality across our business functions; and age is one of the nine equality duties specifically mentioned.

Our Equality Scheme sets out how we will engage with stakeholders and sectoral interest groups to hear their views and my Department also works closely with other government departments and others in taking forward a range of cross-cutting strategies, policies and initiatives. The introduction of a statutory duty on public authorities here will help underpin the existing collaboration that takes place and encourage further joined-up working and where possible, the sharing of resources across government too.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Capital Projects: Foyle

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the major capital projects funded by her Department in the Foyle constituency in 2012.
(AQW 28878/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Spend is recorded by my Department according to financial years. For the purpose of this answer I would, therefore, report that no major capital projects were funded by my Department in the Foyle constituency from the 1 April 2012 to 31 March 2013.

However, I would point out that over £8m has been spent on a variety of resource projects in the year, including on City of Culture.

Capital Projects: Foyle

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the major capital projects funded by her Department in the Foyle constituency in 2013.
(AQW 28879/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Spend is recorded by my Department according to financial years. For the purpose of this answer I would, therefore, report that no major capital projects will be funded by my Department in the Foyle constituency from the 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014.

However, I would point out that over £9m is planned to be spent on a variety of resource projects in the year, including on City of Culture.

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) all third sector organisations funded by the Department who provide services to the public; and (ii) the value of each contract.
(AQW 29414/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The third sector organisations funded directly by the Department and its NDPBs are detailed in the table attached.

Contract value is interpreted as the value of grant provided to organisations in the current year.

In the case of Stadiums' programme, contracts signed to date cover a longer period than the current year and the values provided reflect this. These values contain only DCAL's contribution to the contract total.

Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Linen Hall Library	300,000
Somme Heritage Centre	30,000
Mellon Centre for Migration Studies	74,000
NI Publications Resource	31,000

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Cardinal O'Fiaich Library & Archive	23,000
Railway preservation Society of Ireland	4,125
FLAME: Gasworks Museum	2,200
Downpatrick and Co. Down Railway	2,823
Armagh Public Library	525
Royal Irish Fusiliers Museum	1,296
National Trust Springhill	2,280
Somme Heritage Centre	2,603
Inniskillings Museum	2,000
The Odyssey Trust Company Ltd	587,000
PIPS Charity	30,000
Níamh Louise Foundation	30,000
Foyle Film Festival - Community Film Project	50,000
The Nerve Centre - Core Funding, Film Clubs & Fab Lab	456,160
Amma Centre – Creative Learning Centre	301,670
Studio-On - Creative Learning Centre	433,593
Cinemagic - Core Funding & Film Clubs	186,651
Queens Film Theatre	53,000
Belfast Film Festival - Core Funding & Community Outreach	144,000
CultureTech	100,000
Action on Hearing Loss	10,000
British Deaf Association	13,831
Deaf Answers	18,205
Deaf Answers	9,230
Hands That Talk	7,152
National Deaf Children's Society	20,353
National Deaf Children's Society	11,943
Northern Ireland Deaf Youth Association	9,727
Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland	37,500
Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association	37,500
Pobal - Rights & Revelry 2013 (Promotes equality and social inclusion)	2,000
Foras na Gaeilge - Liofa Website (supports Irish Language)	60,000
East Belfast Mission - Establishment of an Irish Language Centre	5,000
Forbairt Feirste - Beechmount Heritage Initiative (Development Belfast, supports Irish Language)	21,683
Forbairt Feirste - Gaeltacht Qtr Scoping Study (Development Belfast, supports Irish Language)	15,000
Forbairt Feirste - Gaeltacht Qtr Action Plan (Development Belfast, support Irish Language)	25,737
Forbairt Feirste - Nansen Story Book Project (Development Belfast, supports Irish Language)	16,100
Forbairt Feirste - The Gaeltacht Bhóthar Seoighe Story (Development Belfast, supports Irish Language)	15,200
Forbairt Feirste - The An Griangraf Gafa Book (Development Belfast, supports Irish Language)	12,000
Ulster Scots Language Society	18,950

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Ulster Scots Language Society	22,150
Ulster Scots Language Society	24,500
Ulster Scots Language Society	19,300
Springboard Opportunities	80,000
Odyssey Millennium Ltd.	15,000
Ground Zero 360o Inc.	5,000
Angling First	10,000
Irish Football Association (Stadium Programme - Redevelopment of Windsor Park)	26,270,000
UB Irish Rugby Football Union (Stadium Programme - Redevelopment of Ravenhill)	13,187,254
Ulster Council GAA (Stadium Programme - Redevelopment of Casement)	45,188,045
Irish Football Association (Promoting Equality, Tackling Poverty + Social Exclusion through Sport)	1,500,000
UB Irish Rugby Football Union (Promoting Equality, Tackling Poverty + Social Exclusion through Sport)	1,500,000
Ulster Council GAA (Promoting Equality, Tackling Poverty + Social Exclusion through Sport)	500,000
Tyrone GAA County Committee (Promoting Equality, Tackling Poverty + Social Exclusion through Sport - Garvaghey Centre of Participation)	500,073
POBAL (Promotes Irish Language)	90,796
Raidió Fáilte (Promotes Irish Language)	50,382
Iontaobhas Ultach (Promotes Irish Language)	87,716
Comhaltas Uladh (Promotes Irish Language)	26,850
Forbairt Feirste (Promotes Irish Language)	53,649
An t-Áisaonad (Promotes Irish Language)	141,921
Altram (Promotes Irish Language)	86,145
Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise (Promotes Irish Language)	42,874
Cairde Teo (Promotes Irish Language)	56,403
Gaelphobal Cheantar an tSratha báin (Promotes Irish Language)	58,008
Coiste Forbartha Charn Tóchair (Promotes Irish Language)	66,242
Cairde Uí Néill (Promotes Irish Language)	50,675
Boirche Íochtar Conradh na Gaeilge (Promotes Irish Language)	39,700
Glór na nGael, Uachtar Tíre (Promotes Irish Language)	49,359
Cumann Cultúrtha Mhic Reachtain (Promotes Irish Language)	70,030
Ionad Uíbh Eachach (Promotes Irish Language)	41,480
Glór na Móna (Promotes Irish Language)	51,355
Croí Éanna (Promotes Irish Language)	52,071
An Droichead Teo (Promotes Irish Language)	68,194
The Beat Initiative	155,200
Belfast Community Circus School	163,299
Belfast Exposed Photography	147,479
Big Telly Theatre Company	150,350
Cahoots NI Ltd	121,764
Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival	126,100

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Crescent Arts Centre	226,800
Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich	172,208
Feile an Phobail	142,590
An Gaelaras Ltd	139,535
Golden Thread Gallery	180,019
The Lyric Theatre (NI)	1,018,500
The Metropolitan Arts Centre	1,000,000
New Belfast Community Arts Initiative T/A Community Arts Partnership	179,311
NI Opera	521,569
North West Play Resource Centre (The Playhouse)	259,012
Tinderbox Theatre Company	213,400
Ulster Orchestra Society Ltd	2,031,966
Verbal Arts Centre	255,496
The Void Art Centre	142,768
Waterside Theatre Company Ltd	130,930
Young at Art	167,416
Creative Exchange	13,300
Flaxart Studios	39,396
Orchid Studios Association	14,790
Paragon Studios	20,370
QSS @ Bedford Street	31,606
Crescent Arts Centre	9,000
Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival	25,000
Golden Thread Gallery	11,180
Centre for Contemporary Art Derry - Londonderry	5,000
Cahoots NI Ltd	10,000
Belfast International Comedy Festival	5,000
Crescent Arts Centre	9,000
Crescent Arts Centre	6,546
Sinead Morrissey	7,500
The Performing Rights Society Foundation for Music	15,000
Indian Community Centre	8,700
The John Hewitt Society	3,600
Origin Theatre Company	10,000
Ursula Burns	5,000
The Void Art Centre	10,000
NI Opera	2,500
Spanner in the Works	14,100
Cahoots NI Ltd	10,000
Dance Resource Base (NI) Ltd	12,285
East Belfast Partnership	60,000

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Replay Theatre Company	30,000
Replay Theatre Company	30,000
An Droichead	3,500
East Belfast Partnership	20,000
Sliabh Beagh Development Association	15,000
The Armagh Rhymers Educational & Cultural Organisation	4,789
Catalyst Arts Ltd	3,434
Creative Exchange	15,371
Digital Arts Studios	6,283
NI Opera	9,588
Oh Yeah Music Centre	5,250
The Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association	14,250
Seacourt Print Workshop Limited	8,250
Armagh Pipers Club	18,721
Arts Care	12,961
Arts & Disability Forum	11,265
The Beat Initiative	15,836
Belfast Community Circus School	15,000
CRAIC (Community Recreational Arts in Coalisland)	6,500
In Your Space (NI) Ltd	11,940
New Belfast Community Arts Initiative T/A Community Arts Partnership	11,740
Wheelworks	10,578
Ahoghill Loyal Sons of William Flute Band	4,470
Annaghmore Star & Crown Flute Band	5,000
Articlave Flute Band	5,000
Ballyboley Pipe Band	5,000
Ballydonaghy Pipe Band	4,797
Ballylone Concert Flute Band	4,751
Ballyrashane Flute Band	5,000
Ballyronan Accordion Band	5,000
Bann Valley Community Association	5,000
Bellarena Accordion Band	5,000
Blair Memorial Flute Band	5,000
Broughshane and District Pipe Band	4,908
Cahard Flute Band	2,486
Church Hill Silver Band	5,000
Cloughfin Pipe Band	5,000
Corcrain Flute Band	5,000
Dungannon Silver Band	5,000
Dunmore Silver Band	4,920
Flute Band Church	2,591

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Flutes and Drums Donaghadee	3,825
Johnston Memorial Flute Band	3,874
Joseph Forde Memorial Pipe Band	5,000
Killeen Pipe Band	5,000
Kilmore Flute Band	4,946
Lack Pipe Band	5,000
Letterbreen Silver Band	5,000
Lislea Lambeg Drumming Club	1,500
Lisnamurrican Temperence Flute Band	5,000
North Down First Flute Band	4,800
Orangefield Flute Band	3,892
The Pride of the Orange and Blue Auld Boys Flute Band	5,000
Quilly True Blues Flute Band	5,000
Spa Accordion Band	4,920
Strawhill Voluntary Independent Pipe Band	2,295
TAG (The Active Group)	5,000
Knocknagoney Area Forum	5,000
North West Women's Collective	5,000
Cuan Mhuire Rehabilitation Centre	5,000
Drumbo Arts and Craft Society	5,000
Roger Casements GAC	5,000
Beyond	3,000
Craft Northern Ireland	18,000
Digital Arts Studios	6,912
Flaxart Studios	5,688
Golden Thread Gallery	9,060
Paragon Studios	8,640
Photo Works North / Source Magazine	15,520
R-Space Gallery CIC	5,000
Seacourt Print Workshop Limited	19,513
The Void Art Centre	25,000
Bready Cricket Club	31,000
Donaghmore & District Community Association	31,000
Hanwood Trust Company Ltd.	31,000
The Cliff	31,000
Irish Football Association	4,875
Termoneeny Community Association	31,000
Coleraine and District Riding for the Disabled Association	31,000
Down Club Mark Ltd	72,000
Lower Ormeau Residents' Action Group	31,000
NI Civil Service Sports Association	31,000

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Irish Cave Rescue Organisation	5,000
Mourne Mountain Rescue Team	18,833
North West Mountain Rescue Team	22,454
Special Olympics Ireland	605,900
Disability Sports NI	120,000
Irish Football Association	7,150
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	7,150
Irish Amateur Boxing Association	600,000
Irish Amateur Boxing Association	169,936
Irish Amateur Boxing Association	43,920
Irish Amateur Boxing Association	51,000
Disability Sports NI	162,500
Outdoor Recreation NI	225,000
Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee	10,500
Irish Football Association	7,800
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	7,800
North Belfast Play Forum	80,000
2&4 Wheel Steering Group	89,500
Athletics Northern Ireland	153,556
Basketball NI	38,000
British Gymnastics	95,670
British Orienteering	41,000
British Orienteering	39,200
Canoe Association of NI	130,467
Cricket Ireland	186,676
Disability Sports NI	45,000
Disability Sports NI	45,000
Golfing Union of Ireland UB	102,000
Golfing Union of Ireland UB	87,000
Horse Sport Ireland	50,000
Irish Amateur Boxing Association	58,000
Irish Bowls Federation	38,000
Irish Football Association	240,000
Mountaineering Ireland	44,000
Netball NI	139,290
NI Archery Society	25,000
NI Fencing Ltd	15,000
NI Judo Federation	63,000
NI Wrestling Association	31,500
Northern Ireland Federation of Shooting Sports	45,030
Rowing Ireland	83,448

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Royal Yachting Association (NI)	125,192
Swim Ulster Ltd	150,500
Taekwondo Association of NI	30,000
Triathlon Ireland	117,500
UB Badminton Union of Ireland	101,400
UB Irish Rugby Football Union	236,975
UB Irish Rugby Football Union	231,975
UB Irish Table Tennis Association	64,000
UB Tennis Ireland	78,236
Ulster Camogie Council	59,000
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	217,000
Ulster Hockey Union	216,360
Ulster Squash	45,000
Omagh District Council	1,000
Ulster Hockey Union	4,100
Lurgaboy Adventure Centre Ltd	750
British Orienteering	34,200
Cricket Ireland	37,500
Mountaineering Ireland	35,000
NI Commonwealth Games Council	54,500
NI Sports Forum	40,000
UB Irish Table Tennis Association	24,800
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	60,000
Ulster Hockey Union	30,650
Dungannon United Youth FC	245,000
Armagh City FC	245,000
Athletics Northern Ireland	4,000
Basketball NI	4,000
British Orienteering	4,000
Canoe Association of NI	4,000
Cricket Ireland	4,000
Horse Sport Ireland	4,000
Irish Amateur Boxing Association	4,000
Irish Bowls Federation	4,000
Netball NI	4,000
NI Archery Society	4,000
NI Judo Federation	4,000
Rowing Ireland	4,000
Royal Yachting Association (NI)	4,000
Shooting Federation of Northern Ireland	4,000
Swim Ulster Ltd	4,000

Third Sector Organisation Name	Grant Award £
Taekwondo Association of NI	4,000
Triathlon Ireland	4,000
UB Badminton Union of Ireland	4,000
Ulster Camogie Council	4,000
Ulster Hockey Union	4,000
Ulster Squash	4,000
Holywood Yacht Club	60,000
Coalisland Fianna GFC	223,879
Search and Rescue Dog Association-Ireland North	2,000
Bangor FC	245,000
Annagh United FC	245,000
Crossmaglen Rangers GFC	238,806
Castlewellan FC	131,394
North Belfast Play Forum	149,600
Abbey Villa FC	245,000
Derrynoose GAC	245,000
Banbridge Amateur Boxing Club	245,000
Association of NI Car Clubs	16,700
Adventure Activities Industry Advisory Committee	25,000
Athletics Northern Ireland	25,500
Netball NI	50,000
Ulster Hockey Union	44,141
Southern Sports Partnership	18,000
Disability Sports NI	3,750
Athletics Northern Ireland	3,750
UB Tennis Ireland	3,750
NI Sports Forum	3,750
Magherabeg Rural Community Association	179,545
Irish Football Association	3,750
UB Irish Rugby Football Union	3,750
Ulster Council Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)	3,750
NI Commonwealth Games Council	3,750
Ulster Hockey Union	3,750
Outdoor Recreation NI	3,750
St Joseph's GAC (Ederney)	245,000
Cricket Ireland	3,750
Ulster Camogie Council	3,750
Colaiste Feirste (Belfast)	245,000
Swim Ulster Ltd	33,500
Swim Ulster Ltd	2,880

Lough Neagh

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her position on the future Lough Neagh.
(AQW 29647/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Lough Neagh fishery plays an important role in the socio economic life of the communities around the Lough. The fishery is a key priority for my Department and my officials have engaged with fisheries' interests around the Lough to assess how my Department can help support the further development of the fishery in maximising its value and long term sustainability.

There are a range of challenges impacting on the commercial fishing and recreational angling sectors. These issues can be best addressed through the development of an integrated fisheries management plan in conjunction with local stakeholders. My officials are currently taking forward this work which will be underpinned by scientific research and advice. The Plan will provide an important planning framework for the conservation and sustainable use of the fisheries resources and future management of the fishery.

Fish Stocks

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what studies are being carried out to assess fish stocks, with a view to improving fishing tourism.
(AQW 29715/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is commissioned by my Department to undertake research into salmon and freshwater fisheries. This provides the scientific basis to the conservation and management of inland fisheries.

Healthy fish stocks are essential in supporting sustainable recreational fisheries and this remains a priority for my Department. We have recently commissioned a number of studies to assess fish stocks on Lough Neagh and Lough Erne to help inform the future management of these fisheries and in maximising their recreational value for angling.

Angling is an important part of the tourism product and my Department will continue to work closely with SportNI, NITB and the Loughs Agency in supporting the growth and development of the sport for both local and visiting anglers.

Language Agencies: Funding

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of whether the Irish Language Agency and the Ulster Scots Agency have been treated equally since 2006, with regards to funds and resources as promised in the Belfast Agreement.
(AQW 29753/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The North South Language Body is made up of the Ulster Scots Agency and Foras na Gaeilge. The Agencies are jointly funded by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure from the North and the Department for Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht from the South.

The Ulster Scots Agency is responsible for the promotion of the Ulster Scots heritage, culture and language and Foras na Gaeilge is responsible for the promotion of the Irish language on an all – island basis as defined in the legislation.

Both Agencies outline their strategic aims and objectives through their business and corporate plans which are agreed by the Sponsor Departments and Finance Departments and the NSMC Ministers.

The Agencies are funded according to their needs, as identified within their approved business and corporate plans. Budget allocations are based on the need in conjunction with the respective plans and are monitored and reviewed throughout the year. Thus it is about delivering to the point of need by ensuring the Agencies receive their required budgetary allocations to meet their approved Strategic aims and objectives.

Glentoran Football Club

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on whether the strategy for the development of local football now includes the £10m redevelopment of Glentoran Football Club, as promised by the previous Minister, subject to a viable business case.
(AQW 29766/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The IFA's draft Facilities Strategy which details development plans for local football, does not include specific reference to a £10m redevelopment of Glentoran Football Club. As funding for the development of sub-regional association football stadiums has yet to be secured, no decision of any kind on funding to assist the development of any sub-regional stadiums has yet been taken.

Legacy Trust UK: Connections Programme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following the implementation of the Legacy Trust UK's three year Connections Programme in 2012, what cultural benefits have been derived to date, and to which communities.
(AQW 29801/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Dungannon, Derry and Belfast have all benefitted from the Connections Programme and examples are provided below.

Land of Giants

The partners in Land of Giants - The Beat Initiative, Belfast Community Circus and Young at Art- continue to provide high quality participative arts activity and audience experiences within their respective operational programming. This experience has increased each organisation's visibility and positioning at a local and national level.

Luminous Soul

The Luminous Soul project continues to operate, with free weekly classes for disabled participants. The longer term impact of the project has been considerable;

- The dancers have performed in festivals and showcase events within the north of Ireland and London and performed at the closing ceremony of the 2013 World Police and Fire Games, hosted in the north of Ireland.
- Open Arts have established links with leading dancers and dance companies working on an international basis;
- The project has provided opportunities for developing best practice in working with disabled people through contemporary dance and movement.
- Disabled people are encouraged to try out contemporary dance and to consider that with training they have the potential to become professional. To date, Open Arts has worked with over 80 disabled people who have an interest in dance. Luminous Soul made it possible for some of these individuals to try dance for the first time.

Imagine Action

This large scale collaborative project brought Echo Echo, Nerve Centre and Beam Creative Network together working within the north of Ireland. The project increased the profile of the organisations involved and highlighted the benefits of working together

- A number of the young people involved in Imagine Action were from a rural background and had no previous experience of participating in arts activities. Since project end, the Beam Creative Network have undertaken two Arts Council funded projects; 'No Limits' and 'Beyond Limits', both inclusion projects for young people with and without disabilities. A number of the young people involved in these projects were participants in Imagine Action.
- Through Imagine Action, the Beam Creative Network has established links with artists working within the north of Ireland and beyond.
- The Beam Creative Network have reported that the young people involved have increased in confidence and ability through participation in Imagine Action and subsequent Arts Council funded projects.

Echo Echo

- Into Contact allowed Echo Echo Dance Theatre Company, the core company ensemble, to work at the highest professional level with a range of internationally acclaimed artists. The current work 'Without' by Rosemary Lee and Echo Echo is hugely ambitious original work and is set to tour widely.
- 'Motion Ensemble' challenged the most experienced improvisation performers and has developed new audiences and profile for the company's work. The first edition of 'Echo Echo Dance & Movement Festival' will offer a programme of local, national and international performance in the intimate setting of the Echo Echo's beautiful new home building, a unique space and a very tangible physical legacy in 2013 and beyond.

Capital Projects: Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the capital projects funded by her Department in each constituency since she came to office.
(AQW 29833/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The spend details requested are summarised in Table 1 attached and covers the 32 month period between 1 May 2011 and 31 December 2013.

I have arranged for further details at project level to be placed in the Assembly Library.

The following considerations should be borne in mind when interpreting this data.

The Department sometimes provides capital funding through intermediary bodies and does not hold information on subsequent allocations at a constituency level. In these cases, funding is allocated according to the physical location of the intermediary body. For example, the Department provides funding to Sport Governing Bodies under its Promoting Equality,

Tackling Social Exclusion Agenda. For the purposes of your question, this funding has been allocated to the constituency in which the Governing Bodies lies.

It should be also noted that the pattern of allocation across constituencies will reflect, among other things, the physical location of major venues and organisations which receive funding support.

Please note that the North Down constituency contains £11.23m in respect of the Olympic 50m Pool in Bangor.

Belfast South constituency total contains spend on Ravenhill Stadium of £10.66m and on Windsor Stadium of £1.87m. The West Belfast constituency contains spend on Casement Park of £2.82m.

Finally, allocations are recognised on an actual spend basis, except in the case of Arts Council which reports project spend on the date funding is awarded.

Table 1 – Capital Spend Per All Constituencies

Constitency	Amount £m
Belfast East	2.937
Belfast North	1.836
Belfast South	16.555
Belfast West	4.732
East Antrim	1.123
East Londonderry	0.986
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	2.333
Foyle	2.624
Lagan Valley	0.596
Mid Ulster	1.801
Newry And Armagh	2.257
North Antrim	1.576
North Down	13.481
South Down	2.584
Strangford	0.542
Upper Bann	1.647
West Tyrone	1.576
South Antrim	0.964
Total	**60.150**

Fisheries Legislation

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on (i) the amendments to fisheries legislation being prepared by her Department and whether these give effect to salmon conservation proposals; and (ii) whether the changes will be in place for the incoming salmon fishing season.
(AQW 29853/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

(i) Proposed changes to angling regulations are currently under consideration and these relate to a range of salmon conservation measures which have been the subject of extensive consultation. It is proposed that there will be a prohibition of salmon netting, catch and release will be mandatory for all salmon and sea trout caught by anglers in the DCAL jurisdiction and that worming will only be allowed for such fishing after the end of June. Only single or double barbless hooks will be permitted for salmon and sea trout angling.

(ii) It is intended that these regulations will be in place by the start of the game angling season on 1st March.

North-west: Departmental Office

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) under what authority will a departmental office will be set up in the North West; (ii) the proposed lifespan of the office; and (iii) who will be responsible for the costs of the set up and running the office.
(AQW 29888/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A key City of Culture legacy objective is to ensure that the benefits of DCAL's investment in the City are felt in the towns and villages across the North West. My intention is to open a DCAL office in Derry to further enhance a focus on the North West. This will have responsibility for coordination and oversight of culture, arts and leisure activity in the North West and specifically the current Derry/ Strabane and Limavady/ Coleraine council areas.

DCAL officials are currently preparing detailed arrangements and costs which will be funded through my Department. A business case is being compiled to support the establishment of the office and we will be liaising with DFP properties to ensure value for money. The establishment of this small team in the North West is in line with our normal business. Whilst the intention is to have the new Departmental office in place for the start of the 2014/15 financial year, the lifespan of the office will be considered in the business case.

The North West office will coordinate a new Strategic Oversight Structure for City of Culture legacy. This will include stakeholders across local and central Government, the community and voluntary sector, business and others to ensure that Executive and Departmental targets and priorities are delivered.

DCAL officials focused on North West development will also stimulate strategic linkages and collaboration between multiple stakeholders across government, industry, education, local councils, the wider DCAL family and the community and voluntary sectors to drive joined up approaches to growing the economy and tackling poverty and social exclusion.

Irish City of Culture 2016

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the applications relating to her Department's support for Londonderry's bid to host the Irish City of Culture 2016.
(AQW 29889/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Given the success of City of Culture 2013, I am fully supportive of the Irish City of Culture initiative and would encourage all cities to consider applying for the title.

Derry continues to face significant socio economic problems, with quality of life in the City at a lower level than Belfast and significantly below the best performing European Cities. Therefore, I am keen that the City pursues all opportunities which can improve quality of life for those most in need.

My Department has not yet received any applications for funding in relation to a bid for the Irish City of Culture title in 2016.

Irish City of Culture 2016

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail how Londonderry's bid for the Irish City of Culture 2016 will be funded, including whether all related costs of a successful bid would be funded by (i) her Department; and/or (ii) the Irish Government.
(AQW 29890/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I understand that Derry City Council, together with citywide stakeholders, will formally bid for the title of Irish City of Culture.

My Department has not yet received any applications for funding in relation to the proposed bid.

Commemorations: 1916

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the discussions that departmental officials are engaged in, and the plans that are being prepared, regarding any commemoration pertinent to 1916.
(AQW 29891/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arm-Length Bodies sponsored by DCAL are playing a key role in telling the stories and different interpretations of significant anniversaries from the 1912-1922 period. My Department continues to work with a wide range of social partners to promote inclusive approaches to marking the Decade of Centenaries. This has included the Roundtable on Centenaries convened by the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

My officials have also been working with the Somme Heritage Centre to fund development of an education programme linked to the First World War and including the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Relevant events and exhibitions pertinent to other significant anniversaries will be developed as this Decade of Centenaries progresses.

Language Agencies: Advertising Spend

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the estimated total advertising spend from 16 January 2014 to the 31 March 2014 by (i) The Irish Language Agency; and (ii) The Ulster Scots Agency.
(AQW 29911/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Foras na Gaeilge estimate its advertising spend from 16 January to 31 March 2014 at €9,000 (£7,740).

The Ulster Scots Agency estimate its advertising spend from 16 January 2014 to 31 March 2014 at £2,500.

Fishing: All-island Licence

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the introduction of a single all-island fishing licence.
(AQW 29963/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Loughs Agency, Inland Fisheries Ireland and my Department have established a partnership to develop an electronic e-licensing project that will support the development of angling as a tourism product across the island of Ireland.

The initial element of the project is a scoping study funding by the EU's INTERREG Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body. The study will explore the opportunities within angling's regulatory structures for harmonisation, complementarily and simplification. A future product arising from this work could be the provision of a new All Ireland e license for angling.

The terms of reference of the scoping study have been agreed and it is planned that work will commence in March.

Lough Neagh: Research Project

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the progress of the genetic research project on Lough Neagh and its feeder rivers by Queen's University Belfast.
(AQW 30022/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Work on the genetic project has been progressing well and to date over 7200 brown trout samples have been taken for genetic analysis and more will be taken later this year.

The report on this work is scheduled to be completed and submitted to my Department by the end of November 2014.

Irish Language Act and Ulster Scots: Spend

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount spent by her Department on the development of the (i) Irish Language Act; and (ii) the Ulster Scots language. in each of the last two financial years.
(AQW 30028/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

(i) During the two financial years 2011/12 and 2012/13, spend on the development of an Irish Language Bill has been through salary costs of Departmental officials. The Department does not hold a record of the proportion of time these officials spent on work on the Bill.

(ii) In 2012/13, the Ministerial Advisory Group for the Ulster Scots Academy (MAGUS) spent £17,609 on projects related to the development of the Ulster Scots language. The Ulster-Scots Agency's spend on Ulster Scots language development was £144,840 in 2012 and £132,061 in 2013.

Cultural Tourism

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the steps she is taking to promote cultural tourism, specifically the history between Scotland and Northern Ireland.
(AQW 30046/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure plays a central role in promoting cultural tourism across the North of Ireland through investment in cultural infrastructure such as museums, theatres, sports venues and the language sector.

A number of the Department's Arm's Length Bodies are involved in projects which explore the history between Scotland and the North of Ireland.

For example, the Ulster-Scots Agency's exhibition entitled "Masters of the Sea – Belfast's Ulster-Scots Shipbuilders" will go on display in the Scottish Maritime Museum in Irvine from March 2014.

Foras na Gaeilge administers the Colmcille project including Slí Cholmcille, which is a heritage and tourism trail linking Scotland and Ireland.

Libraries NI hold Ulster-Scots material and there were three Burns Night celebrations in Ballymena Central Library, Omagh Library and Derry Central Library in January 2014.

The permanent history galleries at the Ulster Museum explore historical links in the context of the Plantation of Ulster and the Ulster American Folk Park includes 'Scotch-Irish' themes.

The Ministerial Advisory Group on the Ulster-Scots Academy has recently worked on a project in partnership with the Ulster Historical Foundation to research the Scots invasion of Ireland in 1315, including identifying possible tourism potential.

The Arts Council support, amongst others, The Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association and the McCracken Society.

The Public Records Office (PRONI) actively promotes cultural tourism and works with peer institutions to host events relating to the shared history of Ireland and Scotland.

I have also supported the continuation of the Ulster-Scots Broadcast Fund which places a high priority on the links and shared history of Scotland and the North of Ireland.

These are just some examples of the ongoing work being taken forward by the Department and its Arm's Length Bodies in terms of the promotion of cultural tourism with particular reference to the history between Scotland and the North of Ireland.

Capital Works: Football Stadia

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the budget provision for capital works in football stadia, other than Windsor Park.
(AQW 30109/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At present there is no budget provision for capital works in football stadia other than at Windsor Park. The Executive previously endorsed the development of sub-regional stadia as a priority area of spend in the next CSR period. Therefore funding for the development of sub-regional association football stadiums has still to be secured and no decision or timescale on funding to assist the development of any specific sub-regional stadium has yet been taken.

Commonwealth Games 2014

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her Department's plans for the Commonwealth Games 2014, including its representation at the games.
(AQW 30128/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The NI Commonwealth Games Council is responsible for all aspects of the north of Ireland team competing at the 2014 Glasgow Games. My Department, through Sport NI, continues to work closely with the Council as it takes forward its preparations for the Games.

The Council has established two groups - an Operational Group to take forward the detailed preparations with the local governing bodies, and the Strategic Task and Finish Group which oversees the work of the Operational Group and considers opportunities to maximise the NI Team's performance in Glasgow. DCAL officials have attended the meetings of this group to hear at firsthand how the Games preparations are progressing.

From April 2013 and in the lead up to the Games, my Department, through Sport NI, is also providing direct financial assistance to the NI Commonwealth Games Council totalling £136k. This funding will help with the Council's costs for staff, administration and other costs associated with attendance at the 2014 Games.

Support is also being provided to our top athletes in advance of the 2014 Commonwealth Games. Sport NI, through its Athlete Investment Programme for the year 2013/14, is providing financial assistance of almost £450k to sports and governing bodies who are preparing athletes for the Games. Sport NI provides £2.5M of funding to the Sports Institute NI, for support services to our top athletes, including those athletes preparing for the Commonwealth Games. These support services include performance planning, science and skills; sports medicine; and, strength and conditioning.

As diary commitments for July and August 2014 have not yet been planned, representation from my Department to attend the Games has not yet been decided.

Boxing: Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether applications for funding for boxing, under the recent allocation from Sports NI, were (i) rejected; or (ii) monies withheld because it was found that claimed facilities did not exist.
(AQW 30147/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Boxing Investment Programme was established to address the strategic equipment and facility needs of boxing clubs that operate at the core of deprived communities across the north of Ireland.

Recent funding applications to Sport NI, in this regard, were in relation to the capital works element of the programme, with a total of seventy-six completed applications having been received from boxing clubs across the north of Ireland. None of these clubs have been rejected from the process.

In addition, no monies have yet been awarded to clubs. Capital works required in each of these clubs have been ranked in order of priority and indicative grant awards will be allocated accordingly and to the budget available. I understand that Sport NI is currently in the process of informing these funding decisions to all applicants in writing.

Boxing Clubs: Child Protection Obligations

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether all boxing clubs are now wholly compliant with child protection obligations.
(AQW 30148/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The governing body for boxing in the north of Ireland, the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council (UPBC) has responsibility for ensuring that all boxing clubs affiliated to it are compliant with child protection obligations. The recent report from the Independent Working Group, set up to examine boxing in Ulster, highly commended the work of the UBPC to ensure that coaches, other representatives and volunteers are vetted and can operate safely within the sport. Furthermore, the Group recommended that the UPBC continue to adhere strictly to the child protection policy and procedures to maintain standards at the highest possible level.

I am aware that the UPBC has a requirement that any person seeking a coaching or judges award must agree to attend a 'Safeguarding Children and Young People in Sport' workshop and complete an Access NI vetting check. I have been advised that over 1,000 Access NI checks have been administered by the UBPC for coaches and officials in regulated activity.

Sport NI, an arms length body of my Department, will continue to provide support to governing bodies, including the UPBC, on their child protection obligations. In addition, Sport NI has processes in place to ensure that any boxing clubs, who apply for direct funding, comply with child protection obligations.

Fishing Licences

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of (i) fishing licences that have been issued; and (ii) convictions for fishing without a licence, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30182/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

(i) **Table 1 below details the number and types of DCAL angling licences sold in each of the last five years:**

Type of licence	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Game Season	8499	8998	8143	7381	7329
Foyle Endorsement	708	797	638	682	694
Coarse Season	2436	2560	2603	2277	2763
Disabled Game	1674	1756	1795	1739	1701
Disabled Coarse	131	142	132	151	134
Game Senior Citizens	3968	4508	4489	4448	4786
Game Juvenile	2591	2654	2261	2114	2138
Game 14 Day	74	57	54	89	45
Game 3 Day	694	657	685	675	637
Coarse Senior Citizens	174	221	237	216	292
Coarse Juvenile	448	480	525	464	552
Coarse 14 Day	78	70	67	37	46
Coarse 3 Day	207	310	347	374	412
Joint Coarse 14 Day	1141	1015	996	1011	1248
Joint Coarse 3 Day	714	957	1015	907	1169
Joint Game 14 Day	282	271	334	334	380
Joint Game 3 Day	1879	2267	2172	2312	3185
Total	25698	27720	26493	25211	27511

Table 2 below details the number of DCAL commercial fishing licences sold in the last 5 years:

Year	Eel Long line <1200 hooks	Eel Draft	Eel Long line >1200 hooks	Salmon Draft net	Trout net (Yards)	Coarse net (Yards)	Bait net
2008	62	29	2	18	11,600	21,700	34
2009	34	30	2	17	11,500	32,000	22

Year	Eel Long line <1200 hooks	Eel Draft	Eel Long line >1200 hooks	Salmon Draft net	Trout net (Yards)	Coarse net (Yards)	Bait net
2010	79	37	2	16	11,400	46,300	44
2011	93	38	2	20	10,400	56,700	50
2012	86	45	9	21	12,600	64,500	70

Trout and coarse nets are licensed in lengths of 100 yards.

(ii) **Table 3 details the number of persons convicted under Section 41 of the Fisheries Act 1966 by financial year:**

Year	Number
2008/2009	66
2009/2010	93
2010/2011	90
2011/2012	75
2012/2013	45

Travel Expenditure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the total expenditure on (i) ministerial travel; and (ii) Special Adviser travel in 2013.
(AQW 30183/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The total expenditure by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on Ministerial travel in 2013 was £570.02. No travel costs were incurred by the Special Adviser during 2013.

Salmon Levels

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) her Department's current estimate of salmon levels for (a) wild salmon; and (b) hatchery salmon; and (ii) how this compares with last five years.
(AQW 30222/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department commissions the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) to monitor the status of Atlantic salmon populations in the DCAL jurisdiction.

The Department's current estimate of salmon levels are based on counts of adult salmon on a number of monitored index rivers. These counts are compared to the conservation limits set and a percentage compliance is calculated.

	Percentage compliance with Conservation Limits				
River	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Blackwater	N/A	N/A	64	83	45
Bush	62	56	46	79	144
Clady	N/A	N/A	163	120*	159
Glendun	33	64	76	88	178
Main	68	61	77	129	53
Shimna		99	53	N/A	N/A

* minimal count as counter operational from Aug 2012

The data below outlines the number of hatchery raised salmon released from the River Bush Salmon Station and wild salmon returning to the Bush.

Year	Hatchery Salmon	Wild Salmon
2009	526	726
2010	895	1045
2011	515	649

Year	Hatchery Salmon	Wild Salmon
2012	789	926
2013	1191	1644

Salmon Stocks

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the departmental rivers for which conservation limits for salmon stocks have been determined.
(AQW 30223/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, working in conjunction with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, have established conservation limits for the following 13 rivers. They are:

Area	River
North Antrim	Bush
North Antrim	Ballycastle
North Antrim	Dun
Neagh / Bann	Blackwater
Neagh / Bann	Clady
Neagh / Bann	Sixmile
Neagh / Bann	Main
Neagh / Bann	Upper Bann
Neagh / Bann	Ballinderry
Neagh / Bann	Moyola
Down	Shimna
Down	Moneycarragh
Erne	Garvary

Sports: Funding

Ms McCorley asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the funding available to sporting organisations; (ii) the streams under which funding is available, including for (a) capital projects; (b) operating costs; and (c) equipment; and (iii) whether there are plans for new sporting provision schemes.
(AQW 30235/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI, an arms length body of my Department, is responsible for the distribution of funding to sport in the north of Ireland.

Currently, Sport NI has no funding programmes open for sporting organisations to apply. However, Sport NI has advised it is in the process of developing the following funding programmes to which sporting organisations may be eligible to apply:

A New Capital Investment Programme - which aims to partially address the under-provision in high performance sports facilities, partially address the identified shortfalls in community sports facility provision, and to significantly increase community participation in sport and physical recreation. It is anticipated that the programme will open to applicants in the latter half of 2014.

Awards for Sport - is a small grants programme primarily aimed at increasing participation in community based sport, especially amongst under-represented groups. The programme will be open to a range of organisations including sports clubs, governing bodies for sport, community/ voluntary groups, and charities. It is anticipated that Awards for Sport will open to applications in February 2014.

Active Clubs - the aim of the programme is grow the coaching, leading and volunteering capacity in sports clubs, especially among under-represented groups and in areas of greatest need. Sport NI hopes to launch the ‘Active Club’ programme around March-April 2014.

Cycling: Dunlop and Hume Stories

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department’s Arms Length Bodies are planning to commemorate the 125th anniversary of the Dunlop/Hume story and its impact on cycling.
(AQW 30312/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware that the route on day one of the Giro d'Italia will pass by the location of the Hume/Dunlop race that took place 125 years ago. This event created an important development in the history of cycling with the introduction of pneumatic tyres on safety bicycles which helped to enable cycling for all, especially for women.

Libraries NI, an Arms Length Body of my Department, is planning the following to commemorate the event:

- Two cycling themed talks in May 2014, provisionally booked for Ormeau Road library and Newry City library.
- An exhibition in Ormeau Road library during May 2014 on the history of cycling and referring to the Hume/Dunlop story. This will draw on both Heritage and Information resources including the patent collection.
- On 6th and 10th May 2014, cycling will be the theme for 2 children's story time/ craft sessions in Ormeau Road library in partnership with Belfast City Council.

Libraries NI also provide access to a range of stock to support people with an interest in cycling and the local history associated with these events.

National Museums has no plans to commemorate the anniversary. It is, however, currently in discussions with Carrickfergus Museum about the possibility of lending bicycles for an exhibit scheduled to coincide with the forthcoming Giro d'Italia event in 2014. The loan may include Dunlop's original pneumatic tyred bicycle.

Brandywell Stadium: Redevelopment

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 29690/11-15, why funding has not been granted for the redevelopment of Brandywell Stadium.
(AQW 30398/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive previously endorsed the development of sub-regional stadia as a priority area of spend in the next CSR period 2015-2016 therefore no decision or timescale on funding to assist the development of any specific sub-regional stadium has yet been taken. At this point, depending on the outcome of Derry City Council's bid to the Social Investment Fund, a sub-regional stadia programme is also a logical if not immediate channel for any potential funding application regarding a redevelopment of the Brandywell Stadium.

Sport Northern Ireland: Board

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the appointment of members to the Board of Sport Northern Ireland.
(AQW 30401/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am currently considering the selection of suitable candidates to fill the appointment of Vice Chair and four members to the board of Sport NI. I wish to be assured that the best candidates are selected who can help Sport NI to deliver against my Department priorities in the next number of years. I hope to be in a position to announce my decision soon.

Golf Clubs: Funding

Ms McGahan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding opportunities available to golf clubs.
(AQW 30402/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI, an arms length body of my Department, is responsible for the distribution of funding to sport in the north of Ireland.

Currently, Sport NI has no funding programmes open for sporting organisations to apply, including golf clubs. However, Sport NI has advised it is in the process of developing the following funding programmes to which golf clubs may be eligible to apply:

A New Capital Investment Programme - which aims to partially address the under-provision in high performance sports facilities, partially address the identified shortfalls in community sports facility provision, and to significantly increase community participation in sport and physical recreation. It is anticipated that the programme will open to applicants in the latter half of 2014.

Awards for Sport - is a small grants programme primarily aimed at increasing participation in community based sport, especially amongst under-represented groups. The programme will be open to a range of organisations including sports clubs, governing bodies for sport, community/voluntary groups, and charities. It is anticipated that Awards for Sport will open to applications in February 2014.

Gaeltacht Bursary Scheme 2014

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of The Gaeltacht Bursary Scheme 2014.
(AQW 30485/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: This year 100 bursaries are being offered at an estimated total cost of £50k. Final costs will not be known until all the applications are received and assessed against the eligibility criteria. The closing date for the 2014 Gaeltacht Bursary is 4th April 2014.

Windsor Park: Development

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of Windsor Park.
(AQO 5467/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The IFA Integrated Supply Team tenders have been assessed and the Most Economically Advantageous Tender has been identified. As no challenges were received during the Alcatel period the Funding Agreement was issued to the IFA and the successful contractor (O'Hare and McGovern) was appointed in December 2013.

Design development by the contractor is currently underway and it is anticipated that construction works will commence on site in the next few months.

Provided that significant delays around any legal challenges are avoided, then the Windsor Park development can remain on programme with completion of the construction works planned for September 2015.

Performing Arts

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any discussions she has had with the Minister for Employment and Learning on developing a framework for the performing arts.
(AQO 5459/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning about developing a Performing Arts Framework and the Arts Council have also confirmed that they do not have a Performing Arts Framework nor have they had any contact with the Department for Employment and Learning on the issue.

Libraries NI

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether Libraries NI are experiencing any budgetary or administrative difficulties caused by the on-going operation of Education and Library Boards as a result of the delay in the Education Bill.
(AQO 5460/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Chief Executive of Libraries NI has informed me that the organisation is not experiencing any budgetary or administrative difficulties arising from its current operating arrangements with the Education and Library Boards.

Libraries NI has developed a range of beneficial working arrangements with the Education and Library Boards. These include a number of Service Level Agreements which are reviewed annually and work well.

The services provided to Libraries NI by the Boards cover capital works, property and vehicle maintenance, legal and insurance services and job evaluation.

The Boards also provide Centres of Procurement Excellence expertise and services to Libraries NI. In addition, Libraries NI operates under the successful Belfast Education & Library Board's Strategic Partnership which delivers capital projects for libraries within the BELB area. This was the Partnership under which the Falls, Ormeau, Shankill and Whiterock libraries were recently extensively refurbished to a high standard.

Libraries NI is developing plans to ensure that the services it receives from the Education and Library Boards will continue to be available following the creation of an Education and Skills Authority.

Special Olympics Ireland 2014

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what assistance her Department is providing to people who wish to participate in the Special Olympics Ireland games in Limerick in June 2014.
(AQO 5461/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is providing £459k core funding to Special Olympics Ireland, along with OFMDFM, DHSSPS, DSD and DE, towards a £2.295m cross-departmental package covering the 4-year period 2011/12 to 2014/15. This funding package is enabling the organisation to expand its activities throughout the north of Ireland and extend its reach in providing sports training and competition opportunities for people with an intellectual disability. This includes for those wishing to take part in this year's Special Olympics Ireland Games in Limerick.

I understand that, thanks to the support received through the Executive, Special Olympics Ulster has been able to put in place the largest number of training sessions to prepare athletes for the Games of any region in the Special Olympics Ireland programme.

Fishing: Ballyshannon

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions she has had with Inland Fisheries Ireland to ensure that there is an adequate and functioning fish ladder at Ballyshannon.
(AQO 5462/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Electricity Supply Board (ESB) operates the major hydro electric generating station at Ballyshannon on the River Erne. The facility represents a barrier to fish passage and ESB is required by European law to take steps to minimise the impact on migratory fish.

My officials have regular meetings with Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) and ESB to monitor the operation of the fish passes and movement of fish to ensure their uninterrupted passage into the Erne system.

The fish ladder at Ballyshannon is used to enable salmon to navigate their way successfully past the hydro. Another fish pass allows eels to transcend to a holding trap where they are collected and transported by my inland fisheries staff for release into the Erne.

In certain conditions, such as the warm dry summer of 2013, there may be issues with sufficient flow of water through the dam to encourage salmon to move upstream. My officials work closely with the IFI and ESB in monitoring and resolving any issues as they arise. Despite the conditions, the number of salmon recorded passing through the fish pass in 2013 was the largest since 2007.

My officials will continue to maintain regular contact with IFI and ESB in monitoring the operation of the hydro to ensure the safe passage of migratory fish given their importance to the environment, angling, tourism and the local economy around the Erne.

Boxing: Report into Sectarianism

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the report of the Independent Working Group into sectarianism in boxing.
(AQO 5463/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I welcome and acknowledge the findings and recommendations of the Independent Working Group (IWG). The Group were asked to assess the current governance structure of the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) and its disciplinary practice to tackle racism and sectarianism. As a result of their engagement with clubs, groups and individuals associated with boxing, a comprehensive report has been provided that raises a number of key issues to be addressed.

While this report was dealing with a small minority of cases, based on factors which originate outside the sport, it has highlighted that there must be a robust process in place to deal with incidents of racism or sectarianism as soon as they arise. There is no room for sectarianism in sport and the IABA must take the necessary actions to address this issue.

I welcome the Group's view that a separate boxing governing body for the north of Ireland would not benefit the sport and while issues of national identity are a matter for the individual athlete, it is important that such issues do not disenfranchise our stars of the future from progressing through their sport.

It is important to acknowledge the good work which goes on throughout the sport of boxing. As well as providing health and emotional wellbeing benefits, it has helped to unite communities.

Through this report, and its recommendations, the Group have provided the IABA with a path to modernise the structure of boxing for the future which can enhance its reputation of bringing together communities from across the north of Ireland and beyond.

I encourage the IABA to take forward the recommendations without delay. My Department and Sport NI will provide the IABA with the support they need to move forward in modernising their sport.

Motor Sports: Funding

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the recent success of Kris Meeke in the World Rally Championship in Monte Carlo, what plans her Department has to provide funding for local motorsport events.
(AQO 5464/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would like to offer my congratulations to Kris Meeke in finishing third in the World Rally Championship in Monte Carlo. This is an impressive result for Kris as he goes forward into the next rounds of the Championship. I wish him well for the rest of the competition.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has responsibility for funding sporting events, including local motorsport events. My Department's interest in motorsport remains focussed on encouraging motorsport to improve the safety of competitors and spectators.

That said, officials recently met with the organisers of the Circuit of Ireland Rally, to explore how DCAL could help with the event, which will be part of this year's FIA European Rally Championship. Discussion focussed on what opportunities may be available for the event to support my Department's priorities around promoting equality and target poverty and social exclusion. Sport NI has been assisting the organisers to develop a bid for funding in this regard.

I have already stated my commitment to sustaining motorsport within the north of Ireland and met with Ministers Kennedy and Foster to explore opportunities around safety in motorsport and the provision of continued funding for motorsport into future years. Through collaborative working my department will ensure that positive outcomes continue to be delivered for motorsport within the north of Ireland.

Libraries: East Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps her Department is taking to upgrade library facilities in East Belfast.
(AQO 5465/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Our libraries are community hubs and, to ensure that they are welcoming and fit for purpose, a major investment programme is underway to maintain the buildings and provide other facilities, such as IT and appropriate levels of stock. This will enable them to deliver sustainable services to the public.

In relation to Libraries NI's buildings, condition surveys on the 5 libraries in East Belfast identified a need for redecoration work at the Ballyhackamore and Cregagh libraries. This was completed in the current financial year at a cost of £29k. In 2014/15 redecoration is planned for Holywood Arches and there is to be an internal refurbishment of the Woodstock library. These are estimated to cost £14k and £80k respectively.

Libraries NI's investment in IT facilities will primarily be delivered though the £28m 'e2' project. This is a new computer system which will be rolled out across all libraries in the next 9 months. It will provide a wide range of IT systems for the whole of the public library service – including both staff and customers.

The public facing aspects of this system will include:

- Greatly improved broadband speed with better equipment
- Significantly improved on-line library services, and
- Wi-Fi

In addition to providing an IT infrastructure, the levels and range of stock are continuously reviewed to ensure their relevancy for the communities that each library serves.

The ongoing investment in staff, stock and facilities and increased community engagement is helping to realise my vision of providing a flexible and responsive library service that assists people to fulfil their potential.

Fishing: Tourism

Mr Milne asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the impact on fishing tourism of the mandatory salmon catch and release measures applicable to rivers and the ban on the sale of rod caught salmon.
(AQO 5466/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The introduction of mandatory catch and release measures for salmon and sea trout and the ban on the sale of rod caught salmon are important aspects of my new conservation regulations for inland fisheries.

Catch and release has been embraced by many leading fisheries organisations and is regarded as an important and effective fisheries management tool. Many angling clubs and private fisheries in the North already operate this approach.

Angling makes an important contribution to tourism and the economy, and while these new measures may have an impact initially, it will pay dividends in the longer term. The key concept underpinning catch and release is that by releasing fish they will continue to be available for natural purposes including breeding and for other anglers to catch again.

Salmon or sea trout are too valuable a resource to be caught only once and the new measure will lead to an improvement in the quality of fishing with improved stock levels and in furthering the economic benefits of the existing fisheries resource.

In addition to salmon, we also have world class coarse and brown trout fisheries such as Lough Erne and these waters continue attract a significant number of visiting anglers each year.

I am confident that the introduction of the new fisheries conservation measures will lead to the improvement of salmon and sea trout stocks, encourage more anglers to visit Ireland and make a greater contribution to the local economy.

Ulster Rugby

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department supports Ulster Rugby.
(AQO 5468/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is currently delivering the redevelopment of the Ravenhill Rugby Grounds which is the Headquarters of Ulster Rugby. My Department's investment in the Stadium will total £16.4 by the time the whole project is complete.

In support of my Department's key priority of promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion Ulster Rugby has been awarded £1.5m (£0.5 each year 2012-13. 2013-14, 2014-15). This funding to Ulster Rugby will be applied to increasing participation in the sport in the top 30% of areas of multiple deprivation, to increasing the number of accredited coaches working within Disability by 10% and also to increase female participation including coaches.

In addition to this support, my Department over the past three years, through Sport NI has awarded just under £850,000 to Ulster Rugby thorough programmes which include the 'Investing in Performance Sport Programme', the 'Stadia Safety (Urgent Works) Programme'and the 'Sport Matters Capital Equipment Programme.'

In terms of planned support, a further £917,000 is anticipated, predominantly through Sport NI's Performance Focus Programme.

Department of Education

Education and Library Boards: Staff Increments

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 27166/11-15, for an update on the current position.
(AQW 30013/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): The appropriate documentation was submitted to DFP for approval to pay Education and Library Board staff's annual increments and 2013 pay award, due in April 2013, on 31 January 2014.

Schools: Defibrillators

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what training his Department provides to teachers on the use of defibrillators.
(AQW 30020/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The decision on the part of a school to acquire a defibrillator and train staff in its use is a matter for each school individually. The health and safety of pupils and staff is the responsibility of the school management, accountable in the first instance to the Board of Governors.

Training for teachers is delivered to student teachers (in the form of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses) by the Higher Education Establishments (HEIs). For serving teachers training is provided by the Education and Library Boards (ELB) through, for example, the ELBs' Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) or the Health and Safety teams reflecting the specific training requirement identified by schools.

The Department for Employment and Learning has confirmed that the four locally based teacher training institutions do not currently provide ITE students with training on the use of defibrillators.

I am pleased to advise, however, that in light of requests from schools seeking guidance on the purchase of automatic external defibrillators (AEDs) and on the availability of training on their use, the ELBs and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) established an Inter-Board/CCMS working group (the Group) - which includes representation from the NI Ambulance Service - to consider and address these matters.

The Group is working to develop a specification for the AED and to progress the AED procurement process in line with the statutory requirements under European Union procurement regulations. The ELBs have confirmed that draft school guidelines have also been developed.

In recognition that training in the use of AEDs is required alongside the development of the AED specification, the Group is also working to develop an AED training pack for schools.

A separate tender for training is being developed and it is hoped that the Group will be able to conclude the tender in the very near future.

Ballymena, Ballymoney and Moyle Council Areas: Spend

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how much his Department has spent in the (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballymena; and (iii) Moyle council areas since May 2011.
(AQW 30114/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Council Area	Spend from April 2011 to Date
Ballymoney	£65,690,516
Ballymena	£196,007,839
Moyle	£42,788,679

South Down and Strangford: Minor Works in Schools

Mr Hazzard asked the Minister of Education to detail all instances where minor works were carried out in schools in the (i) South Down; and (ii) Strangford constituencies, including the total financial investment this represented.
(AQW 30152/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following tables details minor work schemes that have been approved in the (i) South Down; and (ii) Strangford constituencies during the period April 2011 to December 2013:

(i) South Down

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
Castlewellan Primary School	Upgrade & widen driveway	Sep-11	60,058.56
Castlewellan Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	402.08
Newcastle Primary School	Kitchen refurb	Sep-11	55,534.84
Newcastle Primary School	New play equipment	Sep-11	12,402.12
Newcastle Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	19,427.02
Newcastle Primary School	Play equipment	Jul-13	20,080.16
Spa Primary School	Upgrade front entrance	Dec-11	371,863.20
Spa Primary School	Landscaping	Dec-11	3,483.86
Spa Primary School	New heating system	Jun-12	142,853.52
Downpatrick Primary School	Forming covered play space	Feb-12	29,032.24
Downpatrick Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	15,199.02
Downpatrick Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	385.86
Cumran Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	166.17
Glasswater Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	1,752.52
Glasswater Primary School	Pupil entrance	Nov-12	200,335.12
Glasswater Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	134.30
Glasswater Primary School	SEN rooms	Nov-13	3,031.50
St Francis' Primary School	Double mobile accommodation	Feb-12	188,066.66
St Francis' Primary School	Perimeter fencing / gate	Jul-12	4,200.00
St Francis' Primary School	Car parking facilities	Dec-12	7,500.00
St Francis' Primary School	Severy & remodelling	Feb-13	45,422.09
St Mary's Aughlisnafin	Additional classroom accommodation	Feb-11	82,552.50
St Macartan's Primary School	Pedestrian gate	Aug-12	2,700.00
The Holy Family Primary School	Fencing	Sep-11	21,000.00
The Holy Family Primary School	Secure door access	Dec-12	9,720.00
St Brigid's Primary School	Provision of PE store	Feb-12	13,589.54
St Colmcille's Primary School	Toilet refurb	Mar-13	125,265.42
St Malachy's Primary School	Refurb of staff toilets	Jan-11	111,719.41
St Malachy's Primary School	Re-roofing	Mar-13	255,662.50
St Patrick's Primary School	Replacement modular accommodation	Mar-13	501,631.92
Annsborough Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	8,598.93
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	Micro hydro system	Dec-11	619,248.73
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	Landscaping	Dec-11	7,973.63
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	900.22
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	New play area	Feb-13	41,664.17
Cedar Integrated Primary School	Sewer division	Jul-11	9,600.00

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
Downpatrick Nursery School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	176.91
St Mary's High School	Convert classroom to 6th form accommodation	Mar-13	43,725.15
St Mary's High School	School Meals Kitchen refurb	Jun-12	126,634.02
St Mary's High School	Traffic improvements	Nov-13	18,000.00
St Mary's High School	Convert classroom	Mar-13	44,187.00
St Colmcille's High School	Refurb of changing rooms	Mar-11	122,585.97
St Colmcille's High School	HE refurb	Feb-12	340,380.00
St Colmcille's High School	Drainage to grass pitch	Nov-13	90,000.00
St Malachy's High School	Install of new phone system	Oct-11	9,720.00
De La Salle High School	School Meals Kitchen improvements	May-13	135,060.00
Shimna Integrated College	New HE facility	Mar-12	568,339.00
Shimna Integrated College	Upgrade Science & Tech accommodation	Mar-13	538,506.90
Ardmore House Special School	Refurb of classroom (Cluster 2)	Sep-11	51,048.41
Ardmore House Special School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	1,158.51
Ardmore House Special School	Legionella prevention	Feb-13	8,757.02
Knockevin Special School	Mobile classroom refurb	Jul-11	165,889.47
Knockevin Special School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	3,606.55
Knockevin Special School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	5,401.23
Knockevin Special School	Parking / playground	Feb-13	125,016.79
Knockevin Special School	Legionella prevention	Sep-11	14,060.00
Down High School	Fitness suite	Oct-12	42,444.14
Down High School	New pavillion	Oct-12	502,163.65
Down High School	External fitness equipment	Oct-12	38,498.39
Down High School	Conversion to gas heating in mobiles	Dec-12	8,819.09
Dromore Road Primary School	Ext & Refurb to ancillary areas	Aug-13	485,514.81
Dromore Road Primary School	Platform lift	Oct-12	42,000.00
Ballydown Primary School	Nursery Unit - Disabled access works	Nov-13	13,213.40
Ballydown Primary School	Disabled Access works	Jul-12	12,195.00
Kilkeel Primary School	Provision of front porch & DDA access	Jul-12	34,732.18
Annalong Primary School	Ext & Refurb	Dec-13	563,512.14
Annalong Primary School	Refurb of nursery unit& covered play area	Oct-13	105,000.00
Brackenagh West Primary School	Ext & Alterations	Mar-13	333,685.39
Bronte Primary School	New nursery unit	Apr-13	401,423.87
Drumadonnell Primary School	New nursery unit	Feb-12	437,406.73
Killowen Primary School	External storage container	Aug-12	3,360.00
St Joseph's Primary School	Toilet refurb	Apr-13	6,278.40
St Joseph's Primary School	Toilet refurb	Dec-12	72,254.40
Holy Cross Primary School	New modular school meals servery	Aug-12	84,683.02

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
St Patrick's Primary School	Conversion of rooms to Nursery	Dec-12	107,196.00
St Patrick's Primary School	Purchase of Land	Mar-13	900.00
St Patrick's Primary School	Conversion of rooms to nursery	Sep-13	113,574.99
St Patrick's Primary School	Secure door access	Jul-11	120,900.00
St Paul's Primary School	Replace fencing	Aug-12	18,900.00
St Marys Primary School Dechomet	Security fencing	Mar-13	18,300.00
St Marys Primary School Dechomet	Provision of multi purpose hall	Oct-12	253,965.00
St Patrick's Primary School	SEN adaptations - grab rails	Oct-13	2,146.38
St Patrick's Primary School	Provision of 2 disabled parking spaces	Feb-11	1,200.00
St Mary's Primary School	Door entry system	Aug-11	8,407.80
St Mary's Primary School	Replacement perimeter fence	Jul-11	19,200.00
St Colman's Primary School and All Saints' Nursery Unit	Nursery Unit	Dec-13	210,600.00
St Dallan's Primary School	Provision of 2 gated exits	Mar-13	900.00
St Patrick's Primary School	Staffroom / Storage for C2K	Dec-11	77,446.00
St Bronagh's Primary School	Traffic management	Nov-12	36,000.00
St Bronagh's Primary School	Bin compound	30-Jul-12	2,040.00
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	Health & Safety works to playground & fencing	Jan-13	7,501.59
Seaview Nursery School	Additional classroom & storage	15-Feb-12	291,095.85
Rathfriland High School	New modular unit music suite	Jan-12	186,527.96
St Columban's College	Conversion of disused staff toilet	Feb-11	2,970.00
St Mark's High School	Hold open devices linked to fire alarm	Feb-13	92,599.00
St Mark's High School	Provison of modular building for drama suite	Mar-11	198,779.88
St Louis Grammar School	Replacement boiler / store roof	Jan-11	19,026.54
St Louis Grammar School	Remedial electrical works	Feb-11	26,041.50
St Louis Grammar School	Heating to mobiles	Apr-11	16,640.40
St Louis Grammar School	Upgrade fire alarm	Jun-11	11,103.75
St Louis Grammar School	Replacement windows	Jul-11	16,209.00
St Louis Grammar School	Leaking heating	Dec-12	13,436.55
St Louis Grammar School	Provision of mobile technology	Jan-12	228,912.00
St Louis Grammar School	Provision of kiln room	Jul-12	2,490.00
St Louis Grammar School	Additional parking / new car parking spaces	Sep-12	24,000.00
St Louis Grammar School	Replace drains & manhole covers	Oct-12	7,500.00
St Louis Grammar School	Leaks in boiler house & assembly hall	Oct-12	3,258.41
St Louis Grammar School	Leaks in flat roof	Nov-12	2,388.00
St Louis Grammar School	Fire protection/safety works for visually impaired pupil	Aug-13	1,824.00
St Louis Grammar School	Disabled access	Oct-13	40,800.00

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
St Louis Grammar School	Drainage	Nov-13	10,800.00
St Louis Grammar School	Gas conversion	Dec-13	18,363.60
St Louis Grammar School	Disabled access	Sep-12	64,200.00
Sacred Heart Grammar School	General classroom extension	Mar-13	23,964.00
Sacred Heart Grammar School	HE refurb		207,009.00
		Total	**11,101,712.55**

(ii) Strangford

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
Loughries Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	227.24
Grey Abbey Primary School	New office	Dec-11	85,411.62
Grey Abbey Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	134.30
Carrickmannon Primary School	Convert WC to office	Feb-12	22,206.25
Carrickmannon Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	195.66
Carrickmannon Primary School	Covered walk ways	Feb-13	26,585.54
Newtownards Model Primary School	Dining hall	Oct-11	546,016.18
Newtownards Model Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	2,288.54
Newtownards Model Primary School	New roof	Nov-13	39,237.56
Kirkistown Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	183.90
Kirkistown Primary School	New classroom & associated works	Nov-13	6,543.15
Castle Gardens Primary School	CCTV system refurb	Nov-11	6,151.00
Castle Gardens Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	535.31
Castle Gardens Primary School	Landscaping	Feb-13	7,383.53
Victoria Primary School (Ballyhalbert)	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	2,958.02
Portavogie Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	1,753.52
Portavogie Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	929.85
Portavogie Primary School	Extension to classrooms	Dec-13	1,407.45
Ballywalter Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	45,160.68
Ballynahinch Primary School	New security lobby	Nov-11	20,523.60
Ballynahinch Primary School	Landscaping	Sep-11	3,393.97
Derryboy Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	197.22
Killyleagh Primary School	New playground & play equipment	Sep-11	45,614.66
Killyleagh Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Sep-11	6,607.00
Victoria Primary School	New heating boiler	Sep-11	10,801.00
Victoria Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	6,266.29
Victoria Primary School	Access reader	Feb-13	14,471.44
Moneyrea Primary School	Extension to classroom	Feb-12	131,990.00
Moneyrea Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	132.66
Alexander Dickson Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	48,412.56
Londonderry Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Feb-12	3,949.54

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
Londonderry Primary School	Extension & refurb	Nov-12	505,700.01
Londonderry Primary School	Moving mobiles to site	Feb-13	104,103.20
Carrowdore Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	3,729.17
Carrowdore Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	869.63
Andrews Memorial Primary School	DDA works & new lift	Dec-11	347,072.81
Academy Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	51,250.42
Academy Primary School	Enclosing covered links (cluster 10)	Feb-12	40,507.42
Academy Primary School	School Meals Kitchen refurb	Jun-12	2,134.44
Academy Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	57,317.44
Killinchy Primary School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	16,071.03
Abbey Primary School	Replacement windows	Sep-11	136,538.56
Abbey Primary School	Play area & retaining wall	Feb-13	60,191.75
Abbey Primary School	Windows	Feb-13	35,164.56
St Joseph's Primary School	Traffic management improvements	Aug-13	36,000.00
St Patrick's Primary School	Refurb girls & staff toilets	Feb-11	100,367.00
St Patrick's Primary School	Toilet refurb / DDA / Access control	Jun-11	23,625.00
St Patrick's Primary School	External storage container / bin compound	Jan-13	7,800.00
St Patrick's Primary School	Outdoor play area	Jan-13	420.00
St Patrick's Primary School	External storage container & bin compound	Jan-13	7,800.00
St Finian's Primary School	School Meals Kitchen refurb	Sep-11	28,662.40
St Patrick's Primary School	Additional modular classroom	Feb-12	75,589.91
St Patrick's Primary School	School Meals Kitchen refurb	Sep-11	12,395.59
St Patrick's Primary School	Additional modular classroom	Feb-12	82,655.26
St Patrick's Primary School	Staffroom & staff toilets	Jan-13	91,819.58
St Mary's Primary School	Toilet refurb	Feb-12	76,021.37
St Mary's Primary School	Reposition of perimeter fence	Sep-11	14,400.00
St Mary's Primary School	Replacement roof	Oct-11	150,588.45
St Mary's Primary School	Fire risk improvements	Feb-13	55,977.35
St Mary's Primary School	Fire risk improvement	Feb-13	63,177.35
Kircubbin Primary School	2 classroom extension	Nov-11	383,847.99
Kircubbin Primary School	Canopy	Feb-13	38,486.41
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	Landscaping	Sep-11	6,133.00
Millennium Integrated Primary School	External doors - health & safety	Jul-11	65,475.00
Millennium Integrated Primary School	Secure oil tank	Feb-13	4,500.00
Millennium Integrated Primary School	More car parking spaces	Sep-13	69,600.00
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	Rental of classroom & resurface car park	Mar-11	18,725.63
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	Provision of boom barrier	Sep-12	94,360.03
Newtownards Nursery School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	224.86

School Name	Scheme Description	Month Approved	Total Cost
Newtownards Nursery School	SEN rooms	Nov-13	2,447.75
Glenbrook Nursery School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	170.31
Movilla High School	Extend CCTV system	Sep-11	4,254.72
The High School Ballynahinch	External fitness equipment	Oct-12	46,488.91
The High School Ballynahinch	Changing pavillion	Nov-13	6,620.80
Glastry College	Mobile classroom & IT suite improvements	Dec-11	123,409.12
Glastry College	External fitness equipment	Oct-12	45,982.78
Glastry College	New mobile toilet block	Nov-13	352.00
Saintfield High School	Changing pavillion	Oct-11	348,503.54
Saintfield High School	Boundary fencing at playing fields	Sep-11	37,983.41
Saintfield High School	External fitness equipment	Oct-12	51,929.99
St Columba's College	School Meals Kitchen refurb	Sep-11	23,217.62
St Colman's High School	Upgrade HE facilities	Aug-12	202,230.00
Regent House School	Fire risk assessments Phase 3	Nov-11	94,138.53
Regent House School	Fitness suite	Sep-11	18,095.29
Regent House School	Boundary fencing at playing fields	Sep-11	13,014.52
Regent House School	Landscaping	Sep-11	12,201.80
Regent House School	Fire risk assessments Phase 4	Feb-13	12,841.26
Regent House School	External fitness equipment	Feb-13	51,182.12
Regent House School	Artificial hockey pitch & floodlighting	Jul-13	189,776.56
		Total	**5,241,812.29**

Teachers: Pay Award

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Teachers' Negotiating Committee discussions regarding the 2013/14 pay award for teachers; and when these negotiations are scheduled to conclude
(AQW 30238/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware that on 9 September 2013, NITC (NI Teachers Council), made up of the 5 teaching unions, submitted a claim for uplift on teachers pay from September 2013.

I have urged Management Side of the Teachers Negotiating Committee (made up of employer and departmental representatives) to consider this claim and bring negotiations to conclusion.

Blind and Visually Impaired Children and Young People

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for a cross-departmental review into the provision of habitation services in blind and visually impaired children and young people.
(AQW 30245/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As part of the Action Plan 2014-2016 contained in the Royal National Institute of the Blind's Vision Strategy for the north of Ireland, Visually Impaired sector organisations have agreed to pursue a statutory review of habilitation services for blind and partially sighted children including referral pathways.

Looked-after Children and Young People: Numbers

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of looked after children and young people in each Education and Library Board.
(AQW 30283/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The most up-to-date validated figures for looked after children relate to the 2012/13 school year, these are detailed in the table overleaf. Updated 2013/14 figures will be available following the completion of the annual school census which is currently being undertaken.

'Looked after' pupils by Education and Library Board - 2012/13

	Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Looked after children	223	254	366	315	293	1,451
Total enrolments	57,396	56,572	72,165	63,077	75,045	324,255
% of pupils that are looked after	0.4%	0.4%	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%	0.4%

Source: NI school census

Note:

1 Figures include pupils in nursery schools, primary (including nursery, reception and year 1-7 classes), post-primary and special schools.

2 'Looked after children' includes children defined in 'The Children (NI) Order 1995', i.e., 'a child who is looked after by an authority is a reference to a child who is—
(a) in the care of the authority; or
(b) provided with accommodation by the authority.'
This includes children who are fostered.

3 ELB refers to the school location rather than the ELB in which the pupil is resident.

Personal Education Plans

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the implementation of Personal Education Plans for looked after children and young people.
(AQW 30284/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department co-chairs the Regional Personal Education Plan (PEP) Implementation Group, which is representative of the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), Education and Library Boards (ELBs) and the Youth Justice Agency.

Following the first year of PEP implementation, feedback from schools, social workers and young people suggested that the PEP should be refined. Work is now underway to do this and to revise the associated guidance.

My expectations for looked after children are no less than for any other child. Given the potential impact of robust PEPs on raising educational attainment for looked after children, I have provided funding for substitute teacher costs to release teachers from the classroom to complete PEPs and to attend looked after children review meetings.

Educational Psychology: Cost

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what is the unit cost of Educational Psychology services in each Education and Library Board.
(AQW 30288/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards have advised that the unit cost of Educational Psychology services, in the 2012/13 financial year, was as follows:-

	Unit Cost
BELB	£32
NEELB	£26
SEELB	£34
SELB	£27
WELB	£29

The above figures have been calculated based on costs in respect of both core and earmarked funding for psychology services and psychology administration.

Looked-after Children and Young People: Attendance

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the attendance rates for looked after children and young people in each Education and Library Board, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 30290/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below. The most recent data available is for the school year 2011/12. Updated figures for 2012/13 will be available at the end of February.

Attendance rate for looked after children in each Education and Library Board, 2009/10 - 2011/12

			Percentage of total half days attended		
	ELB	**Status**	**2009/10**	**2010/11**	**2011/12***
Total	Belfast	Looked after Children	87.9	90.2	91.5
		Other	93.0	93.2	93.6
	Western	Looked after Children	92.7	92.4	90.6
		Other	93.4	93.6	94.1
	North Eastern	Looked after Children	91.1	90.6	91.7
		Other	94.1	94.3	94.5
	South Eastern	Looked after Children	90.5	91.2	92.4
		Other	93.6	93.9	94.3
	Southern	Looked after Children	92.8	93.1	93.3
		Other	93.7	94.0	94.4
	Total	Looked after Children	91.0	91.5	91.9
		Other	93.6	93.8	94.2
	Average attendance		**93.6**	**93.8**	**94.2**
Primary schools	Belfast	Looked after Children	92.6	93.9	93.5
		Other	93.8	93.9	94.2
	Western	Looked after Children	96.0	95.1	95.1
		Other	94.5	94.7	95.2
	North Eastern	Looked after Children	96.3	95.7	94.7
		Other	95.3	95.4	95.6
	South Eastern	Looked after Children	96.2	96.4	95.9
		Other	95.0	95.1	95.4
	Southern	Looked after Children	95.8	94.8	96.0
		Other	94.7	94.9	95.3
	Total	Looked after Children	95.5	95.2	95.2
		Other	94.7	94.9	95.2
	Primary average attendance		**94.7**	**94.9**	**95.2**
Post-Primary schools	Belfast	Looked after Children	84.6	87.1	90.1
		Other	92.5	92.8	93.2
	Western	Looked after Children	90.3	90.7	87.3
		Other	92.2	92.4	92.8
	North Eastern	Looked after Children	86.1	85.0	88.0
		Other	92.6	92.9	93.2
	South Eastern	Looked after Children	86.6	88.0	89.1
		Other	91.7	92.3	92.8
	Southern	Looked after Children	89.8	91.7	90.9
		Other	92.5	92.8	93.2
	Total	Looked after Children	87.4	88.4	89.0
		Other	92.3	92.7	93.1
	Post-primary average attendance		**92.3**	**92.6**	**93.0**

	ELB	Status	Percentage of total half days attended		
			2009/10	2010/11	2011/12*
Special schools	Belfast	Looked after Children	87.7	92.0	90.6
		Other	87.5	88.3	88.7
	Western	Looked after Children	92.5	91.6	89.5
		Other	88.3	89.4	91.2
	North Eastern	Looked after Children	95.0	96.4	95.9
		Other	89.9	91.2	91.2
	South Eastern	Looked after Children	87.3	93.6	94.9
		Other	89.3	89.9	89.7
	Southern	Looked after Children	94.8	89.4	85.0
		Other	90.0	89.8	90.9
	Total	Looked after Children	92.0	93.5	92.4
		Other	88.9	89.7	90.1
	Special school average attendance		**89.0**	**89.8**	**90.2**

* The care status of 1,676 enrolments was not available in 2011/12, representing 0.6 per cent of the total enrolments.

Schools: Development Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education when he will make a decision on the development proposals for (i) St. Mary's Junior High School, Lurgan; (ii) St. Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan; and (iii) St. Michael's Grammar School, Lurgan.
(AQW 30337/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: On 2 September 2013, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) published Development Proposal (DP) No. 294, which proposes that St Michael's Grammar School, St Mary's High School and St Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan amalgamate to form a new co-educational 11-18 voluntary grammar school with effect from 1 September 2014, or as soon as possible thereafter. The statutory two-month objection period ended on 4 November 2013.

DE officials are in the process of preparing advice for my consideration and I anticipate being in a position to make a decision on the proposal in the near future.

Schools: Suspensions and Expulsions

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupil (i) suspensions; and (ii) expulsions in each Education and Library Board in each of the last three years.
(AQW 30338/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department publishes statistics on pupil suspensions and expulsions on its website. The information is provided annually by the Education and Library Boards (ELBs). The table below details the number of pupil suspensions in each ELB in each of the last three years.

Suspensions

ELB	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
BELB	835	816	757
WELB	746	753	630
NEELB	1045	866	800
SEELB	879	828	788
SELB	735	616	581
Total	**4240**	**3879**	**3556**

The table below details the total number of school expulsions which have occurred in each of the last three years. This information cannot be broken down by individual ELB as the numbers involved are so small that doing so would carry a high risk of allowing individual pupils to be identified.

This position reflects the Statistics Authority Code of Practice on Official Statistics, in particular Principle 5, relating to confidentiality.

Expulsions

	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Totals	38	24	19

Principal Posts: Vacancies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) how many vacancies for Principal posts occurred in each employing authority, in each sector, during the last school year; (ii) what was the number of applicants for each post; and (iii) how many were not filled following the initial advertisement.
(AQW 30343/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools have provided the figures, in relation to Principal vacancies for the 2012/2013 academic year, in the tables below.

BELB

Sector	Vacancies for Principal Posts	Number of Applicants for each Post	Not filled following Initial Advertisement
Nursery	0	0	0
Primary	2	12	1
		7	
Post-Primary	1	1	1
Special	1	5	0

NEELB

Sector	Vacancies for Principal Posts	Number of Applicants for each Post	Not filled following Initial Advertisement
Nursery	0	0	0
Primary	11	15	5
		14	
		10	
		15	
		22	
		8	
		12	
		5	
		3	
		17	
		7	
Post-Primary	6	6	4
		3	
		7	
		9	
		14	
		7	
Special	0	0	0

SEELB

Sector	Vacancies for Principal Posts	Number of Applicants for each Post	Not filled following Initial Advertisement
Nursery	1	6	0
Primary	8	5	1
		8	
		13	
		7	
		7	
		6	
		1	
		0	
Post-Primary	4	2	2
		9	
		6	
		2	
Special	1	3	0

SELB

Sector	Vacancies for Principal Posts	Number of Applicants for each Post	Not filled following Initial Advertisement
Nursery	1	6	0
Primary	7	6	2
		7	
		3	
		7	
		7	
		7	
		5	
Post-Primary	4	5	0
		5	
		4	
		6	
Special	0	0	0

WELB

Sector	Vacancies for Principal Posts	Number of Applicants for each Post	Not filled following Initial Advertisement
Nursery	1	3	1
Primary	0	0	0
Post-Primary	0	0	0
Special	0	0	0

CCMS

Sector	Vacancies for Principal Posts	Number of Applicants for each Post	Not filled following Initial Advertisement
Nursery	2	15	0
		7	
Primary	20	12	2
		17	
		9	
		7	
		9	
		8	
		7	
		9	
		5	
		3	
		4	
		7	
		7	
		7	
		18	
		6	
		9	
		3	
		11	
		14	
Post-Primary	4	4	0
		15	
		7	
		9	
Special	0	0	0

Travel and Subsistence Costs

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the travel and subsistence costs of (i) his Department; and (ii) its Arms-Length Bodies, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30345/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The travel and subsistence costs of (i) my Department and (ii) its Arms-Length Bodies in each of the last five years is as follows:

Financial year	Department £'000	Arms-Length Bodies £'000
2008-09	503	6,045
2009-10	496	6,061
2010-11	451	5,739
2011-12	408	5,673
2012-13	413	5,539

Middletown Centre for Autism

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 30039/11-15, in relation to the twenty children referred to outreach support, to detail the total hours of support received in each case; and for a breakdown of the support provided.
(AQW 30350/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executive of the Middletown Centre for Autism has advised that the total hours of support received by the twenty children is as follows:

Referral Number	Hours of Direct Support
1	214
2	197
3	77
4	137
5	191
6	109
7	118
8	228
9	110
10	40
11	28
12	34
13	89
14	39
15	85
16	29
17	47
18	39
19	30
20	13

The support received can include specialist interventions from the following disciplines in order to meet the individual needs of each child:

- Specialist Occupational Therapy;
- Specialist Speech and Language Therapy;
- Autism Interventional Specialist Support;
- Educational Psychological Assessment;
- Specialist Teacher Support;
- Specialist Learning Support in the classroom;
- Home Support.

Schools: Unused Premises

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail the unused school premises in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area.
(AQW 30395/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following is a list of all unused school premises in the South Eastern Education and Library Board, as at 31 January 2014.

1 Newtownbreda Primary School

2 Kindle Primary School, Ballykinler

3 Brookfield Special School

4 Hilden Integrated Primary School

5 Newport Primary School

6 Ballykeigle Primary School

7 Cottown Primary School*

8 Rathvernette Primary School

*recently used as Cottown Reading Unit until Autumn 2013.

This list includes only assets where there are still buildings/premises on site. Most have been officially declared surplus and are at some stage of the disposal process.

Schools Enhancement Programme

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Schools Enhancement Programme.
(AQO 5475/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently 51 applications to the Schools Enhancement Programme (SEP) going through Economic Appraisals to ensure any investment that is made represents best value for the public purse.

As detailed within the SEP Protocol, and in recognition of the range of infrastructure issues facing schools, the programme will consider proposals within one of 3 streams: rationalisation proposals; insufficient accommodation to meet educational needs; and significant accommodation inadequacies.

Proposals considered as having met the necessary criteria will be considered and ranked within each work stream.

An announcement of projects which will receive funding, and the level of that funding will be made in due course..

Shared Education

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Education how shared education is being enhanced in the Area Planning process.
(AQO 5476/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As the member will be aware my Department has a strong commitment to Shared Education as witnessed by the commitments made in the Programme for Government. I believe the work that I and my Department have been undertaking on a range of fronts will help to advance Shared Education here.

In relation to Area Planning the Terms of Reference I set require engagement by all sectors. They explicitly encourage creative and innovative solutions, including opportunities for shared schooling across sectors.

The Area Planning Guidance emphasise my commitment to shared education and that in bringing forward area solutions or proposals I expect the Planning Authorities to explore opportunities for sharing at all levels.

I would take the opportunity to remind members that in addition to moving forward with the recommendations flowing from the work of the Advisory Group on shared education, I recently launched the Shared Education Campuses Programme. As part of the "Together: Building a United Community Strategy" this programme will help provide shared education facilities as part of delivering sustainable long term area provision.

Education and Library Boards: Staff Contracts

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has budgeted for the incremental payments that are part of recognised contractual arrangements with existing Education and Library Board employees.
(AQO 5477/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I can confirm the Department of Education Budget 2011-15 takes account of incremental progression payments in respect of Education and Library Board employees.

Education and Training Strategy: 14- to 19-year-olds

Mr Douglas asked the Minister of Education for an update on the development of a strategy for 14-19 year olds in conjunction with the Minister for Employment and Learning.
(AQO 5478/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I will continue to work closely with my colleague the Minister for Employment and Learning on issues that affect the education and training of our young people. We both agree that the needs of our young people must be put first and that the coherent and joined up delivery of our respective policies is of a high priority. I regularly meet with the Minister for Employment and Learning to discuss how we can achieve even better cooperation and my officials from the most senior level down engage directly with their colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning. This will continue to be the case.

This work will focus on what is important – the young people in our schools, colleges and training organisations. Supporting them, equipping them with the knowledge, understanding and skills they need to drive the economic future of this island we live on. That is my focus, and Minister Farry's focus. And that will continue to be our focus.

Area Learning Communities are where this partnership working is delivered on the ground. Excellent partnerships have been developed between schools and colleges and senior officials from my department have recently visited each Area Learning Community to find out the views and experience of principals and learn how we can make Area Learning Communities even more effective.

I appreciate that Members may be seeking a strategy document but my focus has been on the working strategic partnership between our two departments which remains robust. My officials continue to develop this strategic partnership, building on earlier work and to consider the development of a 14-19 Strategy in conjunction with DEL.

Education: Minor Works Scheme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education for an update on his Department's minor works scheme.
(AQO 5479/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In 2013/14 the Minister allocated £46m for a programme of minor works in controlled schools and £31m to advance a programme of minor capital works in the non controlled sectors.

The budget to progress a programme of minor works for controlled schools is delegated to the each of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs).

Furthermore, to enable a programme of non controlled minor works projects to be taken forward by the ELBs a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) has been implemented. This MoA established an approach upon which the ELBs and DE will progress minor works for the non controlled sector.

Free School Meals: Social Disadvantage

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education to outline any correspondence he has had with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development regarding the use of the Free School Meal Entitlement as an indicator of social disadvantage among the school population.
(AQO 5480/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There has been no correspondence with the OECD specifically relating to Free School Meal Entitlement as an indicator of social disadvantage.

The OECD recently published its Review of Evaluation and Assessment in Education here, which made reference to the use of free school meal entitlement as a measure of social disadvantage. They observed that whatever measure is used, we need to be transparent about the analysis and research that has informed this decision. This point was also re-iterated at a recent OECD dissemination event in Stranmillis.

My Department takes the view that entitlement to free school meals is an effective indicator of social disadvantage. Free school meals entitlement has a number of characteristics that make it the most reliable indicator for identifying social deprivation:

- It relates to the individual pupil so is more robust than a spatial measure which assumes everyone in an area is alike;
- It is updated on a yearly basis, so is current;
- It is easily gathered at school level and is available, to us, a part of the census return;
- It is highly correlated with the multiple deprivation measure and with the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI)

The view of the Independent Panel that conducted the Review of the Common Funding Scheme was that free school meals entitlement provides an indication of the relative concentration of potentially disadvantaged pupils in a given school in a way that no other indicator currently does.

I remain open to hearing suggestions as to better indicators that meet the characteristics I have just outlined.

Woodburn Primary School

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Education, in relation to his visit to Woodburn Primary School, Carrickfergus on 23 January 2014, for an update on the proposals for a replacement school building.
(AQO 5481/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At present, there are no specific plans for a new build project for Woodburn Primary School.

A process is underway within the department to assess potential capital investment schemes. Woodburn PS has been forwarded by the North Eastern Education & Library Board as part of a list of potential candidate projects, and these projects will now be assessed together with potential schemes from the other Boards areas and from the non-controlled sectors.

The reality is that many schools are in need of investment and proposed projects are therefore competing for a limited pot of available capital. I will continue to examine the case for capital investment across the estate and any proposals for Woodburn Primary School will be considered as part of that process.

Department for Employment and Learning

Steps 2 Success: Tendering Process

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) the scoring criteria for local companies who tendered for the Steps 2 Success program; and (ii) any disparity in the scoring criteria for companies outside Northern Ireland tendering for the same program.
(AQW 29993/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

(i) All companies who submitted bids were marked against the following scoring criteria.

(Reference) Requirement

- (SC 1) Using an example(s) detail how you planned for and implemented the business model to deliver the service. Your answer should cover the organisational structure, staffing and other resources required to deliver the service.
- (SC 2) With respect to the example(s) at SC1 above was the timetable of the organisation who awarded you the contract met? If not detail the reasons why and how this was overcome. What challenges did you face in implementing this service? What actions did you take to address these challenges and what was the result of these actions?
- (SC 3) Using an example(s) detail the processes and approaches you used to identify and meet the needs of both individuals and groups with different employability barriers to achieve the targets and other measures set by the organisation who awarded the contract?
- (SC 4)Using an example(s) detail how you have managed your own staff and/or sub- contractors to ensure that the targets and other measures set by the organisation who awarded you the contract were met.
- (SC 5) Using an example(s) detail how your organisation/ business model adapted to changing circumstances, both in terms of changing economic circumstances and changes to the requirements by the organisation who awarded the contract(s)? How was this managed and did it remain within budget.
- (SC 6) Using an example(s) detail the practical processes and arrangements put in place in order to work in partnership with employers, trade bodies, the Third Sector and/ or statutory bodies to deliver the service and maximise employment opportunities. Detail the obstacles you encountered and the action taken to overcome these.
- (SC 7) Using an example(s) detail how you have managed performance, describing the management structure, systems (including IT systems) and processes in place to deliver the service.
- (SC 8) Using an example(s) detail the financial management, administrative and control systems in place to ensure the delivery of the service. Were control weaknesses identified in your systems and if so how were these addressed?
- (SC 9) Using an example(s) detail the quality management systems and processes in place and the actions taken to identify, report and manage quality issues in delivering the service.

  Note: it is not sufficient to list quality standards achieved. The actual system and processes used must be detailed.
- (SC 10) Using an example(s) detail the risk management systems and processes in place, and the actions taken to identify report and manage risk in relation to the delivery of the service.
- The Economic and Financial Standing of all bidding organisations were assessed on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis.

(ii) All companies were scored against the same published criteria, regardless of their geographical location.

Steps 2 Success: Tenders

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to (i) detail any local based tenders for the Steps 2 Success program, (ii) confirm which of the these were successful.
(AQW 29994/11-15)

Dr Farry:

(i) To protect the integrity of the procurement process of the Steps 2 Success competition, it is not possible to release information relating to those organisations who applied for each of the contract areas but were not successful.

(ii) Details of the successful bidding organisations for all three contract areas have been published on the DEL website. These are as follows:

Contract Area 1: Andersonstown, Bangor, North Belfast, Falls, Holywood Road, Knockbreda, Lisburn, Newtownards, Shaftesbury Square, Shankill.

Successful Organisations
- Avanta Enterprise Ltd
- EOS Works Ltd
- Ingeus UK Ltd
- Pertemps People Development Group
- Reed in Partnership
- Sencia Ltd

Contract Area 2: Antrim, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Carrickfergus, Coleraine, Foyle, Larne, Limavady, Lisnagelvin, Newtownabbey, Strabane.

Successful Organisations
- Avanta Enterprise Ltd
- EOS Works Ltd
- Ingeus UK Ltd
- Pertemps People Development Group
- Reed in Partnership
- Sencia Ltd

Contract Area 3: Armagh, Ballynahinch, Banbridge, Cookstown, Downpatrick, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Kilkeel, Lurgan, Magherafelt, Newcastle, Newry, Omagh, Portadown.

Successful Organisations
- Avanta Enterprise Ltd
- Reed in Partnership
- Sencia Ltd
- Maximus Employment & Training Ltd
- South West College

G4S has withdrawn from the competition for the Steps 2 Success competition for Contract Area 3.

North West Regional College: Vehicle Body and Paint Operations

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether insurance costs have prevented students from (i) attending the Body Workshop course at the North Coast College; (ii) attaining placements within the industry; and to detail the action he will take to assist these students and the college.
(AQW 30004/11-15)

Dr Farry: Students attending the Vehicle Body and Paint course at the North West Regional College are participants on my Department's Training for Success programme.

All Suppliers delivering the Training for Success programme have a contractual obligation to ensure that every participant is fully insured during their time in training. Suppliers must also ensure that employers offering work placements hold appropriate insurance.

North West Regional College has assured my officials that no one has been prevented from attending the Vehicle Body and Paint course due to any issue with insurance.

Whilst it is accepted that difficulties exist in securing work placements, insurance costs cannot be isolated as the only factor; the present economic conditions have also contributed to the availability of work placements.

College records show that there are currently 27 participants on the Vehicle Body and Paint course, with 21 participants placed with employers. Please be assured that college staff will continue to engage with employers and make every effort to secure work placements for all participants on the Training for Success programme.

IT Sector: Skills Shortage

Mr Rogers asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline what steps his Department is taking to address the skill shortage that exists within the IT sector, given the continued inward investment by multi national companies.
(AQW 30201/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Assured Skills programme in partnership with Invest NI is designed to help attract new foreign direct investment companies to Northern Ireland, by assuring them that the skills they need to be successful are available in Northern Ireland.

Employers within the IT sector have raised concerns regarding skill shortages and the impact they are having on their ability to grow the sector. In response to those concerns I convened an ICT working group, to identify the skills challenges faced

by the sector and put in place an ICT Skills Action Plan which sets out how these issues will be addressed by business, Government and education and training providers in the short, medium and longer term.

The ICT Skills Action Plan was launched in June 2012 and implementation of the actions has been progressing steadily. This work is having a positive impact on the skills shortages in the sector.

Applications to IT-related degrees at our local universities have risen by over 24% in the last year alone and new initiatives continue to be taken forward.

Three cohorts of the Software Testers Academy have been completed. The latest cohort, completed in December 2013, saw 27 students trained as software testers with 21 students finding full time employment in the sector. Four students are currently seeking employment whilst two other students left the course and gained employment.

The Cloud Academy, which provides unemployed graduates with the skills and experience required to take up exciting new opportunities within the cloud computing sector, is an ongoing academy which commenced in September 2013, with 14 students currently being trained. Training will be completed by May 2014.

A Big Data (Deloitte Analytic Training Academy) has also been taken forward. This academy involved a nine week intensive training programme targeted at graduates and provided 17 students with the skills and accredited qualifications identified by Deloitte for new job opportunities in their Belfast Office.

My officials have also worked together with the Department of Finance and Personnel and local ICT employers to develop a Public/Private ICT Apprenticeship scheme. The pilot scheme, launched in August 2012 resulted in 32 apprentices being recruited and trained for the ICT sector. A second cohort of the scheme was launched in August 2013, in response to employer demand, which led to 42 apprentices being recruited. My officials are also working to develop the scheme and launch it in the North West to support employers in that area.

The Department has also worked with local Colleges to develop a Software Professional Course. The course is due to commence on 3 February 2014 and will provide the re-skilling of 250 non-ICT HND or graduates over the next three years.

Both of our local universities are now offering MSc courses for non–IT graduates that have resulted in over 200 graduates receiving training to ensure they are ready to work in the local ICT sector.

Furthermore, in conjunction with the ICT Skills Working Group, the Department of Education has worked with CCEA and local employers to develop a new A level curriculum in ‘Software Systems Development’. This A level is now available in schools and the first teaching of the course began in September 2013. Local employers have been working with teachers to ensure they are capable of delivering the new curriculum.

Another significant development is the arrangement between e-skills UK, Sentinus and Momentum to raise the awareness and attractiveness of the ICT sector across all levels of education – from primary school right through to university.

Support for the implementation of the ICT Skills Action Plan has been widespread. In September 2013 I attended a Digital Summit, organised by Momentum, the IT trade association in Northern Ireland. The Summit was extremely positive, attracting involvement from all the stakeholders involved in the ICT sector, including a number of my Ministerial colleagues, to address the issues of access to skills, access to funds and access to markets.

The Summit provided an open forum to discuss the skills requirements of the sector and all stakeholders endorsed the progress being made as a result of the implementation of the ICT Action Plan.

However, it is imperative that we continue to strive to ensure this extremely important sector is supported by a suitably skilled workforce. For that reason the ICT Skills Working Group met again in December 2013 with the purpose of reviewing the ICT Skills Action Plan to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the local ICT sector.

The Group agreed an updated and refreshed ICT Skills Action Plan which will soon be available via my Department’s website.

Travel Expenditure

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the total expenditure on Ministerial travel from (i) January to June 2013; and (ii) July to December 2013.
(AQW 30356/11-15)

Dr Farry: From January to June 2013 the total expenditure for Ministerial overseas travel was £1,963; and from July to December 2013 the total expenditure was £4,612.

These figures include travel by train, aeroplane and hire car.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Tourism: Scots/Irish Community in the USA

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) any proposals to promote tourism to the Scotch-Irish community in the USA during 2014; and (ii) the total cost of any such plans.
(AQW 29754/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): The Scots-Irish community in the USA is an important market for us to target in our marketing efforts.

As specified in its Business Plan 2014, Tourism Ireland proposes to highlight Northern Ireland to the Scots-Irish community at a number of events this year. The most prestigious event is the Stone Mountain Highland Games in Atlanta, Georgia, which takes place in October and attracts up to 80,000 individuals of Scots and Scots-Irish descent over a two-day weekend cultural festival featuring music, entertainment, educational and sporting events.

Tourism Ireland plans to hold a festival opening night networking event; to sponsor the festival's music stage and music group "Stonewall"; to provide a tourist information booth with the participation of the Ulster-Scots Association and the Ulster Historical Foundation; and to sponsor the Scots-Irish chef Judith McLoughlin, who will lecture on Scots-Irish cuisine and tours to NI.

Other events targeting the US market (including the Scots-Irish Community) which will provide opportunities for highlighting NI as a tourism destination, and to promote Scots-Irish connections between NI and the US, planned by Tourism Ireland throughout the year, include:

- The USA PGA Merchandising Show in Orlando, Florida, which attracts over 40,000 golf professionals and representation from all 50 US states and 74 other countries.
- Sales blitzes in Atlanta, Florida, Texas, Chicago/Boston and in Canada.
- At food fairs in Austin, Texas and Aspen, Colorado.
- At the Barclay's Championship PGA Golf tour and at the Deutsche Bank PGA Golf Championship in Boston.

Tourism Ireland's total budget for marketing both Northern Ireland and the island of Ireland in North America in 2014 is £8.6 million - this includes all promotional activity targeting the Scots-Irish community.

Farming: Safety Measures

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount in her budget that has been allocated for farm safety measures in (i) 2014; (ii) 2015; and (iii) 2016.
(AQW 29949/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In 2014/15 the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has committed over £350,000 towards its farm safety programme. This programme includes expenditure on a farm safety media campaign, a child safety campaign, farm safety awareness days and a farm safety focus at several agricultural shows.

In addition to this programme expenditure HSENI has a dedicated team of staff working on farm safety issues. Other HSENI staff also contribute to specific farm safety activities, for example the 1000 farm advisory visits currently underway.

HSENI will continue to work hard with the other partners in the Farm Safety Partnership to maximise the resources available to address farm safety issues in Northern Ireland.

The NI Executive has yet to agree and allocate budgets for 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Visits to Constituencies

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of ministerial visits she has made to each constituency since April 2011.
(AQW 29964/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information sought is not readily available and may only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Invest NI: County Fermanagh

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the companies located in County Fermanagh; and (ii) the amount of funding each company has received from InvestNI since 2008.
(AQW 29965/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI does not hold information on (i) all the companies located in County Fermanagh; however, the table below shows (ii) those companies located in County Fermanagh that have received an offer of financial support from Invest NI during the period 1st April 2008 to 31st March 2013.

Assistance Offered by Invest NI to Companies Located in County Fermanagh (2008-09 to 2012-13)

Name	Assistance Offered (£)
Access Rescue Consulting at Height (ARCH)	6,700
Acheson & Glover Limited	46,160
Acorn Wood Mouldings Limited	81,201
Acos (N.I.) Limited	43,234
Annan Interiors Limited	7,435
B.McCaffery & Sons Limited	6,372
Balcas Limited	1,313
Balcas Timber Limited	703,010
Balfour Quarries	52,750
Barnlee Residential Home	2,550
Beenificial Ltd	6,980
Belcoo Pharmacy	2,659
Belle Isle Limited	17,030
Belmore Court Motel	125,868
Belmore Meats	9,178
Best Choice Garage Doors Ltd	6,100
B-In-Control Ltd	7,200
Bite Snack Foods Ltd	259,815
Bosk Ltd	10,920
Brownlees Bramleys	4,000
Care Direct 24/7 Ltd	43,094
Carewell Homes	2,600
CashTrail Ltd	45,000
Cassidy and Clarke	1,000
Castle Hume Leisure Limited	24,800
Cherrytree Home Bakery Ltd	4,000
Chimtechnology Ltd	4,000
Clareview Leisure	4,000
Class A Guttering Ltd	1,280
Conscape Ltd	474
Conwell Contracts (UK) Limited	60,640
Corsenshin Farm	9,725
Courtney's Garage Ltd	5,252
Crawford Brothers	16,072
Crust & Crumb Bakery Ltd	108,681
Customs House	5,850
CVC Technologies Ltd	19,314
Dairy Produce Packers Limited	15,000
Damiraco Limited	112,090
David Robert Mahon Ltd	5,840
Deane Public Works Limited	18,577

Name	Assistance Offered (£)
Devine and Associates Ltd	34,408
Discovery 80 Limited	1,650
Donor2Deed Limited	266,948
Douglass Windows (PVCu) Ltd	3,164
Dylan Quinn Dance Theatre	20,362
Easy Recycle Ltd	4,000
Elite Electronic Systems Ltd	244,766
Emerging Group Limited	7,200
Empire Meats Ltd	303,970
Enviro Care NI Ltd	4,000
Erne Extrusions Ltd	292,909
Erne Management Limited	16,413
Erne Stone	4,000
F Flynn Engineering	250
Fabric Fashion	11,036
Fairsandmarkets.com Limited	4,000
Fermanagh Lakeland Lodges	25,187
Fermanagh Properties Limited	49,871
Flynn's Fine Foods	8,615
Furnish Kennels	1,956
Future Renewables	36,560
Global Safety Management Ltd	5,000
Gormley Kitchens Ltd	3,108
GR White & Son Ltd	52,218
Greentown Environmental Ltd	27,135
Hill Head Engineering	1,950
Hillcrest Energy	4,000
Hybrid Mail Solutions Limited	38,768
iGeneration Marketing Limited	4,000
Inishmacsaintbrewery Ltd	4,410
Inspire Architectural Design	2,610
Interviews 123 Limited	1,800
ITS Plant-Tech Ltd	4,383
J.M. Engineering Limited	16,000
Jak-A-Box Limited	35,121
JCP (NI) LTD	1,000
JG Crushing and Recycling Limited	8,648
John J. Sloan and Sons Limited	855
Kerry Foods Enniskillen	12,786
KERRY GROUP PLC	1,261
Kettyle Foods Ltd	153,154

Name	Assistance Offered (£)
Keys & Monaghan Architects Limited	1,568
Killyhevlin Hotel Limited	31,778
Kilmore Quay Resort Limited	2,740
Lady Muck Compost	16,250
Lakeland Communications Limited	19,000
Lakeland Computer Consultancy Services Ltd	66,114
Lakeland Electrical Services (NI) Ltd	21,000
Lakeland Seaplane Tours Ltd	9,022
Liberty HR	2,489
Lissan Foods Limited	4,512
Lough Erne Floating Classroom Community Interest Company	7,000
Luxrobes	12,810
M.W. CAD Solutions Ltd	14,000
Mahons Hotel	44,084
Manor House Country Hotel Limited	216,588
Manor House Marine & Cottages Limited	20,868
McCusker Engineering	1,950
McElwaine Electrical	118,911
McElwaine Security Services Limited	85,750
McElwaine Smart Technologies Ltd	121,305
McElwaine Technical Services Limited	49,021
McHugh Fuels Ltd	3,046
McPhillips Flyties	1,500
Millars Meats	4,000
MJS Environmental Ltd	8,460
Modern Tyre Service	1,250
Naman Leisure Ltd	4,000
OMJ Limited	146,514
Outer Space (E) Limited	4,000
P Clarke & Sons Limited	67,647
P I K Engineering Limited	4,000
Petal Postforming Limited	270,200
PM Processing Limited	4,000
Porsha Bespoke Limited	75,722
Precision Repair Solutions Limited	760
Prunty Peat Limited	31,250
Quay Garden Structures	3,170
Quinn Glass Limited	83,791
Ready Egg Products Limited	91,078
Rockview Engineering Ltd	16,918
Sean Quinn Concrete Ltd	924

Name	Assistance Offered (£)
Select Security & Electrical Supplies Ltd	10,000
SHAZZAM	4,710
Sloane Helicopters (Sales) Limited	49,126
Steel Solutions (N.I.) Limited	800
Steppingstone Timber Products	3,078
Struct Steel Engineering	3,178
Teemore Engineering Limited	56,213
Tenderlean Meats Limited	72,852
Terawatt UK Ltd	20,287
The Belleek Pottery, Limited	3,525
The Celebration Candle Company	11,535
The Golf Cabin	4,000
The Oil Market Journal	13,001
The Sean Quinn Group Ltd	4,620
The Sheelin Cottage Bread Company	3,560
The Traditional Food Company	1,000
Thomond Underwriting Limited	64,838
Tickety-Moo Limited	4,000
Tracey Concrete Limited	83
Trunk Flooring Limited	144,801
Tully Meadows Limited	3,200
Upscale Marketing	14,400
Vguard International Ltd	119,951
Vibe FM Community Radio Limited	5,000
Webtech (N.I.) Limited	1,014,185
Western Brand Poultry Products (NI) Ltd	814,425
Westville Hotel Ltd	118,691
Zenox Health Limited	14,700

Note: There were 20 offers totalling almost £78,000 made to individuals, who cannot be included in the table due to data protection regulations.

Invest NI: Business Plans

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of business plans that have received InvestNI assistance; and (ii) the number of new businesses that have emerged as a direct result of InvestNI assistance, in the last 12 months.
(AQW 29981/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

(i) Invest NI receives applications for support in many different formats, including Business Plans, Training Plans, Research & Development Plans, Application Forms etc. As a consequence, Invest NI offered support to 4,986 projects in the last financial year (2012-13), 171 of which were classified as new business start-ups. However, it is not possible to provide a more detailed analysis by type of application format used.

(ii) During the same period Invest NI offered support to 1,574 additional new business start-ups through the Regional Start Initiative (formerly the Enterprise Development Programme).

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the ministerial meetings on energy issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council, including the reasons for the lack of meetings; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council.
(AQW 29983/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Details of meetings, including Ministerial meetings, held under the auspices of the British Irish Council are available from the following website: www.britishirishcouncil.org. In each case the published communiqué provides details of issues discussed, including, where appropriate, energy issues.

Details of meetings under the auspices of the North South Ministerial Council and reports on issues discussed, including, where appropriate, energy issues are available from the following website: www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org.

Employment Contracts

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the proportion of jobs (i) created; and (ii) promoted which are (a) permanent contracts versus fixed term; and (b) full-time versus part-time employment, for the most recent consecutive five years for which data is available.
(AQW 30016/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI reports jobs on a Full Time Equivalent (FTE) basis. During the period 2008-09 to 2012-13, Invest NI promoted 31,787 FTE jobs. Invest NI's support for job promotion is conditional on the maintenance of the employment created for a minimum of five years (three years in the case of SMEs). Therefore, all Invest NI employment-related assistance relates to permanent jobs.

Invest NI currently only reports on the number of jobs that have been created through the Jobs Fund. Since the scheme's inception in 2011-12 and 31 December 2013, it has created 4,177 new jobs.

Invest NI: Resources

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount of InvestNI resources which were targeted towards jobs in the promoted category versus jobs created category, for the most recent consecutive five years for which data is available.
(AQW 30017/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI currently reports on the basis of jobs promoted by the companies it supports. Grant support is offered at the start of a project based on a company's commitment to create a set number of new jobs. These jobs are known as promoted jobs. Funding for these jobs is then paid as the new jobs are filled by the company. These are known as created jobs; therefore, created jobs are a product of promoted jobs.

The table below shows the amount of assistance offered by Invest NI to promote jobs in the last five full financial years (2008/09 to 2012/13).

Invest NI Assistance Offered to Job Related Projects (2008-09 to 2012-13)

	Assistance Offered £m
2008-09	76.11
2009-10	78.88
2010-11	52.59
2011-12	31.20
2012-13	49.15

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the ministerial meetings on tourism issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council, since May 2007.
(AQW 30033/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There were three British Irish Council Summit meetings between May 2007 and September 2008 at which Tourism issues were on the agenda and discussed. Since then my Department has provided briefing specifically requested on tourism issues related to broader agenda items on two occasions (June 2010 and June 2013).

There have been ten North South Ministerial Council meetings in Tourism Sectoral format since May 2007.

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the ministerial meetings on trade issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council, since May 2007.
(AQW 30056/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A total of 10 North South Ministerial Council Trade and Business Development sectoral meetings have taken place since May 2007.

Trade is not one of the twelve mandated British Irish Council work sectors.

Renewable Energy: NIE

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of applications by NI Electricity to the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the connection of renewable projects, including the number of those that were successful, for each month since January 2012.
(AQW 30076/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Northern Ireland Electricity advises that it does not apply to the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation for the connection of renewable projects.

Electricity: Self-disconnection

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the definition used by her Department for self-disconnection of electricity; and (ii) the number of households that currently use prepayment meters for electricity, including the percentage of prepayment electricity users that self-disconnect at least (a) once per year; (b) twice per year; and (c) once per month.
(AQW 30079/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

(i) While the term “self-disconnection” is not defined in legislation, there are provisions in legislation and supplier licences to protect customers from disconnection.

(ii) I am informed by the Regulator that as at October 2013, there were 304,098 domestic prepayment customers out of a total of 781,257 domestic customers. I am further informed that the Regulator does not hold information on the percentage of electricity users that self-disconnect.

Foreign Direct Investment: South Down

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how her Department is working to attract foreign investment to South Down.
(AQW 30107/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest Northern Ireland competes for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the global market. Invest NI promotes Northern Ireland as an attractive and viable location for inward investment opportunities to new investors, along with the parent companies of existing foreign owned investors. Northern Ireland’s investment proposition is therefore promoted on the basis of a talented and loyal workforce, advanced telecoms infrastructure, highly skilled business clusters, a pro-business environment, competitive operating costs and proximity to major markets.

The requirements will vary depending on the nature of the project, but a company will typically look at existing investors in the same business sector (Invest NI’s key target sectors being ICT, business services, financial services and renewables); universities and colleges that offer courses relating to that sector; and suitable, available property.

Areas in which these desired features do not exist, or are not clearly presented, are unlikely to attract the attention of potential investors to visit or locate in the area. In addition, potential investors are often drawn to population centres that they consider will provide the appropriate number of suitably skilled potential employees. Therefore a clear understanding and evidence of skill demographics for any region would greatly assist a potential investor in considering a particular area.

This understanding and appreciation of South Down’s key demographics and area attributes is achieved through direct engagement with interested parties. Invest NI is working closely with both Down and Newry & Mourne Councils, and other stakeholders, to develop a sales proposition which shows the strengths and opportunities in their respective areas which will attract potential inward investors to visit, locate there and grow in the surrounding South Down area.

Invest NI has also developed an ‘FDI app’ and a ‘District Council App’ which will help present a snapshot of the benefits of setting up in Northern Ireland to potential investors. Both Down and Newry & Mourne Area Councils have indicated that they wish to be involved and Invest NI is working with them on this to develop these downloadable mobile applications which will form part of each Council, or group of Councils, promotional toolkit highlighting each Council area’s attractiveness as a potential investment location.

As the South Down offering develops, both councils should reflect this by updating the ‘FDI app’ and continuing engagement with Invest NI’s Southern Regional Office - located in Newry. Continued engagement with Government to develop South

Down as a competitive destination, development of relevant skills and increased availability of sites ready for business investment, all have the potential to improve South Down's visible proposition and place it in further contention to attract inward investment.

Ultimately however, the investor will make the decision as to where they locate based on their specific business needs and having considered the options available to them. I hope this provides clarification on your query. Please be assured, that my Department, including Invest NI, are working hard to improve the economic wellbeing of the whole of Northern Ireland.

North West Regional Science Park

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on InvestNI's progress in attracting tenants to the North West Regional Science Park.
(AQW 30119/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The North West Regional Science Park (NWRSP) is due for completion in August 2014 and as such, is not yet part of the Northern Ireland proposition, nor the current offering for the Foyle Constituency in attracting potential Foreign Direct Investors. Invest NI overseas sales teams are aware of the future development of the NWRSP but the lack of a completed physical entity has to date meant no commitment has been secured for an investor to locate there.

However, my Department looks forward to the completion of the NWRSP as the success of this project and the increased availability of sites ready for business investment, all have the potential to improve the North West region's visible proposition and place it in further contention to attract inward investment.

Commonwealth Games 2014

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail her Department's strategy for maximising the benefit of the 2014 Commonwealth Games, including its representation at the games.
(AQW 30129/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The 2014 Commonwealth Games offer the opportunity to highlight Northern Ireland to local and visiting international media and participants alike.

My Department, through Tourism Ireland, will identify tour operators in relevant Commonwealth countries who are packaging trips to the Games and work to influence them to include Northern Ireland in their programmes. Tourism Ireland will also work with Games committee members and others to identify any other avenues for promoting Northern Ireland.

Whilst plans are not yet finalised, engagement with the media is underway and potential activity will be rolled out through traditional and social media in advance of, during and after the Games.

Any representation at the Games will be considered as plans progress.

British Embassy/Irish Embassy: Agrifood Event

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the involvement of the British Embassy in Washington D.C. in the recent agri-food event in Beltville, in which Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and InvestNI participated; and (ii) the involvement of the Irish Embassy.
(AQW 30145/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Northern Ireland Bureau was heavily involved in initiating the lead role for Northern Ireland in securing an opportunity for the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute's Director of Sustainable Agri Food Science and five other senior scientific staff to attend and speak at the four day conference in November 2013.

The Bureau, with the support of Invest NI North America, also assisted by arranging a broader itinerary aimed at maximising the time the scientists could engage with a wider scientific audience. Relevant representatives from the Canadian and Irish embassies and the US Department of Agriculture were also present at the Forum. Invest NI North America provided financial support of $5,000 towards the costs of the event.

The Irish Embassy played no part in organising the Forum. The Agricultural Attaché at the Irish Embassy attended some elements of the Forum and provided support to the four person team from Teagasc, the Republic of Ireland's agri-food body, who travelled to the US to participate in the Forum. Teagasc attendance at the Forum was discussed in advance between the Chief Executive of AFBI and the Head of Research and Development at Teagasc.

Energy: Electricity Generation

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the construction of electricity generation infrastructure will be subject to the allocation of full planning permission before any contractual arrangements are made.
(AQW 30169/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Planning permission and the conditions attached to such permission, if required, are matters for the Department of the Environment. Where any person seeking a grant of planning permission in relation to electricity infrastructure decides to enter into contractual commitments prior to obtaining that permission, that is a commercial decision and not a matter within the scope of my Department's functions.

Invest NI: Rockabill NI Ltd

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether InvestNI has provided Rockabill NI Ltd advice or financial support; and if so, to provide details of this advice or support.
(AQW 30197/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI has not provided any financial support or advice to Rockabill NI Ltd.

Belfast: Decentralisation of Jobs

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given that Belfast is the most congested city in the UK, to outline how her Department is working to decentralise jobs, in particular IT roles, from Belfast.
(AQW 30198/11-15)

Mrs Foster: It is important to note that Invest NI does not determine the location of an inward investment project and is not in a position to sign up to sub-regional targets including decentralisation of jobs created from Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) projects won. Northern Ireland competes for FDI against some much larger nation states. In order to maximise our presence in overseas markets, Invest NI focuses on selling Northern Ireland as a whole.

A typical FDI investor will make the decision as to where they locate based on their specific business needs having weighed up the options available to them - taking into account existing investors in the same business sector, universities and colleges that offer courses relating to that sector; suitable, available property and population centres that they consider will provide the appropriate number of suitably skilled potential employees.

As noted by the Independent Review of Economic Policy, it is important to allow companies the scope to locate where they can operate most profitably. To do otherwise would be detrimental to the chances of securing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for Northern Ireland.

In compliance with European Commission's Regional Aid Guidelines, Invest NI can negotiate varying levels of Selective Financial Assistance (SFA) dependent upon where potential investors may choose to locate. Geographically, there are only two categories for consideration, which are FDI projects locating within 1) Belfast District Council Area and 2) Rest of Northern Ireland. The maximum contribution that Invest NI can make to a project under SFA is determined by the European Commission's Regional Aid Guidelines. Currently the maximum additional contribution threshold for a potential FDI project locating outside Belfast DCA is 5% more than the maximum contribution that can be offered towards the same project locating within Belfast DCA.

Within the maximum contribution levels Invest NI will negotiate different levels of support taking into consideration factors such as job quality, a project's impact on local employment, availability of labour etc. Once again, it should be stressed that the investor will make the decision as to where they locate based on their specific business needs and having weighed up the options available to them.

The Independent Review of Economic Policy also acknowledged Invest NI's approach to Inward Investment as being the most appropriate, recognised the importance of FDI in building a more dynamic and innovative private sector and acknowledged that, per capita, Northern Ireland has been one of the most successful UK regions at attracting FDI.

Farming: Funding for Safety Measures

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the level of funding her Department apportioned to on-farm safety measures in each of the last three years, including each project that received funding.
(AQW 30202/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment continues to raise awareness of key safety messages for the farming industry through the work of the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI).

In 2011/12, £75,000 was attributed to the delivery of farm safety messages by the HSENI. In response to the increase in farming fatalities, the expenditure was increased to exceed £400,000 in 2012/13. Within the first three quarters of the current financial year (2013/14), over £300,000 has been dedicated to creating a safety first culture amongst the farming community through media, education, publication and events.

DARD also provides ongoing financial contributions towards the work of the HSENI in this area, by means of their involvement in the Farm Safety Partnership and through funding towards the farm safety media campaign. The DARD contributions are included in the figures shown above.

Trade: Kurdistan

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, following recent activity between Northern Ireland and the Kurdistan Regional Government, what potential exists for firms based in the East Londonderry constituency to build trade links.
(AQW 30204/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Kurdistan is a market with potential for Northern Ireland companies. It is, however, not a market for inexperienced exporters. Companies will need to visit this market regularly over a reasonable time period and research the market

before selecting the correct partner. Invest NI has worked with a number of businesses located in the East Londonderry constituency, from across a range of industry sectors. Many have been introduced to potential customers or have discussed opportunities in the Kurdistan region.

Newspread Ltd

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations she has made to Newspread Limited in relation to the substantial increase in service charges to local newsagents.
(AQW 30225/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The issue of a service charge increase by Newspread Limited has not been raised with me therefore no representations have been made. I have asked my officials to investigate this issue.

The National Federation of Retail Newsagents (NFRN) representatives have raised the issue of a separate increase in carriage charges by EM News. DETI Officials met with representatives from the NFRN on 27 November 2013 to discuss that issue and with representatives from the Competition & Markets Authority on 4 February 2014 to outline the concerns expressed by NFRN members.

Third Sector Organisations: Funding

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the departmentally funded third sector organisations providing services to the public; and (ii) the value of each funding package.
(AQW 30236/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

(I) Departmentally Funded Third Sector Organisation	(Ii) Value of Each Funding Package
Outdoor Recreation Northern Ireland (Service Level Agreement 2013/14)	£120,000
Mourne Heritage Trust (Service Level Agreement 2013/14)	£ 55,000
Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust (Service Level Agreement 2013/14)	£ 20,000
Visit Belfast – Business 2 Business (Service Level Agreement 2013/14)	£225,000
Visit Belfast – Visitor Information (Service Level Agreement 2013/14)	£177,000
Social Enterprise Northern Ireland	Maximum of £450,000 over 3 years
AdviceNI funded through a commercially tendered 3 year contract to deliver debt advice across NI. We do not fund AdviceNI as a third sector body other than through the commercial contract and we have no long or medium term commitment to fund outside of this contract.	2012/13 £669,374 2013/14 £953,808 2014/15 £955,430

Tamboran Resources/AMEC

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) whether she is aware of discrepancies between the figures presented to her Department by Tamboran Resources and the figures presented by AMEC plc in the UK Strategic Environmental Assessment; (ii) for her assessment and explanation of those discrepancies; (iii) what independent verification of Tamboran's figures her Department has completed; and (iv) what independent verification will her Department carry out on onshore petroleum licence holders.
(AQW 30251/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

(i) Yes.

(ii) The figures presented by Tamboran Resources relate to the possible development of shale gas in the Lough Allen Basin (including parts of County Fermanagh) whereas the figures produced by AMEC relate to future shale gas development in Great Britain. Different development scenarios and parameter values are used in the two models.

(iii) Any estimates about the financial benefits that might arise from shale gas development depend on the production scenario used in the calculation, and ultimately on the quantity and quality of the reserves and the costs of production. At this stage of exploration, before any deep boreholes have been drilled, figures produced in connection with any future shale gas production inevitably contain a large degree of uncertainty and must be treated with caution.

(iv) My Department will carry out verification of information presented by onshore petroleum licence holders as and when it is appropriate to do so.

Larne Port: Job Promotion and Creation

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what assistance her Department can provide to the Port of Larne for job promotion and creation measures.
(AQW 30260/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI principally supports businesses in the manufacturing and tradeable services sectors to grow through support for a range of activities including research and development, people management, strategic development, e-business, environmental impact and export development.

Invest NI has previously provided support to the Port of Larne through a Carbon Trust Loan and a scoping study into opportunities within the sustainable energy supply chain.

Invest NI continues to engage with the Port of Larne to scope any potential project and provide advice on the potential for Invest NI to support the growth of the business and create additional jobs. Invest NI may be able to provide further support to the Port of Larne in the future based on the business satisfying Invest NI eligibility criteria and Invest NI intervention principles.

Ulster Bank: Job Cuts

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the senior management of The Ulster Bank or The Royal Bank of Scotland in relation to the Irish Bank Officials Association fears that an announcement of compulsory job cuts, reductions to pay and further branch closures is imminent.
(AQW 30478/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Banking is a reserved matter and, as such, my Department has no statutory oversight of the banking sector. However, I recognise the importance of growing the financial sector in Northern Ireland. I am also aware of the challenges banks are facing as they seek to recapitalise and restructure and the implications this has on local operations and staff.

Along with the Finance Minister, I meet with representatives from Ulster Bank on a regular basis to discuss a range of issues including restructuring and the impact this may have on Northern Ireland. We are scheduled to meet with Ulster Bank officials again on 20 February. At this meeting I will be seeking an update on proposed branch closures and job losses and will emphasise how important it is that senior management in these banks are working to minimise the impacts of these closures.

Department of the Environment

Planning Application K/2013/0072/F

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, in relation to planning application K/2013/0072/F, to detail (i) the current status of the planning application; (ii) why he announced approval of a goldmine in Gortin, near Omagh, on 4 December 2012; and (iii) the outstanding issues that are currently referred to on his Department's website.
(AQW 29650/11-15)

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): The current status of this application is 'Permission Granted' as of 22 January 2014.

The 4 December announcement I made followed a presentation to the Omagh District Council with an opinion to approve application K/2013/0072/F to the Omagh District Council's November Planning Committee meeting. Having heard subsequent representations from 3rd parties, I had instructed my officials to consider their concerns before the issue of formal planning approval.

The outstanding issues referred to on the Portal related to the preparation and issue of formal planning approval.

Listed Buildings: Boundaries

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 29284/11-15, why his Department is operating on the 1974 boundaries.
(AQW 29721/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The 'listing' of buildings of 'special architectural or historic interest' was introduced in 1973. Since then, all historic buildings have been given a seven figure reference number to identify them, both for internal record purposes, as well as for consistency for external, interested parties - including owners. These figures happen to relate to the district council area and electoral ward in which they were located in 1974 - for example - the Town Hall at Bangor Castle is recorded as HB 23/07/001A, with 'HB 23' being the North Down Council area.

The Department's focus is upon identifying and protecting listed buildings. Changing references to reflect changing electoral boundaries has a significant resource implication, and would be potentially confusing to owners and researchers.

Drivers: Fatalities

Mr Elliott asked the Minister of the Environment how many (i) men; and (ii) women aged (a) 17-19; (b) 20-29; (c) 30-39; (d) 40-49; (e) 50-59; (f) 60-69; (g) 70-79; (h) 80-89; and (i) over 90 years old hold a valid driving licence; and how many drivers in each category have been the contributing driver in fatal road accidents in each year since 2004.
(AQW 29954/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Details of the number of licence holders with entitlement to drive cars or motorcycles in each of the age categories requested is attached at Annex A. Figures include those with Group 1 licence entitlement – i.e. cars and motorcycles and do not include those with entitlement to drive Group 2 vehicles (lorry and bus) as these drivers hold entitlement to drive cars in addition to the Group 2 entitlement.

It should be noted that drivers with motorcycle entitlement may also hold entitlement to drive a car, so the 2 tables should not be totalled.

Figures in relation to drivers who have been the contributing driver in fatal road accidents in each year since 2004 by age are attached at Annex B. These figures have been supplied by the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Please note that these figures are based on the perception of responsibility by the police officer at the time of the collision. This data is collated for statistics purposes only and does not reflect the outcome of any court proceeding.

Annex A
Breakdown of Licence Holders by Gender, Age and Entitlement Private Cars / Light Vans (at 30 Sept 2013)

		Entitlement				
Gender	**Age (years)**	**Full**	**Full (Restricted)**	**Passed (not upgraded)**	**Provisional**	**Grand Total**
Female	15 - 16	0	0	0	373	373
	17 - 19	12,501	18	284	11,635	24,438
	20 - 29	86,726	1,022	575	21,598	109,921
	30 - 39	95,983	836	251	8,969	106,039
	40 - 49	104,309	564	72	5,011	109,956
	50 - 59	86,921	468	13	2,811	90,213
	60 - 69	64,030	470	*	1,217	65,719
	70 - 79	33,944	300	*	161	34,405
	80 - 89	10,104	112	*	*	10,236
	90+	555	10	*	*	567
Total		**495,073**	**3,800**	**1,197**	**51,797**	**551,867**

		Entitlement				
Gender	**Age (years)**	**Full**	**Full (Restricted)**	**Passed (not upgraded)**	**Provisional**	**Grand Total**
Male	15 - 16	*	*	*	1,130	1,131
	17 - 19	14,290	18	214	11,846	26,368
	20 - 29	88,883	739	546	23,043	113,211
	30 - 39	100,320	445	282	8,856	109,903
	40 - 49	113,193	402	87	5,238	118,920
	50 - 59	99,703	403	19	3,080	103,205
	60 - 69	78,071	405	*	1,674	80,155
	70 - 79	45,420	286	0	402	46,108
	80 - 89	15,722	107	0	53	15,882
	90+	1,250	*	*	*	1,253
Male Total		**556,852**	**2,808**	**1,153**	**55,323**	**616,136**

These are DOE Official Statistics

* Small number suppressed to protect individual confidentiality

Annex B

Number of drivers1 perceived to be responsible2 for a fatal collision by age group and gender 2004 to October 2013

		17-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	90+	Total
2004	Male	14	29	12	10	5	2	5	4	0	81
	Female	2	5	1	4	2	1	4	0	0	19
	Total	16	34	13	14	7	3	9	4	0	100
2005	Male	16	24	13	5	6	6	2	4	0	76
	Female	2	4	5	3	2	1	0	0	0	17
	Total	18	28	18	8	8	7	2	4	0	93
2006	Male	15	21	14	12	7	4	0	1	0	74
	Female	0	7	3	2	1	2	0	1	0	16
	Total	15	28	17	14	8	6	0	2	0	90
2007	Male	16	21	13	10	4	6	5	2	0	77
	Female	1	3	2	1	1	2	1	1	0	12
	Total	17	24	15	11	5	8	6	3	0	89
2008	Male	15	24	8	12	8	1	2	1	1	72
	Female	0	4	0	1	0	1	4	0	0	10
	Total	15	28	8	13	8	2	6	1	1	82
2009	Male	8	27	13	8	10	1	2	2	1	72
	Female	3	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
	Total	11	32	13	8	10	1	2	2	1	80
2010	Male	8	11	6	4	2	3	0	2	0	36
	Female	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	4
	Total	9	11	7	5	2	3	0	3	0	40
2011	Male	7	7	3	4	2	2	2	2	0	29
	Female	1	3	3	2	0	1	1	0	0	11
	Total	8	10	6	6	2	3	3	2	0	40
2012	Male	2	7	6	5	2	3	2	1	1	29
	Female	2	1	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	6
	Total	4	8	7	6	2	3	2	2	1	35
(to 31 Oct) 2013	Male	3	15	4	3	2	2	0	1	0	30
	Female	1	3	2	0	0	0	3	0	0	9
	Total	4	18	6	3	2	2	3	1	0	39

1 Includes all drivers of vehicles which require a valid driving licence with the exception of quad bikes but excludes riders of pedal cycles, horses and other non motorised vehicles.

2 Responsibility is perceived by the officer at the time of the collision, is collated for statistics purposes only and would not necessarily reflect the outcome of any court proceedings.

Source: Statistics Branch, Police Service of Northern Ireland, Lisnasharragh

Driver and Vehicle Agency: Inspections

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of the Environment how many inspections under the Roadside Enforcement Initiative were carried out in (i) each county; and (ii) Belfast, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29958/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Driver and Vehicle Agency publish an annual compendium of statistics which details total vehicle checks carried out by enforcement section. The reported statistics for the last three years are as follows:

2010/11	6086 checks
2011/12	6288 checks
2012/13	5706 checks

DVA does not routinely record vehicle checks by county, however, statistical analysis of enforcement data for 2012/13 shows the following:

County	**Vehicle Checks 12/13**
Antrim	887
Down	1164
Tyrone	972
Armagh	327
Fermanagh	234
Derry	1134
Belfast	988
Total	**5706**

It has not been possible to provide figures in the format requested for 2010/11 or 2011/12.

Taxis: Wheelchair Users

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department is ensuring that wheelchair users are not being overcharged by taxi companies.
(AQW 29976/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Equality Commission has advised that DDA legislation makes it unlawful for organisations such as transport service providers, including taxi operators, to discriminate against disabled people in the way in which they provide or do not provide their services.

Currently only Belfast Public Hire taxis operate under a regulated taximeter and fare regime. However, it is intended that the new Taximeter and Maximum Fare Regulations to be introduced in September 2014 will set a maximum fare tariff for all taxis in Northern Ireland and introduce a requirement for all taxis to fit a taximeter. These Regulations will make it an offence to charge any consumer more than the maximum fare regardless of the size and type of vehicle being provided, and will therefore provide protection for all taxi users.

Further to this, I have asked officials to liaise with Disability Action and the Inclusive Mobility & Transport Advisory Committee to see what further advice can be provided by the Department to operators regarding their responsibilities around these issues.

Taxis: Wheelchair Users

Mr Frew asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department is ensuring that taxi companies provide sufficient wheelchair accessible vehicles to meet demand.
(AQW 29977/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Whilst there is currently no requirement for operators to have a minimum number of wheelchair accessible vehicles in their fleet, my Department does however have powers under section 2(5) of the Taxis Act (NI) 2008 to specify a minimum percentage of taxis of a different class of use on an operator licence. We therefore keep the situation under review, to determine whether market activities achieve a balancing of supply and demand, or whether there is market failure requiring the Department to intervene.

As part of this, my Department has recently received the conclusions of research undertaken into the taxi industry in Northern Ireland, including the provision of wheelchair accessible vehicles. This research is currently being considered and will shortly be forwarded to the Environment Committee for their information.

The research will assist my Department in determining whether there is undersupply of wheelchair accessible vehicles in taxi fleets in Northern Ireland and, if this is the case, what actions may be appropriate to take to address this situation.

I would be content to share the results of the research with the Member upon its release to the Committee.

Planning Appeals: Enforcement Notices

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the enforcement notices served in November 2011, prior to the immunity timeframe change that were (i) appealed; (ii) successfully defended by the Department; and (iii) quashed. **(AQW 30001/11-15)**

Mr Durkan: In November 2011 the Department served 110 Enforcement Notices. Of these 37 were appealed. Of the appeals heard, 14 were dismissed (notice upheld), 9 upheld (notice quashed). 7 notices were withdrawn by the Department, 6 appeals were withdrawn by the appellant and 1 made a nullity. The detail of this is laid out below.

Notice Reference	Site	Appeal Yes/No?	Appeal Outcome Notice upheld/ Notice quashed?	Date of Appeal Outcome
A/2010/0124CA	Adj to 15 Edenreagh Road, Eglinton,	Yes	Notice Upheld	11 February 2013
B/2008/0006CA	211 Seacoast Road, Limavady	Yes	Notice Quashed	21 December 2012
D/2009/0015CA	Village Inn, Bellaghy Rd, Dunloy	Yes	Notice Quashed	07 June 2012
D/2010/0041CA	195 Frosses Road, Dunloy	Yes	Notice Quashed	13 August 2012
E/2004/0056CA	Adj. 23 Ballinlea Rd, Ballycastle	Yes	Withdrawn by appellant	14 August 2012
EN/A/2007/0011/CA/01	Tullyally Road, Derry	Yes	Notice Quashed	28 August 2012
EN/A/2010/0246/CA/01	23 Heather Road, Derry	Yes	Notice Upheld	20 August 2013
EN/A/2010/0246/CA/01	23 Heather Road, Derry	Yes	Notice Upheld	20 August 2013
EN/G/2010/0073/CA/01	Land at the junction of Broughdone Lane / Shellinghill Road, Cullybackey	Yes	Notice Upheld	28 June 2012
EN/H/2007/0046/CA/01	Moneymore Rd, Magherafelt	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	11 September 2012
EN/I/2007/0003/CA/01	Killybearn Road, Cookstown	Yes	Withdrawn by appellant	27 September 2012
Notice Reference	Site	Appeal Yes/ No?	Appeal Outcome Notice upheld/Notice quashed?	Date of Appeal Outcome
EN/J/2008/0057/CA	Park Rd Strabane	Yes	Notice Upheld	01 August 2012
EN/K/2009/0130/CA	Tummery Rd Dromore	Yes	Notice Upheld	27 June 2012
EN/M/2011/0012/CA	Rossmore Rd Dungannon	Yes	Notice Upheld	04 April 2013
EN/N/2011/0063/CA/01	Lands opposite and South of 66 Annesborough Road, Lurgan	Yes	Notice Upheld	07 October 2013
EN/O/2004/0084/CA/01	NWP, Cargaclogher Rd, Crossmaglen	Yes	Notice Quashed	01 February 2013
EN/P/2009/0245/CA/01	Approx 60 Metres NW of 16 Aughnaloopy RoadKilkeel	Yes	Notice Upheld	25 June 2013
EN/P/2010/0128/CA/01	OM Tyres, Chapel Hill Road, Mayobridge	Yes	Notice Quashed	20 November 2012
EN/P/2010/0258/CA/01	Adjacent to 37 Carrickrovaddy Road Dorsey	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	24 May 2012

Notice Reference	Site	Appeal Yes/No?	Appeal Outcome Notice upheld/ Notice quashed?	Date of Appeal Outcome
EN/S/2006/0114/CA/02	39 Groganstown Road, Dunmurry	Yes	Notice Upheld	04 December 2012
EN/T/2005/0037/CA/01	Creeve Road, Randalstown	Yes	Notice Upheld	07 August 2013
EN/T/2007/0090/CA/01	Roguery Rd, Randalstown	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	28 December 2012
EN/T/2007/0090/CA/02	Roguery Rd, Randalstown	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	28 December 2012
Notice Reference	Site	Appeal Yes/ No?	Appeal Outcome Notice upheld/Notice quashed?	Date of Appeal Outcome
EN/T/2007/0090/CA/03	Roguery Rd, Randalstown	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	28 December 2012
EN/T/2009/0127/CA/01	Land North of 181 Templepatrick Road, Ballyclare	Yes	Withdrawn by appellant	25 February 2013
EN/T/2009/0127/CA/02	Land North of 181 Templepatrick Road, Ballyclare	Yes	Withdrawn by appellant	25 February 2013
EN/T/2011/0028/CA/02	Land at 15 Lurgan Road, Crumlin	Yes	Withdrawn by appellant	04 October 2012
EN/X/2005/0087/CA/01	Comber Bypass, Comber	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	22 November 2012
EN/X/2005/0087/CA/02	Comber Bypass, Comber	Yes	Withdrawn by appellant	22 November 2012
R/2005/0067CA	Lands opposite 59 Clealough Road, Killyleagh	Yes	The Enforcement Notice is a nullity and there is therefore no valid appeal.	11 December 2012
R/2006/0164CA	Land adjacent to 183 Dundrum Road, Newcastle	Yes	Notice Quashed	30 December 2012
R/2008/0097CA	Land at 60 Valentia Place, Newcastle	Yes	Notice Quashed	13 June 2012
S/2006/0147CA	Lands adjacent to 23 Budore Road, BT29 4JD	Yes	Notice Upheld	08 October 2012
W/2006/0122CA	Lands adjacent to 50 Holywood Road, Newtownards	Yes	Withdrawn by Dept	10 October 2012
Notice Reference	Site	Appeal Yes/ No?	Appeal Outcome Notice upheld/Notice quashed?	Date of Appeal Outcome
X/2007/0228CA	Lands adjacent to Quintin Castle, 3 Kearney Road, Portaferry	Yes	Notice Upheld	28 August 2012
EN/Z/2007/0070/CA/01	56 The Boulevard, Wellington Square	Yes	Notice Quashed	20 August 2012

Notice Reference	Site	Appeal Yes/No?	Appeal Outcome Notice upheld/ Notice quashed?	Date of Appeal Outcome
EN/Z/22010/0383/CA/01	Lands between Hope Street and Wellwood Street, to the rear of 69-85 Great Victoria Street and 54-78 Sandy Row, Belfast	Yes	Notice Upheld	05 November 2012

Energy: Hydroelectric Projects

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the status of the document, co-published by the Planning Service, entitled "Small Hydroelectric schemes – Impacts on River Fisheries in Northern Ireland"; and whether this document is being taken into account in the assessment of applications for hydroelectric projects.
(AQW 30002/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The report referred to was commissioned by the former Department of Enterprise (now the Department of Enterprise and Investment – DETI) and was funded by Northern Ireland Electricity PLC. The planning policy context for assessing small hydroelectric schemes is contained within Planning Policy Statement 18 'Renewable Energy' and Best Practice Guidance to PPS 18, both published August 2009.

Following the introduction of the Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, NIEA, as the implementation body, introduced a Northern Ireland wide water resource management regime in order to control and licence activities that sustainably use water. Where an activity will or is likely to have, a significant or serious adverse impact on a waterway, protected habitat or protected species, under the terms of the Water Framework or Habitats Regulations the development will be refused. This research document has been referenced and taken into consideration in relation to the determination process for considering abstraction licences submitted for hydro power developments.

Habitats Directive: River Faughan

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, following the Head of Planning's written commitment to the Ombudsman on 7 September 2012 that his Department fully intends to respond in detail on all issues raised by River Faughan Anglers in relation to small scale hydroelectric schemes on the River Faughan Special Area of Conservation, why fifteen months later no response has been forthcoming.
(AQW 30003/11-15)

Mr Durkan: While many of the issues raised pertain to live planning applications and will be dealt with through the course of processing these applications, I have instructed my officials to assess all of the representations made by the River Faughan Anglers Ltd with a detailed response by the 14th February 2014.

Review of Public Administration: Update

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Review of Public Administration.
(AQO 5341/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The Local Government Reform programme remains on target for 1 April 2015.

The Local Government Bill was introduced into the Assembly on 23 September 2013 and is currently at Committee Stage. It is my aim to have the remaining Assembly stages scheduled for March 2014 with Royal Assent needed by early May 2014. The Bill is a major step towards making local government reform a reality and will provide the legislative framework necessary to give effect to the Executive's decisions on the future shape of local government.

Plans remain on track for elections to the new councils in May 2014. The Secretary of State has brought forward two pieces of legislation to make arrangements for the elections in May 2014. The District Electoral Areas (Northern Ireland) Order 2014 was laid before Parliament on 18 December.

All 11 Statutory Transition Committees (STCs) are now established and operating as required by the Regulations. The work of the STCs is monitored by the Regional Transitional Committee, which I chair, and I am in the process of conducting a series of visits to all the Statutory Transition Committees to engage with elected members at a local level.

Councils will operate in shadow form for a period of time until April 2015 when the new councils assume full powers and responsibilities. The newly elected councils, acting in shadow form, will have the statutory authority and democratic mandate to make policy decisions.

The advertisement for 10 Chief Executive posts was placed in the press with a closing date for receipt of applications of 9 December 2013. The Chief Executive post for Belfast will be advertised before the end of January 2014. The successful candidates should be selected by the end of March 2014.

George Best Belfast City Airport: Car Park

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the impact of his decision to reverse the planning approval for a private car park at George Best Belfast City Airport.
(AQO 5342/11-15)

Mr Durkan: In this case the Planning decision was not reversed. The Department's opinion changed during the processing of the application, following consideration of further material matters. The decision was taken on 16 December 2013 following consultation with Belfast City Council Town Planning Committee.

In this case, the application did not come to me for consideration. It is not a major planning application of the type where I often act as a decision maker. This decision was made locally and was not a decision taken at Ministerial level. The Department must make decisions based on the prevailing Planning Policy, which has been subject to a rigorous public consultation process.

In terms of impact, the decision appears to be consistent with decisions made in relation to similar cases elsewhere. Mr Boal has the right to challenge this decision through the appeals process.

Councillors: Remuneration

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment when he will publish the details of the remuneration package affecting councillors in the new council structure.
(AQO 5343/11-15)

Mr Durkan: It is important that the new scheme of allowances recognises the commitment of councillors and the work that will be required of them if they are to deliver the Executive's vision of strong, effective local government that has the needs of citizens at its core.

At present, I am carefully considering the recommendations made to me by the NI Councillors Remuneration Panel in November last year and the rationale for those recommendations.

I discussed the recommendations with the Political Reference Group for the Local Government Reform Programme in December. At that meeting, it was agreed that officials would examine the evidence for the Report's recommendations and that we would meet again to discuss the issues in more detail. This further meeting has been scheduled for 4th February.

After the meeting with the Political Reference Group in February, I will seek further views and opinions as necessary to allow me to reach final conclusions. I will then publish the new scheme of allowances.

South Eastern Regional College: Planning Permission, Bangor

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether enforcement measures will be taken against South Eastern Regional College for beginning the construction of a theatre in Bangor despite the relevant planning permission having expired; and if so, to detail (i) what action can be taken; and (ii) the cost of renewing the planning application.
(AQW 30160/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Planning permission was granted on 4 November 2008 for the construction of a performing arts and technology innovation centre with associated car parking and landscaping. Planning officials inspected the site on 23 January 2014 and established that a vehicular access has been constructed in accordance with planning permission. Information is currently awaited from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to verify that the access was constructed before the planning permission expired on 4 November 2013. Therefore at the present time there is no evidence to demonstrate that the planning permission has expired or that any unauthorised development has been carried out which would give rise to enforcement action.

I am advised the fee for a similar application would be £18,330.

Exploris: Business Case

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment for his response to the business case produced by Ards Borough Council for keeping the Exploris aquarium open.
(AQW 30473/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Ards Borough Council approved an outline business plan at their meeting on 29th January. They have not yet considered or approved a business case with the necessary detailed costings and assumptions supporting the options under consideration. It is this detailed business case on which I and the Executive must make our decisions. A business case has been prepared by the consultant who also prepared the business plan and my officials, including the Department's economist, are currently scrutinizing the case. They are in discussion with the consultant and Council officials and they will report back to me on the outcome of these discussions.

The Council will have to agree the business case which must also be approved by DFP.

I remain committed to my Department funding all reasonable costs associated with running the seal sanctuary, and to bringing an agreed business case to the Executive at the earliest opportunity.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Vacant Domestic Properties

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how many domestic properties since October 2011 have been established as vacant; and how many owners has there been a successful request for rates payment (a) in full, or (b) in part.
(AQW 29795/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Domestic properties move in and out of occupancy on an ongoing basis. From 1st October 2011, vacant domestic property rating liability changed from zero to full liability, with the exception of a number of prescribed exclusions.

During the period from 1st October 2011 to 31st March 2013, 40,143 domestic properties with a known owner were established as vacant.

Due to exclusions, only 28,332 rate assessments were raised and bills issued. A total of (a) 18,213 of these have been fully paid and (b) 1,987 partially paid . LPS has not received payment for the remaining 8,132 bills.

North West Regional Science Park

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the funding provided by her Department to the Northern West Regional Science Park.
(AQW 30118/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The North West Regional Science Park was awarded funding of £12,051,825 under the INTERREG IVA Programme. Of this, the match funding provided by the Department of Finance and Personnel is £2,334,739.

Rates Payments: Land and Property Services

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how many (i) domestic; and (ii) residential rate payers have had their rates payments returned to them in each of the last three years because Land and Property Services are unable to accept advance payments.
(AQW 30143/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The information requested is not available.

Northern Ireland Civil Service: Grades

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide a breakdown of the three highest ranking civil service grades, for each of the last ten years, broken down by gender.
(AQW 30165/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The information requested is set out in the attached table.

Breakdown of Grades 1, 2, and 3 for each of the last ten years, broken down by gender

		NICS Grades		
Year*	**Gender**	**Grade 1**	**Grade 2**	**Grade 3**
2003	Male	1	12	38
	Female	0	2	7
2004	Male	1	12	39
	Female	0	2	9
2005	Male	1	10	34
	Female	0	2	9
2006	Male	1	9	35
	Female	0	1	12
2007	Male	1	10	35
	Female	0	1	12
2008	Male	1	12	33
	Female	0	1	10

Year*	Gender	NICS Grades		
		Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
2009	Male	1	13	34
	Female	0	1	12
2010	Male	1	15	34
	Female	0	2	11
2011	Male	1	14	31
	Female	0	1	9
2012	Male	1	11	28
	Female	0	2	7
2013	Male	1	11	29
	Female	0	1	8

Notes

* Data is at 01 October in each year except 2009 when the date reference is 01 December.

Does not include staff seconded outside the NICS or staff on a career break.

Travel Expenditure

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel pursuant to AQW 29680/11-15, can the information be supplied in respect of his Department.
(AQW 30186/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: The total expenditure on Ministerial travel in my Department was (a) £280 for the period January to June 2013; and (b) £3,458 for the period July to December 2013.

Procurement Procedures

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the procurement procedures with which all departments have to comply in relation to the awarding of training programmes to external groups and organisations.
(AQW 30193/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: All NICS departments, their agencies, non-departmental public bodies and public corporations are subject to the Executive's Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy. This policy requires compliance with the obligations set out in the European Directive, 2004/18/EC, the Public Contracts Regulations 2006 (as amended) and the overarching principles of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

The Public Contracts Regulations divide services into "Part A" (or "priority") services and "Part B" (or "residual") services. The award of training programmes to external groups and organisations is defined as a Part B service as listed in Schedule III of the regulations.

Part B tenders must comply with the Regulations in that they must be "adequately advertised", must include a technical specification, and feedback must be available. Part B services are also bound by the general obligations of transparency, equal treatment, non discrimination and proportionality that derive directly from the TFEU. The Treaties and UK competition law also require that "nothing shall be done which in any way prevents, restricts or distorts competition."

Rates: Disabled Persons Allowance

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether people who have had adaptations carried out in their home, at the recommendation of an Occupational Therapist or Health Professional, are contacted by a member of the Disabled Persons Allowance team, to inform them of their potential eligibility for Disabled Personal Allowance Rates Rebate.
(AQW 30199/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: There is no prerequisite for the Disabled Persons Allowance (DPA) team to contact either Occupational Therapists or Health Professionals as it is up to the ratepayer to submit an application if they think that adaptations made to property qualify for DPA. Land & Property Services, through its Outreach events, regularly makes informal contact with Health Care Professionals while promoting rate reliefs such as DPA. Many of the adaptations recommended by them during these discussions do not fall within the terms of the DPA scheme however, the Disabled Facilities Grant administered by Northern Ireland Housing Executive covers them.

Rates: Commercial Enterprises/Charities

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail how many commerical enterprises, who have previously been paying rates, have successfully been registered as a charitable foundation, in the last five years
(AQW 30218/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: My Department does not hold the requested information.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Locums: Cost

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the cost of the appointment of locums in each Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29710/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Health and Social Care Trusts advise that it is not possible to separately identify the appointment costs of locums. Locums are appointed from different sources. The main one is the Trusts internal electronic locum sourcing system which is supplemented by the use of agencies who are on a procured contract call off list. On rare occasions agencies not on the call off list can also be used to engage locums. The locum hourly rate includes the agency commission fee.

Needle Stick Injuries

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of needlestick injuries in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29923/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is only possible to provide the compensation and legal costs of needle stick injuries for settled Employers Liability claims for the past three years, as follows:

2012/13 £	2011/12 £	2010/11 £
99,746	151,917	210,033

January Monitoring Round: Intended Spend

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a breakdown of his intended spend of the extra £30m of resource which he secured from the January Monitoring Round.
(AQW 30035/11-15)

Mr Poots: The January Monitoring allocation will play a critical role in helping to address a range of pressures in those front line services that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including looked after children and our elderly population.

Trusts have been experiencing increasing pressures and demands within unscheduled care / emergency admissions and domiciliary care services. There is also a focus on maintaining and improving the safety and quality of patient care across all our settings. In terms of children's services, there has been an increase in the numbers of Looked After Children during 2013/14, requiring additional expenditure on child protection registration, costs of care (in foster care or residential care), legal costs and social work costs.

January Monitoring Round: Medical Negligence Cases

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the £30m allocated to his Department in the January Monitoring Round will be spent; and whether it will be used to deal with medical negligence cases.
(AQW 30037/11-15)

Mr Poots: The January Monitoring allocation will play a critical role in helping to address a range of pressures in those front line services that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including looked after children and our elderly population.

The Health and Social Care Trusts have been experiencing increasing pressures and demands within unscheduled care / emergency admissions and domiciliary care services. There is also a focus on maintaining and improving the safety and quality of patient care across all our settings. In terms of children's services, there has been an increase in the numbers of Looked After Children during 2013/14, requiring additional expenditure on child protection registration, costs of care (in foster care or residential care), legal costs and social work costs

Funding has not been provided at this stage for clinical negligence cases.

January Monitoring Round: Intended Spend

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the £30m allocated to his Department in the January Monitoring Round will be spent.
(AQW 30038/11-15)

Mr Poots: The January Monitoring allocation will play a critical role in helping to address a range of pressures in those front line services that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including looked after children and our elderly population.

Trusts have been experiencing increasing pressures and demands within unscheduled care / emergency admissions and domiciliary care services. There is also a focus on maintaining and improving the safety and quality of patient care across all our settings. In terms of children's services, there has been an increase in the numbers of Looked After Children during 2013/14, requiring additional expenditure on child protection registration, costs of care (in foster care or residential care), legal costs and social work costs.

January Monitoring Round: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much of the £30m awarded to his Department in the January Monitoring Round will be allocated to the Western Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 30064/11-15)

Mr Poots: The January Monitoring allocation will play a critical role in helping to address a range of pressures in those front line services that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including looked after children and our elderly population.

Trusts have been experiencing increasing pressures and demands within unscheduled care / emergency admissions and domiciliary care services. There is also a focus on maintaining and improving the safety and quality of patient care across all our settings. In terms of children's services, there has been an increase in the numbers of Looked After Children during 2013/14, requiring additional expenditure on child protection registration, costs of care (in foster care or residential care), legal costs and social work costs.

As the extent of each of these pressures will be different in each Trust, the Health and Social Care Board and Local Commissioning Groups are currently working with Trusts to ensure that the funds are prioritised to meet the needs of patients and clients in each of the Trust areas.

Universities: Looked-after Children

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail how many looked after children are currently enrolled in universities in (i) Northern Ireland; (ii) England; (iii) Scotland; (iv) Wales; and (v) the Republic of Ireland.
(AQW 30078/11-15)

Mr Poots: This question has been interpreted to mean the number of looked after children from Northern Ireland enrolled at university in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts have informed the Department that there were no looked after children from Northern Ireland enrolled at university in Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales or the Republic of Ireland. HSC Trusts do however support a number of care leavers attending university across these nations. Table 1 below details the number of care leavers attending university in each of the requested nations.

Table 1: Care Leavers Attending University by Nation

Nation	No. of Care Leavers
Northern Ireland	28
England	18
Scotland/Wales	9
Republic of Ireland	0
Total	**55**

* Due to small numbers the Scotland and Wales categories have been merged.

Source: HSC Trusts

January Monitoring Round: Intended Spend

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the £30m allocated to his Department in the January Monitoring Round will be spent.
(AQW 30087/11-15)

Mr Poots: The January Monitoring allocation will play a critical role in helping to address a range of pressures in those front line services that affect the most vulnerable in our society, including looked after children and our elderly population.

Trusts have been experiencing increasing pressures and demands within unscheduled care / emergency admissions and domiciliary care services. There is also a focus on maintaining and improving the safety and quality of patient care across all our settings. In terms of children's services, there has been an increase in the numbers of Looked After Children during 2013/14, requiring additional expenditure on child protection registration, costs of care (in foster care or residential care), legal costs and social work costs.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Critical Care Unit

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the Critical Care Unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital will become operational.
(AQW 30088/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast HSC Trust intends to bring the Critical Care Building into operation on a phased basis from January 2015 to March 2015.

Smoking in Cars: Legislation

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that he announced on 14 November 2011 and 28 February 2012 that a public consultation on legislation banning smoking in cars was to be launched during 2012, for an update on these proposals.
(AQW 30092/11-15)

Mr Poots: Banning smoking in private vehicles is one of a range of tobacco control measures under consideration by my Department. While I had intended to launch a consultation seeking views on this issue towards the end of 2012, work on other important measures such as the Tobacco Retailers Bill, and standardised packaging for tobacco products, has meant that progress on smoking in cars has been delayed. I have written to Executive colleagues on a range of options relating to smoking in private vehicles, and I intend to address the issue in the near future.

In the meantime, my officials are continuing to monitor developments in other jurisdictions with regard to the banning of smoking in private vehicles where children and young people are present.

Personal Education Plans: Looked-after Children

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many looked after children in each Education and Library Board have a completed Personal Education Plan.
(AQW 30095/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not available by Education and Library Board. Figures below have been provided by the Health and Social Care Board and Trusts.

Looked After Children of school age 'in care for 12 months or longer' to have a completed Personal Education Plan

HSC Trust	Completed Personal Education Plan	When collated by Trusts
Belfast	281	January 2014
South Eastern	154	January 2014
Northern	140	December 2013
Western	133	January 2014
Southern	169	November 2013
Total	**877**	

Source: Health & Social Care Board and Trusts

My Department is for the first time collecting information on Personal Education Plans from Health and Social Care Trusts. Provisional information on PEPs for 2012/13 is expected to be available centrally from March 2014.

Air Ambulances

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who ensures that air ambulances are airworthy for the duration of their contract.
(AQW 30099/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has a contract with a private provider for air ambulance services to and from Northern Ireland. The service specification for the contract sets out in detail the requirements the provider must meet in providing safe, responsive, value for money air transport and associated services for the population of Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issues the Air Operator Certificate, the Continuing Airworthiness Management Organisation Approval Certificate, the Maintenance Organisation Approval Certificate and Dangerous Goods Approval. I am assured by the HSCB that the air ambulance service provider for Northern Ireland holds valid certifications issued by the CAA. The air ambulance service provider undergoes stringent regular auditing by CAA inspectors, who also carry out continuing airworthiness monitoring on the fleet.

Under the scope of the certificates issued by the UK CAA the air ambulance service provider for Northern Ireland is approved to undertake air ambulance activities.

Air Ambulances

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether aircraft used as air ambulances are licensed for that purpose.
(AQW 30100/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has a contract with a private provider for air ambulance services to and from Northern Ireland. The service specification for the contract sets out in detail the requirements the provider must meet in providing safe, responsive, value for money air transport and associated services for the population of Northern Ireland.

The United Kingdom Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issues the Air Operator Certificate, the Continuing Airworthiness Management Organisation Approval Certificate, the Maintenance Organisation Approval Certificate and Dangerous Goods Approval. I am assured by the HSCB that the air ambulance service provider for Northern Ireland holds valid certifications issued by the CAA. The air ambulance service provider undergoes stringent regular auditing by CAA inspectors, who also carry out continuing airworthiness monitoring on the fleet.

Under the scope of the certificates issued by the UK CAA the air ambulance service provider for Northern Ireland is approved to undertake air ambulance activities.

IVF Treatment

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department has made an assessment of the ability of other UK regions to commission more than one full cycle of IVF treatment.
(AQW 30134/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not carried out an assessment of other regions of the UK in relation to the provision of IVF treatment as it can vary between the individual Healthcare Trusts; however, I recognise that some regions across the UK provide a greater number of treatment cycles than the available resources currently permit in Northern Ireland.

Access criteria in Northern Ireland, which were developed following public consultations in 2006 and 2009, are however wider than in some other regions of the UK, e.g. offering treatment to couples who already have a child, thus allowing more people to avail of publicly funded treatment. To increase the number of individual treatments provided within current funding could limit the number of women who could access the service.

IVF Treatment

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department has made an assessment of the ability of other UK regions to commission a full cycle of IVF treatment where there is no cap on the number of viable frozen embryos transferred.
(AQW 30135/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not carried out an assessment of other regions of the UK in relation to the provision of IVF treatment as it can vary between the individual Healthcare Trusts; however, I recognise that some regions across the UK provide a greater number of treatment cycles than the available resources currently permit in Northern Ireland.

Access criteria in Northern Ireland, which were developed following public consultations in 2006 and 2009, are however wider than in some other regions of the UK, e.g. offering treatment to couples who already have a child, thus allowing more people to avail of publicly funded treatment. To increase the number of individual treatments provided within current funding could limit the number of women who could access the service.

IVF Treatment

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, based on current eligibility criteria, what extra funding would be needed to ensure Northern Ireland had the capacity to provide NHS patients with two full cycles of IVF treatment.
(AQW 30136/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Health and Social Care (HSC) Board currently invests £3 million per year in infertility services, which includes ovulation induction (OI) by oral medication (clomiphene citrate / gonadotrophins) and intrauterine insemination (IUI), as well as IVF and ICSI.

NICE Clinical Guideline CG156 on Fertility has recently been considered and endorsed by my Department, and it is now the responsibility of the HSC Board, as commissioner of services, to prepare a Draft Service Notification, which will set out its

approach to implementing the guidance in the context of currently available resources and other HSC priorities. The matter of funding required to provide additional IVF cycles will be considered as part of the Draft Service Specification.

Fertility Treatment

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the current commissioning plans for an improved patient pathway through NHS fertility treatment in order to bring Northern Ireland in line with the revised National Institute for Health and Care Excellence Guidance, 2013.
(AQW 30137/11-15)

Mr Poots: Since 2006, my Department has established formal links with NICE whereby all Clinical Guidelines and Technology Appraisals published by NICE from that date are locally reviewed for their applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, endorsed here.

NICE Clinical Guideline CG156 on fertility has recently been considered and endorsed by my Department, and it is now the responsibility of the HSC Board, as commissioner of services, to prepare a Draft Service Notification (formerly known as a "commissioning plan" or "Board response"), which will set out its approach to implementing the guidance within the context of currently available resources and other HSC priorities.

IVF Treatment

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 23041/11-15, to outline how his Department can provide up to three cycles of IVF treatment as recommended by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines.
(AQW 30140/11-15)

Mr Poots: Since 2006, the Department has formal links with NICE whereby all Clinical Guidelines and Technology Appraisals published by NICE from that date are locally reviewed for their applicability to Northern Ireland and, where appropriate, endorsed here.

NICE Clinical Guideline CG156 on fertility has recently been considered and endorsed by my Department, and it is now the responsibility of the HSC Board, as commissioner of services, to prepare a Draft Service Notification which will set out its approach to implementing the guidance within the context of currently available resources and other HSC priorities.

Families Matter Strategy

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the progress of the Families Matter Strategy.
(AQW 30153/11-15)

Mr Poots: Families Matter, launched in March 2009, emphasised the need to prioritise early intervention and prevention services to support families in Northern Ireland. The strategy focuses on joint and partnership working at strategic and operational levels.

The strategy acts as a framework to support early intervention and prevention family support services. In addition to the £2.8m allocated by the Department, additional funding has been allocated by the HSC to deliver services in support of the aims and objectives of Families Matter.

Since 2009, a wide range of services have been supported, including;

- Family Support Hubs;
- A regional directory of family support and child care services across Northern Ireland - www.familysupportni.gov.uk;
- Parenting education and support programmes;
- Relationship counselling;
- Family mediation;
- Child Contact Centres;
- Children's Court Officers.

Since 2009, the development of new health and social care structures and the formation of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership has created new opportunities for partnership working in the field of early intervention family support services. My Department has taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by these new operational structures as it has reviewed and amended the various activities in the Strategy.

In the last year, the Family Support Hub concept has been developed and is being rolled out across Northern Ireland. 10 Family Support Hubs are being opened in the Northern and Belfast HSC Trust areas utilising funding through Delivering Social Change.

The Family Support Website has been a particular success and receives up to 30,000 hits per month. The information available continues to provide a valuable service to families and service providers, and is increasingly used as a platform for

delivery of information by other Departments. For example, there has been significant development of the Family Support NI website to help support the Executive's Child Care Strategy, Bright Start.

Officials are in process of reviewing the operation of Child Contact Centres to identify best practice and future support needs for this valuable service.

My Department is leading on a review of alternative dispute resolution services, which will inform the development of family mediation and relationship support work under Families Matter.

The intention of Families Matter was to serve the needs of all families with children. As we have reviewed the implementation of the Strategy, we have identified that the needs of some specific groups are best served by explicitly addressing the issues that they face. For example, in future we will include recognition of the role of fathers, and particularly the importance of a separated father's continued involvement in his child's life. We will also highlight the needs of parents of children with a disability.

Working collaboratively with other Departments and private philanthropy, we are in the process of establishing an Early Intervention Transformation Programme, supported by a £30m fund. The aim of the programme and fund is to transform how we engage with children and families by acting earlier and in different ways to prevent family difficulties emerging or escalating and to produce improved outcomes in later life.

Families Matter has provided the strategic framework that has enabled my Department to collaborate effectively with other Departments and Agencies to improve outcomes for families and children.

Separated Fathers: Policy Papers

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of (i) Parental Separation: A Father's Guide; and (ii) Separated fathers: Fathers, Separation and Co-Parenting policy paper.
(AQW 30154/11-15)

Mr Poots: I would like to commend the partnership behind Man Matters for their excellent work in publishing these documents.

Separated fathers often find it difficult to know where to go for advice and support. A Father's Guide is an excellent resource that can help guide separated fathers through a very difficult period. The Separated Fathers briefing paper highlights a number of key messages to be considered by policy makers and service planners and I can confirm that they reflect the principles set out in my Department's Families Matter strategy.

Parents and families seeking additional information and support can also access the HSCB website www.familysupportni.gov.uk, which is a comprehensive directory of family support and childcare services across Northern Ireland.

A child's best interests are almost always enhanced by a safe and loving relationship with both parents. While divorce is an all too common occurrence in today's society, it is important to remember the important role that each parent plays in their child's development.

A number of my Executive colleagues share my views on this subject and I am committed to working with them to improve the support available to families who have separated, or who are in the process of separation.

Downe Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people were treated at the Accident and Emergency Unit of the Downe Hospital in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30168/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on attendances (new, unplanned and/or planned reviews) at emergency care departments is published on an annual basis and is available to view or download from:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/emergency_care-3/emergency-care-stats.htm

Alternatively, information on waiting times at emergency care departments (excluding planned review attendances) is published on a monthly basis, and is available to view or download from:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/hospital-stats/emergency_care-3/emergency_care-monthly_waiting_times.htm

Downe Hospital: Accident and Emergency Department

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the staff costs of running the Accident and Emergency Unit at the Downe Hospital for the weeks beginning (i) 9 December 2013; and (ii) 16 December 2013; (iii) 6 January 2014; and (iv) 13 January 2014.
(AQW 30170/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has advised my department that the staff costs of running the Accident and Emergency Unit at Downe Hospital are as follows:

(i) 9 December 2013 – £36,633.50

(ii) 16 December 2013 - £36,633.50

(iii) 6 January 2014 – £31,621.80 (est.)

(iv) 13 January 2014 - £31,621.80 (est.)

The permanent staff in the trust are paid monthly and therefore the Trust has apportioned the December costs over a 4 week period. The costs for December are therefore an average weekly running cost for the Emergency Department at Downe Hospital, rather than actual.

January costs are not available as yet, therefore the answer to (iii) & (iv) is an estimation based on December costs and figures currently available. Costs are for medical, nursing and administrative staff only and do not include central services such as porters.

Mental Health Service Provision: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what mental health service provision is in place for young people in North Down.
(AQW 30174/11-15)

Mr Poots: Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Northern Ireland are provided through a stepped care model, based on the clinical needs of the individual. Services are provided by four CAMHS teams, with Belfast HSC Trust providing services to both the Belfast and South Eastern HSC Trust areas, including North Down.

Inpatient care for young people, when required, is provided in Beechcroft, the Regional Child and Adolescent Inpatient Mental Health Unit at the Forster Green Hospital site in Belfast.

CAMHS to the North Down area are provided by a local community based team in James Street, Newtownards. This is a multidisciplinary team which specialises in the assessment and intervention for under 18s with mental health needs and their families/carers.

Services for children and young people presenting in crisis, and requiring assessment and intervention within 24/48 hours, are provided by a mobile Crisis Assessment Intervention Team, available 7 days per week to GPs and Emergency Departments.

There are also specialist services for young people with eating disorders or drug and alcohol issues. A number of voluntary sector organisations also provide support to young people with mental health problems.

Accident and Emergency Doctors: Job Advertisements

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many job advertisements for middle grade Accident and Emergency doctors have been placed in the National Press and medical journals by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30175/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust advises that job advertisements have been placed in the National Press and medical journals for middle grade Accident and Emergency doctors as follows -

2009 – 1 advertisement in February
2010 – 1 advertisement in July
2011 – 2 advertisements in March and July
2012 – 0 advertisements
2013 – 1 advertisement in July

A further advertisement was placed in January 2014.

Nursing Cover

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department provides financial resources, within the budget which is ring-fenced, to deploy additional nursing staff to provide cover for nurses who are undertaking education programmes.
(AQW 30179/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department provides all Health and Social Care Trusts with the budget required to fund nursing staff to cover for those nurses who are undertaking education programmes.

Clinical Negligence Claims

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department paid out in clinical negligence claims in the last financial year.
(AQW 30187/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that these questions refer to the total amount paid on clinical/social care negligence cases by each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust and Legacy HSS Board.

During 2012/13, £26.7 million was paid on clinical/social care negligence cases by HSC Trusts/Legacy HSS Boards (AQW 30187/11-15).

Between 1 April 2013 and 30 September 2013, £26.1 million was paid on clinical/social care negligence cases by HSC Trusts/ Legacy HSS Boards (AQW 30188/11-15).

It should be noted that these figures are provisional and may be subject to change.

Clinical Negligence Claims

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on clinical negligence in the current financial year.
(AQW 30188/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that these questions refer to the total amount paid on clinical/social care negligence cases by each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust and Legacy HSS Board.

During 2012/13, £26.7 million was paid on clinical/social care negligence cases by HSC Trusts/Legacy HSS Boards (AQW 30187/11-15).

Between 1 April 2013 and 30 September 2013, £26.1 million was paid on clinical/social care negligence cases by HSC Trusts/ Legacy HSS Boards (AQW 30188/11-15).

It should be noted that these figures are provisional and may be subject to change.

Mental Health Charities: Funding

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail any funding provided to mental health charities in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area in each of the last five years, including (i) to whom this funding was awarded; and (ii) for the provision of which services.
(AQW 30192/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust has advised that it contracts with six mental health charity organisations. These organisations are as follows:

- Action Mental Health
- Carecall
- Family Caring Centre
- Mindwise
- NI Association for Mental Health
- Rehability

The services provided by these organisations include advocacy, counselling, day care, drop in facilities, support and advice and supported living. Each of these organisations provides a combination of these services.

Total funding awarded to these organisations in the last 5 years is set out below:

Financial Year	Funding (approximate) £K
2009/2010	700
2010/2011	700
2011/2012	750
2012/2013	1150
2013/2014	1150

Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on transcranial magnetic stimulation treatment being made available to people with extreme migraine conditions.
(AQW 30214/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust that transcranial magnetic stimulation treatment is not currently available in Northern Ireland through the Trust. There are no plans for the neurology service to introduce transcranial magnetic stimulation in the future as evidence of its effectiveness is limited.

Gall Bladder Removal Operations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many gall bladder removal operations have been carried out in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30220/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of gall bladder removal operations carried out in each of the last five years in HSC hospitals in Northern Ireland is given in the table below.

Year	Number of gall bladder removal operations carried out
2008/09	2,271
2009/10	2,302
2010/11	2,214
2011/12	2,376
2012/13	2,483

Source: Hospital Inpatient System

Note: Figures shown above are for total gall bladder removal operations (cholecystectomies) carried out and do not include partial cholecystectomies.

Looked-after Child: Placement

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) why a looked after child was placed in a residential care home for older people; (ii) why it took four months to find a suitable placement for the child; (iii) whether this incident was reported as a Serious Adverse Incident; and if so (iv) by whom it was reported.
(AQW 30246/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have not been made aware of any looked after child being placed in a residential home for older people. However I have been informed by Belfast Health and Social Care Trust that a young adult aged 19 was placed in a nursing home for adults with learning disabilities for a period of 15 weeks until a placement was found in a specialist unit which was deemed to offer the necessary skills, expertise and physical environment to meet their needs.

In line with current governance arrangements none of the criteria was met to report the matter to the Department as a Serious Adverse Incident.

Avastin

Mr McKinney asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether Avastin will be made availble through the Health Service.
(AQW 30269/11-15)

Mr Poots: Since 2006 my Department has established formal links with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) whereby technology appraisals and clinical guidelines published by the Institute are reviewed for their applicability to Northern Ireland and endorsed where appropriate. NICE is an entirely independent body which provides guidance on the best possible and most effective treatments available using the most up-to-date evidence and expert opinion.

In Northern Ireland all NICE approved specialist drugs are either recurrently funded or available via a cost per case mechanism.

NICE has not recommended Avastin for use in the NHS and therefore I would not expect to see Avastin routinely commissioned in Northern Ireland.

However, for treatments not routinely commissioned in Northern Ireland the Health and Social Care Board has a clear process by which individual patient requests can be considered, the individual funding request (IFR), and I have attached the following link for your convenience: http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/pdf/Protocol_ECR_and__IFR_arrangements.pdf.

As part of the process the patient's consultant is expected to put in writing the clinical circumstances which apply to the case and support the request for treatment. Such requests need to be supported by nominated senior clinicians and managers within the relevant Health and Social Care Trust. Clinical decisions are the responsibility of medical professionals.

Family Fund

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the demand for support through the Family Fund grant scheme, the premature conclusion in the processing of grant applications for the 2013/14 financial year and the number of families currently unable to avail of grant support, what consideration he has given to increasing the funding allocation for the 2014/15 Family Fund scheme.
(AQW 30272/11-15)

Mr Poots: Through funding support of £1.57m provided by my Department to the Family Fund in the current year, 2870 families in Northern Ireland with disabled children have been helped.

I am aware that the Family Fund has recently announced that, due to a significant increase in demand for support, all funding received from this Department for the current financial year has been allocated and it is unable to process any further applications from families in Northern Ireland.

I regret this position but due to the ongoing financial challenges facing my Department I am currently unable to increase their funding provision. However, DHSSPS officials will be meeting with the Family Fund in the near future to further discuss this issue and how best it can help support families in NI.

Department of Justice

Ryan McGreechan: Legal Aid

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total Legal Aid paid for proceedings launched by, and on behalf of, Ryan McGreechan, broken down by (i) solicitor/legal firm; (ii) junior counsel; (iii) senior counsel; and (iv) any and all other costs met by Legal Aid.
(AQW 29980/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I am unable to provide this information as Article 24 of the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (NI) Order 1981 precludes the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission from releasing the information requested.

Serious Case Reviews

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to serious case reviews, to detail how many (i) have been completed in each of the last ten years; (ii) are currently being carried out; (iii) have been released; and (iv) are completed and have yet to be released.
(AQW 30164/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is detailed in the table below:

Year	Completed	Ongoing	Released	Completed but awaiting release
2004	0	0	0	0
2005	0	0	0	0
2006	2	0	1	0
2007	1	0	0	0
2008	1	0	1	0
2009	0	0	0	0
2010	0	0	0	0
2011	2	0	0	0
2012	3	0	1	1
2013	0	0	0	0
2014 (@ 3/2/14)	1	1	0	1

Maghaberry Prison: Staff Injuries

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Justice how many members of staff have been hurt or injured at Maghaberry Prison in the last twelve months.
(AQW 30176/11-15)

Mr Ford: Between 1 January 2013 and 31 December 2013 inclusive, 274 members of staff have reported being injured at work.

Magilligan Prison: Working Days Lost

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of working days lost due to staff at Magilligan Prison being off as a result of attacks whilst on duty.
(AQW 30271/11-15)

Mr Ford: Table A below shows the number of days lost, in the last three years, by staff following an attack /assault whilst on duty.

Table A

Date	No of working days lost	No of Staff
01/02/11 – 31/01/12	94	5
01/02/12 – 31/01/13	108	2
01/02/13 – 31/01/14	194	7

Hemsworth and McCaughey Cases

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice to outline how he is taking forward actions to address the judgements in the McCaughey and Hemsworth cases against the United Kingdom at the European Court of Human Rights and to ensure compliance in relation, in particular, to Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights.
(AQW 30292/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is clear that we need a more encompassing and strategic approach to dealing with the past across the justice system, wider government and society. However, in the absence of agreement on such an approach, and reflecting the State's obligation to meet the requirements of the European Convention on Human Rights, my Department is developing a proposed action plan in response to the Hemsworth judgment. The action plan will be brought before the Executive in advance of the Court's 16 April 2014 deadline. Whilst the NIO/MOD lead on the McCaughey and others case, the judgments are in substance fundamentally the same and as such one action plan will be submitted on behalf of the UK Government.

Inquests: Backlog

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice to detail the current backlog in numbers of inquests in Northern Ireland, including how many of these are legacy and/or historic.
(AQW 30293/11-15)

Mr Ford: As at 29 January 2014, 584 deaths have been reported to the Coroner in which the investigation is not complete. Not all cases referred to the Coroner will progress to an inquest hearing. There are currently 21 'non – legacy' inquests listed for hearing.

As at 29 January 2014 there were 73 'legacy' deaths at various stages of investigation which will result in 45 inquest hearings.

Inquests: Listed on Website

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to list future inquests and verdicts on the website of the Coroners Service of Northern Ireland.
(AQW 30296/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) has no plans to list future inquests and findings on the NICTS website because of the personal and sensitive nature of the information involved.

Prisoners: Medication

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, if a prisoner in charge of their own medication is detected abusing the privilege either by supplying their medication to others or found to be in possession of, or to have taken medication which was not prescribed or illegal substances, are they (i) charged and dealt with by the Prison Service or a court; and/or (ii) banned from being in charge of their own medication; and if so, to detail if this a permanent ban or subject to review.
(AQW 30297/11-15)

Mr Ford:

(i) Those prisoners found to be abusing prescribed medication are subject to disciplinary processes; in addition many cases are referred to the PSNI with a view to prosecution.

(ii) In cases where there has been an abuse of the privilege the South Eastern Trust will consider whether it is appropriate for a prisoner to continue possessing his own medication.

Prison Service: Medication

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) when; and (ii) why the Northern Ireland Prison Service agreed to allow prisoners to be in charge of their own medication.
(AQW 30298/11-15)

Mr Ford: The decision to allow prisoners to be in charge of their own medication was taken by the Northern Ireland Prison Service prior to the transfer of healthcare to the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust in 2008.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service first issued in-possession medication to prisoners in the early 1990s in blister packs. At the time, there was a move to professionalise Healthcare provision with the introduction of Nurses.

In-possession medication reduced the amount of time professional nurses took to distribute routine medication. In addition, providing prisoners with in-possession medication enabled them to take responsibility for their own medication, which reflects the circumstances that would exist in the community.

National Crime Agency: Discussions

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Justice to outline the progress he has made in discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Home Secretary and the SDLP, regarding the expansion of the role of the National Crime Agency locally.
(AQW 30319/11-15)

Mr Ford: I wrote to the SDLP and Sinn Féin on 25 November 2013 and again on 25 January 2014 to seek to move this matter forward. I believe that the package I have proposed is reasonable and takes account of the policing architecture here. I am keen to conclude discussions soon as I am being advised that the absence of the NCA in the devolved arena is having an impact on our law enforcement effort.

Since the New Year, I have discussed this issue with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Home Office are aware of the current position. Both the Secretary of State and the Home Secretary have offered their support.

Desertcreat Community Safety College

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Justice why the construction of the Community Safety College at Desertcreat has been set back to June 2014.
(AQW 30322/11-15)

Mr Ford: As you will be aware, there was a difference between the costs included in the business case and those submitted by the organisations bidding for the tender. The Programme Board carried out a Bill of Reductions exercise to reduce the cost of the project. The savings identified, in excess of £19m, will not compromise the functionality of the college but will ensure the provision of a high quality training facility which will meet the needs of police, prison and fire services.

On completion of the Bill of Reductions exercise, an Addendum Business Case had to be prepared and approved by the three services and two departments before being submitted to DFP for approval. On 26 November 2013 DFP formally approved the addendum business case.

The preferred bidder, FGP consortium, was appointed on 3 December 2013 and the discussions are expected to take several months which should culminate with a contract being awarded in May 2014, subject to the NI Executive's final approval before the contract is signed.

With the Addendum Business Case approved and the preferred bidder appointed with discussions ongoing, the contract is planned to be awarded by May 2014, subject to Full Business Case and Executive approvals, with construction starting June 2014.

Prisons: Drugs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to prisons that have drugs-associated problematic areas, to detail why is there not a stringent loss of privileges, such as association, for drug dealers and/or takers in order to reduce supply to other vulnerable prisoners and/or bullying of legitimately-prescribed medication from vulnerable prisoners; and in respect of drug takers, to prevent addiction.
(AQW 30336/11-15)

Mr Ford: Any prisoner who is found to be abusing drugs, including prescribed medication, is subject to disciplinary procedures. Sanctions that are available to the Governor include restriction of association, loss of privileges and referral to PSNI. Those prisoners who come under any form of bullying due to drugs are fully supported and appropriate measures are taken against those found to be bullying. Likewise support is available for those wishing to avoid drugs and for those with addiction problems.

Prisons: Drugs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to outline why, after so many previous concerns being raised by numerous agencies, there is still a drugs culture in prisons; and whether he will introduce a zero tolerance policy, robustly administered to eradicate the problem, given the risks to all parties involved.
(AQW 30339/11-15)

Mr Ford: NIPS is fully aware of the dangers that drugs present in prisons and has a stated policy of zero tolerance. Working with partners such as PSNI, SET and drug addiction services, NIPS has in place all lawful measures available to reduce the illicit use of drugs.

Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981: Article 19

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many summary proceedings have not proceeded as a result of failure to comply with the limitation requirements of Article 19 of the Magistrates' Courts (NI) Order 1981, in the last twelve months.
(AQW 30353/11-15)

Mr Ford: This information is not available as it is not recorded.

Rural Crime: Conviction Rates

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Justice why it is not possible to identify between conviction rates for (a) rural and (b) agricultural related crimes.
(AQW 30381/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no specific offence of rural crime or agricultural crime under criminal law. Conviction data are recorded for generic offences, such as theft, robbery or criminal damage and datasets held by my Department currently do not contain information on the location and circumstances in which offences were committed. Therefore, it is not currently possible to identify from the data whether a conviction relates to rural or agricultural-related crime.

The recently established Rural Crime Unit is working to identify trends and patterns in crimes, that the PSNI have identified as having occurred in rural settlements and offences where the victim is involved in an agricultural-based activity, in order that resources can be effectively targeted to tackle this type of crime.

Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre: Prison Escapee

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice why a prison escapee was invited to talk about his experiences to prisoners in HM Young Offenders Centre Hydebank Wood.
(AQW 30480/11-15)

Mr Ford: During 2013 a book club was established for inmates at Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre and on a number of occasions individual authors have attended to discuss their works. They include Eoin McNamee, Sheena Wilkinson and Lucy Caldwell.

In December 2013, the group expressed an interest in Gerry Kelly MLA's book "The Escape", and when it became known that Mr Kelly might be interested in attending, an invitation was made for him to visit.

The visit was scheduled for the evening of 4 February 2014, although these arrangements were made without the knowledge of the establishment's Governor. When all the circumstances of these arrangements were considered, he made the decision that the event should no longer go ahead as he did not feel it was appropriate for a Young Offenders Centre.

Road Traffic Accidents: Leaving the Scene

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the current legislation; and (ii) the range of penalties available in relation to a person leaving the scene of an accident without providing any contact details or informing the PSNI.
(AQW 30496/11-15)

Mr Ford: Article 175(2) of the Road Traffic (NI) Order 1981 provides that it is an offence for a driver to fail to stop his/her vehicle after an accident and give to a constable, or any person with reasonable grounds for asking, his/her name and address, the name and address of the owner of the vehicle and the identification mark or number of the vehicle. The driver must also keep the vehicle stationary at, or near, the place where the accident occurred, for as long as is reasonable, to provide his/her name and car details.

Part 1, Schedule 1 of the Road Traffic Offenders (NI) Order 1996 provides that the offence is punishable summarily and carries a penalty of up to a level 5 fine (£5,000) or 6 months' imprisonment or both. The court must also endorse the driver's licence with 5-10 penalty points and has discretion to order the disqualification of the driver.

Department for Regional Development

Cycling: New Lanes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many extra cycle lanes have been provided, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 26170/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): In total, for the years 2008-09 to 2013/14 (to date), my Department has provided 65 extra cycle lanes, including a small number of extensions to existing facilities.

However, with the creation of the new Cycling Unit within my Department, which is developing an ongoing programme of work as it aims to ensure that cycling provision is a key element in both transport strategy and delivery, I expect this figure to rise in future years

Translink: Enterprise

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the average cost to process and deliver a Translink Belfast to Dublin train ticket that is booked online; (ii) why the company offers a discount on such tickets booked online given the extra expense of postage; (iii) why users cannot print their own tickets after purchasing online; and (iv) when the system will be updated to enable users to print their own tickets.
(AQW 29915/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have liaised with Translink officials who advise as follows:-

i) Vouchers are posted out by 1st class post (at 47p) with up to 4 vouchers per booking.

ii) The discount reflects a yield management approach similar to, for example, airlines where early booking/purchase is rewarded with a discount. This practice is also common among most rail operators in an effort to generate additional revenue. The lowest fares are offered on off-peak Enterprise services which generally have a lower level of patronage.

iii) For reasons of fraud prevention – to prevent copying and multiple use of a ticket – current Translink ticketing infrastructure does not facilitate an e-ticketing option to enable self-fulfillment of on line purchases.

iv) Translink are currently preparing a business case for a system where the ticket can be printed at a machine in station – although it should be noted passengers can opt for tickets purchased on line to be collected in station as opposed to delivered by post. Some train operating companies and other commercial sellers in Great Britain offer 'print at home', 'redeem at station' or 'post' similar to what Translink offers. Most are moving to 'print at home' / 'redeem in station' and Translink is doing likewise.

A6: Dualling Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development when he plans to announce the next stage of the A6 Dungiven to Londonderry Dualling Scheme.
(AQW 29936/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The A6 Londonderry to Dungiven dualling scheme has been through Public Inquiry. My officials have considered the Inspector's recommendations and I expect to make a Departmental Statement on the way forward later this financial year.

However, progression of these schemes to construction will be dependent upon the successful completion of the statutory processes and the availability of funding.

Mobuoy Road: Landfill Site

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the discovery of the illegal landfill site at Mobuoy Road is likely to prejudice the construction of the A6 dual carriageway.
(AQW 29942/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The discovery of illegal landfill at Mobuoy Road will not prejudice the construction of the proposed A6 dual carriageway. At Mobuoy, the new road is aligned around the eastern periphery of the City Industrial Waste and Campsie Sand and Gravel sites, avoiding the illegal landfill.

The A6 dual carriageway scheme includes a proposal to reinstate part of the Campsie Sand and Gravel quarry, located between Mobouy Road and the River Faughan, to replace flood storage capacity lost to the new dual carriageway. If the illegal landfill is still present when the road is being constructed, I am content that installation of appropriately engineered measures to contain the illegal waste will ensure that the compensatory floodplain can be constructed as planned.

Translink: Fares

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the average percentage increase in fares for (i) Ulsterbus; and (ii) NI Railways journeys, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 29953/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the average percentage fare increase for Ulsterbus in each of the last 3 years was as follows: 2012 -3% and 2013- 3%; for NI Railways the increase was 2012-3% and 2013- 5%.

You will note that I recently announced that there will be no increase on fares for Ulsterbus, Metro services and NI Railways for 2014.

Parking: Residents' Schemes, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has considered the inclusion of areas of North Down in the proposals for residents' parking schemes.
(AQW 29960/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has considered areas within North Down for Residents' Parking Schemes. The Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) identifies the centre of Bangor as being an area of parking restraint and it is my intention to progress Residents' Parking Schemes in some residential areas in due course.

Whilst Holywood has not been similarly identified, officials are currently carrying out an initial assessment of the eligibility of residential streets within the town centre for a Residents' Parking Scheme. Surveys are currently underway in a number of streets within the town centre to inform a summary report that will be available at the end of February 2014.

Officials have also received requests for schemes within other areas and these will be given due consideration in the future.

The timing of schemes outside of Belfast will be dependent upon the progress of those being developed at present elsewhere in Northern Ireland and a future prioritisation of remaining areas.

Parking: Residents' Schemes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria being used to pilot or implement resident's parking schemes.
(AQW 29961/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's policy allows for the introduction of residents' parking schemes in residential areas where parking from nearby businesses, sports facilities, hospitals, schools, universities, theatres, shopping areas, etc penetrates residential streets and prevents residents from parking in reasonably close proximity to their houses. However, two thirds of households within a scheme boundary must be in favour of the proposed scheme, subject to a minimum response rate of one third of all households.

The policy also allows for the introduction of residents' parking schemes for transportation reasons where, for example, local transport plans stipulate that commuter parking needs to be controlled, or for areas where my Department is implementing an area wide parking strategy that could potentially displace parking to adjacent areas.

To determine whether a parking problem exists in an area, an assessment of the extent of available on-street and off-street parking is undertaken. Where parking difficulties exist during the working day (normally Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm), a scheme is deemed justified if the following criteria are met:

- more than 60% of the available kerbside space is estimated to be occupied by non-residents' vehicles for more than 5 hours; and
- more than 80% is occupied in total for the same 5 hours.

Where parking difficulties occur outside of the working day, the following criteria are used:

- more than 40% of the available kerbside space estimated to be occupied by non-residents' vehicles for more than any consecutive 4-hour period outside of the working day; and
- more than 80% occupied in total for the same 4-hour period.

Parking: Residents' Schemes

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria used to determine whether a street will be included in a residents' parking scheme.
(AQW 29962/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's policy allows for the introduction of residents' parking schemes in residential areas where parking from nearby businesses, sports facilities, hospitals, schools, universities, theatres, shopping areas, etc penetrates residential streets and prevents residents from parking in reasonably close proximity to their houses. However, two thirds of households within a scheme boundary must be in favour of the proposed scheme, subject to a minimum response rate of one third of all households.

To determine whether a parking problem exists in an area, an assessment of the extent of available on-street and off-street parking is undertaken. Where resident parking difficulties exist during the working day (normally Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm) a scheme is deemed justified if the following criteria are met:

- more than 60% of the available kerbside space is estimated to be occupied by non-residents' vehicles for more than 5 hours; and
- more than 80% is occupied in total for the same 5 hours.

Where parking difficulties occur outside of the working day, the following criteria are used:

- more than 40% of the available kerbside space estimated to be occupied by non-residents' vehicles for more than any consecutive 4-hour period outside of the working day; and
- more than 80% occupied in total for the same 4-hour period.

It is recognised that adjacent streets may also need to be included in a scheme if there is the potential for displacement of parking into them. When identifying an area to be zoned for consideration as a residents' parking scheme, the area will normally be geographically linked and generally seen as being within the same area or part of the same community. The area identified should not be too large and the boundaries of the scheme will normally be defined by main roads, railways,

large open space, large commercial areas, etc. In some cases, however, an area with these boundaries may need to be sub-divided to reduce it to a manageable size.

Parking: Residents' Schemes, Bogside

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 29139/11-15, to detail when the residents' parking scheme in the Bogside area of Derry will be implemented.
(AQW 29985/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is anticipated implementation of the Bogside residents' parking scheme will take place in the autumn of 2014, however, this is subject to no objections being received to the proposals when they are formally advertised.

Roads: Maintenance

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how much of his Department's budget has been allocated to (i) maintaining, updating and creating new roads; (ii) maintaining road signs; and (iii) updating road markings, in each of the past five years.
(AQW 30014/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of my Department's outturn allocation in each financial year since 2008/09 for maintaining, updating and creating new roads, maintaining road signs and updating road markings are included in the table below:

Allocation of Roads Service Budget

Activity	Financial Year £m				
	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Major Road Improvements	132.9	148.5	227.5	32.3	52.0
Minor Local Road Improvements and Road Safety	35.4	31.5	14.6	35.1	11.3
Road Signs	6.8	6.83	6.26	6.34	6.7
Road Markings Inc. Road Studs	2.0	2.1	1.95	2.31	2.32
Structural Maintenance	62.98	85.19	88.31	120.44	109.69

A6: Dualling Scheme

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the next stages of the A6 Dungiven to Derry Dualling Scheme, including when tender opportunities will be published.
(AQW 30021/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The A6 Londonderry to Dungiven dualling scheme is well advanced in terms of development. It has been through Public Inquiry and publication of the Departmental Statement is expected before the end of the financial year. However, progression of the project would, subject to final approval of the business case, be reliant upon funding being made available.

The Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-21 sets out plans to augment Executive funds by accessing alternative finance for some projects that are suitable to be funded in this way. This includes the progression of a package of high priority road schemes amounting to around £390 million, which would embrace improvements to the A6. However, a commitment to fund the revenue consequences of this road package will be required and so the timing depends on future resource budgets. I will, however, continue to bid for conventional funding for the A6 dualling schemes.

Millennium Way, Lurgan

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the progress the Millennium Way Phase II project following the submission of a planning application, including whether the project will be delivered in 2014.
(AQW 30030/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is continuing to develop this scheme and a new Planning Application for a revised alignment was submitted early in September 2013. I am hopeful planning permission will be granted in the near future.

In the meantime, work is ongoing to finalise the detailed design for the proposal, which will inform the extent of land required for the scheme. Upon receipt of planning approval, my officials will meet with lands owners involved, to commence land acquisition procedures. However, the acquisition of this land is likely to require a Vesting Order and a Public Inquiry may also be required, to determine if the level of land take identified is appropriate.

Progression of the proposal onto my Department's Construction Programme remains subject to the proposal continuing to have a satisfactory economic appraisal, clearing the statutory procedures and funding being made available in future budget settlements.

British-Irish Council and North/South Ministerial Council Meetings

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the ministerial meetings on transport issues which have taken place under the auspices of (i) the British Irish Council; and (ii) the North South Ministerial Council, since May 2007.
(AQW 30034/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Minister for Regional Development has attended six Summit meetings of the British Irish Council since May 2007. All eleven work sectors of the British Irish Council, including transport issues were discussed at these meetings. Details of the meetings are set out below.

16 July 2007, Belfast
26 September 2008, Stirling
20 February 2009, Cardiff
20 June 2011, London
26 November 2012, Cardiff
21 June 2013, Londonderry

There have been no specific British Irish Council Ministerial meetings for the Transport work sector.

The Minister for Regional Development has attended 9 Plenary and 14 Transport Sectoral meetings of the North South Ministerial Council since May 2007 where transport issues were discussed. Details of the meetings are set out below.

17 July 2007, Plenary
14 September 2007, Transport Sectoral
12 December 2007, Transport Sectoral
21 May 2008, Transport Sectoral
23 January 2009, Plenary
3 April 2009, Transport Sectoral
6 July 2009, Plenary
4 November 2009, Transport Sectoral
14 December 2009, Plenary
3 March 2010, Transport Sectoral
5 July 2010, Plenary
20 October 2010, Transport Sectoral
21 January 2011, Plenary
9 February 2011, Transport Sectoral
10 June 2011, Plenary
21 October 2011, Transport Sectoral
18 November 2011, Plenary
20 April 2012, Transport Sectoral
15 June 2012, Plenary
5 October 2012, Transport Sectoral
28 March 2013, Transport Sectoral
17 April 2013, Transport Sectoral
28 November 2013, Transport Sectoral

A5: Independent Review

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the Terms of Reference in relation to the independent review of advice received from a consultant on the A5 road project.
(AQW 30045/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has commissioned a consultant to independently review the environmental work associated with the A5 Western Transport Corridor (WTC) project.

The scope of the independent review includes the following:

- review the Habitats Directive work carried out by the A5WTC project consultant prior to the court judgement in April 2013 and provide a report on its adequacy;
- review the A5WTC project consultant's proposals, methodology and timeline to comply with the Habitats Directive in light of the Court ruling; and
- carry out a review of the published Environmental Statement (ES) and the proposals, methodology and timeline to provide an Addendum to update the ES.

Hillhead Road, Newry

Mr Brady asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the reopening of the Hillhead Road, Newry.
(AQW 30048/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As the Member will be aware, my Department's Roads Service initially closed a section of the Hillhead Road, Newry on 26 January 2007. A further section of the road was closed on 21 August 2008 and, in December 2012, the closure was again extended.

Roads Service issued legal proceedings against three previous quarry owners in early 2009. Whilst these processes have been progressing, until they are complete, I am unable to comment further on the future of the Hillhead Road.

Parking: Lisburn and Banbridge

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the location of off-street car parks operated by Roads Service in (i) Lisburn; and (ii) Banbridge council areas.
(AQW 30057/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the locations of off-street car parks operated by Roads Service, in the Lisburn and Banbridge Council areas, are included in the table below:

Off-street car parks operated by Roads Service in Lisburn and Banbridge Council Areas

Lisburn Council Area	Antrim Street, Lisburn	Benson Street. Lisburn
	Barrack Street, Lisburn	Quay Street, Lisburn
	Governors Road, Lisburn	Saintfield Road Roundabout, Lisburn
	Laganbank Road, Lisburn	Union Bridge, Lisburn
	Longstone Street, Lisburn	Sprucefield Park and Ride, Lisburn
	Queens Road,Lisburn	Glenburn Road, Dunmurry
	Smithfield Square, Lisburn	Main Street, Moira
	Ballynahinch Street, Hillsborough	
Banbridge Council Area	Downshire Place, Banbridge	Bridge Street, Banbridge
	Bridge Street East, Banbridge	Kenlis Court, Banbridge
	Commercial Road , Banbridge	Castle Street, Rathfriland
	Kenlis Street, Banbridge	Meeting Street, Dromore
	Townsend Street, Banbridge	Cross Lane (2 car parks), Dromore
	Church Square, Banbridge	Gallows Street, Dromore
	Downshire Road, Banbridge	Castle Hill, Gilford

Parking: Gritting

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the criteria used when determining if off-street car parks are gritted during frosty weather conditions.
(AQW 30058/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department does earmark funds to provide a salting service with the aim of helping main road traffic to move safely and freely in wintry conditions. In general, main through routes carrying more than 1,500 vehicles per day are salted and, in exceptional circumstances, roads with difficult topography carrying between 1,000 and 1,500 vehicles per day.

On the basis of this policy, my Department does not routinely salt public car parks, although it does cover areas within Park and Ride facilities where the operation of the facility requires a bus to leave the main salted road network to service it. In such cases, the route taken is treated including any portion of the bus route within the confines of the car park.

Additional secondary salting may also be undertaken during periods of prolonged and severe wintry conditions, outside of the scheduled routes on the basis of requests and in order to relieve hardship. The extent of secondary salting takes account of the availability of resources and these decisions are made by local Roads Service section engineers.

Lisburn City Council Area: Non-adopted Roads

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the streets in the Lisburn City Council area that have not been adopted by Roads Service, including the reason for non-adoption and the action being taken to complete the adoption process.
(AQW 30060/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: This information is not held centrally and could only be provided at disproportionate cost. However, if you wish to enquire about a specific area or housing development within the Lisburn City Council area, you should contact the Network Planning Manager, Roads Service Eastern Division, Hydebank, 4 Hospital Road, Belfast.

Drumbeg Mews, Lisburn: Bond Enforcement

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the communication between Roads Service and NI Water in relation to Bond Enforcement Action in Drumbeg Mews, Lisburn; and (ii) when the process will be completed, given the time lapse since the dwellings were first occupied.
(AQW 30061/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Officials from my Department's Roads Service have corresponded with and met with their counterparts from NI Water regarding the Drumbeg Mews development in Lisburn, following the serving of an Article 11 enforcement notice on the developer on 8 June 2010.

They continue to work together to take forward the adoption of the sewers and streets within this development. A CCTV survey and snagging of the sewers has been completed and a schedule of defects identified. There are substantial problems with the sewers laid by the developer, in particular the storm sewer for which the developer did not construct a section of the on-site surface water sewer to comply with the requirement for a sustainable drainage system (SuDS). Additionally, the process for requisitioning the off-site storm sewers was not completed and storm water from the development does not currently have a dedicated outfall discharge point. It appears the storm water from the development is connected to a soak-a-way.

NI Water is currently undertaking the design of a scheme to provide the missing section of sewer, the SuDS system and the dedicated storm outfall to serve Drumbeg Mews and two other adjacent developments. It is expected that design of the dedicated outfall sewer will be completed by the end of February 2014.

Delivery of the necessary project will be dependent upon the availability of finance and resolution of any third party land owner issues.

Roads Service is aware of the defects in the sewers and that NIW is working towards a resolution, which will enable the streets and sewers within the development to be adopted.

Roads: Compensation, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the amount of compensation awarded from pothole and other road surface related claims in North Down, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30110/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The NICS accounting system does not hold details of the cause of accidents and, for that reason, it is not possible to separately identify the amount of compensation awarded from pothole and other road surface claims.

Parking: Residents' Schemes, North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on residential car parking schemes in North Down.
(AQW 30111/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my response to his previous related Assembly Question AQW 29960/11-15.

Fishing Rights at Reservoirs

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the procedure followed when offering fishing rights at reservoirs including specifying if this is this always completed by tender, and if the process varies, to outline why.
(AQW 30146/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it currently has 28 impounding reservoirs on which fishing is permitted. Of these reservoirs, 14 are controlled or managed by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, whilst the remaining 14 are leased directly to private fishing clubs. Although not part of its core business, NIW and its predecessors have been involved in the leasing of fishing rights for some considerable time and traditionally have renewed the rights with existing clubs.

Historically NIW did not offer fishing leases to public bidding as there was no record of more than one club expressing an interest in any particular location. Clubs are normally local to a particular reservoir and clubs outside of the area are unlikely to be interested. However, in early 2011 a recently formed fly fishing club requested use of one of NIW's reservoirs. The lease had just been extended with the previous club and new club expressed concern that there had been no opportunity for the public to bid for the lease. This caused NIW to reconsider how fishing rights are managed and the decision was taken that all future leases with private clubs or individuals will be subject to open competition. NIW considers that the public advertising of fishing leases for NIW's reservoirs is open, transparent, fair and equitable and it enables NIW to satisfy its regulatory requirement to achieve best value for the public purse. The decision to publicly advertise fishing leases did not require consultation.

All leases are now subject to public advertisement and the submissions are assessed on a 'cost alone' basis. NIW is satisfied that compliance with lease conditions provides sufficient measures to enable it to ensure that the reservoirs are properly managed and maintained. The assessment criteria is made clear in the public notice advertised in local press, therefore any interested party is aware of them.

Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of Penalty Charge Notices issued in each of the last three calendar years.
(AQW 30156/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices issued in each of the last three calendar years are set out in the table below:

Year	Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) Issued
2011	125,983
2012	112,755
2013	108,558

Translink: Passenger Numbers

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail how the number of (i) bus; and (ii) rail passengers in 2013 compares to 2012.
(AQW 30157/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The relevant statistics are as outlined in the following table:

	2012 '000s	2013 '000s
Bus	67,163	67,215
Rail	11,335	12,863
Total	78,498	80,078

Speed Limits

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the proportion of roads that currently have a (i) 20mph; and (ii) 30mph speed limit.
(AQW 30158/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would advise the Member that my Department does not hold the information in the format requested.

School Transport Contracts

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the value of the Department of Education's school transport contract.
(AQW 30177/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: This information should be sought from the Department for Education.

Translink: Bus Stations

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the bus stations that will receive funding allocated the January Monitoring Round.
(AQW 30181/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink is carrying out a programme of work aimed at ensuring that all of its bus stations, workshops and garages meet the required standards under current legislation, regulations and British Standards. The £1.5 million granted in January Monitoring will be used, in the main, towards this programme.

The current forecast expenditure associated with the bid is detailed below:

Project	Forecast Expenditure (£'000)
Antrim Integrated Bus/Rail Station	142
Bangor Integrated - Set Down Area	60

Project	Forecast Expenditure (£'000)
Workshop Garage Roof Replacement - Ballymena and Newcastle	81
Pennyburn Depot Storage	13
Building Service Condition Upgrade	126
Voyager Replacement Project	359
Depot Allocation System	270
Minor Capital Works at Depots & Stations	106
Replacement Workshop & Garage equipment	343
Total Forecast Expenditure	**1,500**

Further expenditure on bus station improvements is planned for 2014/15.

None of the allocated money will be used to fund the upgrade of Ballymena Station. A separate project is being considered by Translink for Ballymena station and this is included in the 2014/15 programme of capital projects. That project will be subject to securing the necessary approvals and funding. However, my Department has provided funding for the refurbishment of the roof at Ballymena Bus Garage and work on this project has been completed.

Translink: Bus Stations

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total proposed additional investment in bus stations as a result of the reallocations from the January Monitoring Round.
(AQW 30287/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink is carrying out a programme of work aimed at ensuring that all of its bus stations, workshops and garages meet the required standards under current legislation, regulations and British Standards. The £1.5 million granted in January Monitoring will be used, in the main, towards this programme.

The current forecast expenditure associated with the bid is detailed below:

Project	Forecast Expenditure (£'000)
Antrim Integrated Bus/Rail Station	142
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Pennyburn Depot Storage	13
Building Service Condition Upgrade	126
Voyager Replacement Project	359
Depot Allocation System	270
Minor Capital Works at Depots & Stations	106
Replacement Workshop & Garage equipment	343
Total Forecast Expenditure	**1,500**

Further expenditure on bus station improvements is planned for 2014/15.

Translink: Bus Stations

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the bus stations that will receive funding for improvements as a result of the January Monitoring Round.
(AQW 30289/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink is carrying out a programme of work aimed at ensuring that all of its bus stations, workshops and garages meet the required standards under current legislation, regulations and British Standards. The £1.5 million granted in January Monitoring will be used, in the main, towards this programme.

The current forecast expenditure associated with the bid is detailed below:

Project	Forecast Expenditure (£'000)
Antrim Integrated Bus/Rail Station	142

Project	Forecast Expenditure (£'000)
Bangor Integrated - Set Down Area	60
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Voyager Replacement Project	359
Depot Allocation System	270
Minor Capital Works at Depots & Stations	106
Replacement Workshop & Garage equipment	343
Total Forecast Expenditure	**1,500**

Further expenditure on bus station improvements is planned for 2014/15.

Door-2-Door Transport Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the performance of the Door-2-Door scheme.
(AQW 30396/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Door-2-Door scheme ended on 31 March 2013.

An interim scheme, the Disability Action Transport Scheme, operated by Disability Action was introduced on 01 April 2013 and is operating well. Disability Action regularly report on user views to my officials and these are positive.

Currently my Department is undertaking an evaluation of the transport policies and schemes initiated by the Department to promote social inclusion. The outcome of the evaluation will assist my Department to develop proposals to meet the transport needs of elderly and disabled people across Northern Ireland.

At this time it is planned to maintain the interim scheme with Disability Action.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: High-rise Flats

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has any plans to insulate high-rise flats.
(AQW 29937/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The Housing Executive has advised that they are proposing a pilot scheme at Culchulainn House, Belfast, which is a 13 storey block in the New Lodge area for the provision of a contractor designed ventilated insulated rain screen system to the external walls and balconies. The contractor has been successful in obtaining a Building Research Establishment (BRE) Certification for this proposal and the work is programmed to commence shortly. This is the first high rise block to receive such a proposal and following its completion there will be an evaluation carried out to determine the effectiveness and suitability of this proposal which will shape the Housing Executive's strategy for these types of construction.

The Housing Executive is also about to commission research to undertake a survey of all of their multi-storey residential blocks. The appointed consultant will be expected to produce a comprehensive report analysing the findings of their research and to make recommendations on cost effective improvement measures relating to the refurbishment, upgrade, maintenance and management of the blocks. The overall aim of the research project is to establish the short, medium and long term requirements for the multi-storey blocks with the appointed consultant producing a multi-storey report/strategy document.

Housing Executive: Changes of Tenancy

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development what work is carried out on Housing Executive properties when there is a change of tenancy.
(AQW 29939/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that a Change of Tenancy pre-inspection is carried out by their Maintenance Officer who determines the amount of works to be carried out in order to ensure that the property is in a good state of repair. No tenancy should commence until a property has been brought within lettable standards; has passed Health and Safety checks; and has an Energy Performance Certificate. The level of works appropriate may depend upon the nature of the Change of Tenancy which could include Direct Exchange, Assigned and Succession tenancies.

The following work should be considered mandatory in all Change of Tenancy situations:

- Testing and certification of the electrical installation.
- Testing and certification of hard wired smoke detectors.
- Testing and certification of all heating appliances and associated flues.
- Carry out visual safety inspection of solar water heating system and controls.
- Flush out and disinfectant Domestic plumbing system where the property is vacant for more that 30 days.

The following minimum standards will apply at change of tenancy:

- External fabric - items such as roofs, gutters, windows, doors and external joinery must be in good condition and weather proof.
- Security - locks must be working properly and all window panes intact.
- Services – Change of Tenancy electrical inspection and certification. Water and heating system to be checked and free from defect. Roomheater and flueways to be tested. Gas and Oil Heating to be serviced and tested. Visual inspection of Solar water heating and controls. Testing of smoke and heat detectors where fitted by the Housing Executive. Detectors which have not been fitted by the Housing Executive should be removed.
- Internal doors - all doors must be complete and must close properly.
- Kitchen - existing units, doors, cupboards must fit properly. Work tops and sink units should not be prejudicial to health. All units should be silicone sealed.
- Bathroom - All sanitary fittings should be complete, clean and free from cracks. All units should be silicone sealed.
- Tiles - Cracked tiles to be replaced with identical or close matching tile and re-grouted as necessary.
- Walls and ceilings - Large holes to be filled.
- Mould or fungus to be washed and cleaned using anti-fungicide.
- Infestation - Properties must be fumigated if required.
- Gardens - grass and hedges to be trimmed if appropriate.
- Overall - property must be free from debris, rubbish etc. Previous carpets, floor coverings, previous tenant's possessions should be cleared from the property. Floors will be swept or mopped as necessary. All kitchen and bathroom units, window sills etc will be washed down. All Health and safety risks must be removed.
- Re-let dwellings should be thoroughly cleaned to the NIHE specification before the new tenant moves in.

Housing Executive: Offices

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development how much the Housing Executive has spent on (i) furniture; and (ii) double glazing in its offices in each of the last two years.
(AQW 29969/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised of the following expenditure on (i) furniture and (ii) double glazing in its offices in the last two years:-

(i) Furniture:-

2012	£134,961
2013	£123,731

(ii)
Double glazing to NIHE offices – commenced November 2012 and completed May 2013:-

2012/13	£260,132

Housing Executive: Direct Labour Organisation

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development what is the current extent and operational cost of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's direct labour squad; and by how much these costs have changed since April 2013.
(AQW 29987/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) provided cover for all eight response maintenance contracts vacated by contractors who had gone into administration between April and August 2013. Those contracts * were as follows:-

- West Belfast
- South Belfast
- East Belfast
- North Belfast
- Shankill

- Lisburn Antrim Street
- Lisburn Dairy Farm
- Craigavon

The DLO total turnover including grounds maintenance, void property security and health and safety electrical inspections will have increased from £7.4m in 2013/14 to approximately £19m in 2014/15. The additional costs arise from the DLO taking on some of the contracts formerly undertaken by contractors who went into administration. To do that the Housing Executive has taken on 219# employees (prior to this DLO employed 127 operatives) under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (TUPE) and some additional staff where there was a shortfall in the contractors' structures, for example where they did not employ electricians directly but used sub-contractors. The additional costs include the cost of these staff and all the other costs associated with the work that they do, for example, material, transport, overheads.

Notes

* The DLO is now no longer engaged in the East Belfast or Lisburn contracts.

\# A small number of these staff have since left.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development what criteria will be used to ascertain the success of the Neighbourhood Renewal programmes.
(AQW 30043/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is currently in the process of evaluating the impact of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and the lessons learned.

In taking forward the evaluation, there are three key areas of work:

- An assessment of the overall impact of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy against its stated purpose, key issues, overall aim, goals and objectives;
- An assessment of the effectiveness model for the operational delivery of Neighbourhood Renewal as set out in People and Place; and
- Consideration of the lessons learned from Neighbourhood Renewal that can be provided to Councils in 2015 in the context of their new statutory duty to produce community plans for their areas.

Housing Executive: Double Glazing, East Londonderry

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development when the double glazing of Housing Executive owned homes in East Londonderry will begin.
(AQW 30044/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that it has completed the appointment of contractors to its low rise Double Glazing Framework. It has also completed the secondary competitions for the award of contracts under this Framework. Those contracts have now been signed by the successful contractors and the scheme briefs have been issued to these contractors. The following schemes are in the programme for East Londonderry:-

Greysteel	110 dwellings currently programmed for May 2014
Kennaught/Roe Mill	159 dwellings currently programmed for July 2014
Coleraine	304 dwellings currently programmed for July 2014

Social Housing: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development what plans there are to increase the social housing stock in Carrickfergus.
(AQW 30055/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I recently approved the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) for the period 2014/15 – 2016/17 and details of the schemes included in it for the Carrickfergus Borough Council area are included in the table attached. Currently there are no schemes included in 2016/17 but the SHDP is reviewed annually and there is potential for additional schemes to be added in-year subject to social housing need and availability of finance.

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Work Category	Need Group
Oaklee	Sunnylands Ave/ Sunnylands Grove, Carrickfergus (T)	12	New Build	General Needs

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Units	Work Category	Need Group
Total SHDP 2013/14		**12**		
Clanmil	Governors Place, Carrickfergus	16	New Build	General Needs
Connswater	4-6 Cheston Street, Carrickfergus	6	New Build	General Needs
Oaklee	Irish Quarter West, Carrickfergus (T) & Private Lands @ Irish Quarter West	23	New Build	General Needs
Oaklee	Davy's Street/ Stannus Place, Carrickfergus (T)	12	New Build	Elderly (CAT 1)
Trinity	Greenisland Frail Elderly Replacement (91 Shore Road, Greenisland)	32	New Build	Frail Elderly
Total SHDP 2014/15		**89**		
Connswater	5-7 Woodburn, Carrickfergus	30	New Build	General Needs
Connswater	Lower Woodburn, Carrickfergus (T)	10	New Build	General Needs
To be decided	McKeens Avenue, Carrickfergus (T)	11	New Build	General Needs
Total SHDP 2015/16		**51**		

(T) – Transfer schemes

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Benefits: Employment and Support Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how many Employment Support Alowance refusals were overturned on the grounds of special circumstances at (i) review; or (ii) appeal, in 2013.
(AQW 30062/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available. The IT system used to administer Employment and Support Allowance is not configured to separate applications that were granted on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.

Benefits: Employment and Support Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development how many Employment Support Allowance applications in 2013 were granted solely on the grounds of special circumstances.
(AQW 30063/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available. The IT system used to administer Employment and Support Allowance is not configured to separate applications that were granted on the grounds of exceptional circumstances.

Benefits: Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown by council area of the percentage figures for successful appeals against an ATOS assessment, which resulted in Employment and Support Allowance payments being stopped.
(AQW 30093/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Appeals Service (TAS) does not hold the information in the format requested

as Employment Support Allowance (ESA) appeals are heard at various venues throughout Northern Ireland determined by the postal district within which the appellant resides.

TAS also does not record statistics or information relating to the reason a social security benefit claim is disallowed. However, the table below details the number of ESA appeals received by TAS during the period 1June 2011 to 31 December 2013 that have received a final determination/outcome, how many were successful and the percentage success rate.

Tribunal Centre	Final Outcome	Successful	%
Armagh	637	180	28%
Ballymena	1,676	510	30%
Ballymoney	285	95	33%
Banbridge	468	121	26%
Belfast	7,551	2,202	29%
Coleraine	915	253	28%
Cookstown	438	128	29%
Craigavon	1,898	647	34%
Downpatrick	838	243	29%
Dungannon	1,093	327	30%
Enniskillen	838	346	41%
Limavady	496	185	37%
Londonderry	2,013	853	42%
Magherafelt	609	187	31%
Newry	1,293	336	26%
Newtownards	1,247	409	33%
Omagh	928	364	39%
Strabane	562	215	38%
Grand Total	**23,785**	**7,601**	**32%**

Gambling: Fixed-odds Betting Terminals

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development how many fixed odds betting terminals operate in Northern Ireland; and what assessment he has made of their social impact.
(AQW 30096/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not maintain a record of the number of fixed odds betting terminals (FOBTs) in Northern Ireland; however, a report produced by PricewaterhouseCoopers in 2011 estimated that there were approximately 568 of these machines in operation.

A gambling prevalence survey was carried out by my Department in 2010 as part of the Review of Gambling. The survey found that 2.2% of adults has had a problem with gambling in Northern Ireland, it was not however possible to identify the social impacts of the use of gaming machines as opposed to other forms of gambling.

Research is currently being carried out in Great Britain by the Responsible Gambling Trust to identify whether there is evidence that consumers are experiencing harm as a result of machines such as FOBTs; I look forward to reading the results of this research.

Gambling: Bookmakers

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of licensed betting shops; and how this compares with five years ago.
(AQW 30097/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Records held by my Department indicate that there were 324 licensed bookmaking offices in 2013/14; the corresponding figure for 2008/09 was 359.

Supporting People

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) target; and (ii) actual expenditure for the Supporting People Programme, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 30101/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The annual target for the provision of housing support services to vulnerable people is 17,000. This target has been exceeded year on year since the introduction of the programme.

The table below details the Supporting People expenditure in each of the last 5 financial years compared to the budget.

Year end as at 31 March	Target £'000	Actual £'000
2013	66,384	65,915
2012	65,184	64,097
2011	63,884	63,154
2010	62,000	63,453
2009	62,570	62,635

A ring fenced budget for Supported Housing (Bamford) starts was introduced in the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) period 2011/12 – 2014/15.

The table below details actual spend for Supported Housing units

Year end as at 31 March	Bamford Actual Spend £M
2015	11,630
2014	10,000
2013	10,776
2012	9,566

Please note that anticipated spend has been included for year ending 2014 and 2015.

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Benefits: Employment and Support Allowance

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of Employment Support Allowance claimants from West Tyrone, broken down per council area, who have (i) challenged a decision to disallow benefits; and (ii) been successful in the last three years in overturning decisions to disallow or refuse their relevant benefit; and to detail representation provided for claimants by (a) the Citizens Advice Bureau; (b) Omagh Independent Advice Service; (c) political representatives; and (d) others.
(AQW 30123/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information cannot be provided in the format requested as The Appeal Service (TAS) arranges for Employment Support Allowance (ESA) appeals to be heard at venues throughout Northern Ireland determined by the postal district within which the appellant resides.

The total number of ESA appeals received by TAS for claimants from West Tyrone in the last three financial years, the number who have been successful and the representation provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Omagh

Independent Advice Service, political representatives and others is set out below.

			Representation at successful appeals				
Financial Year	Number of ESA Appeals received (i)	Number of successful appeals	CAB	Omagh Independent Advice Service	Political Reps	Others	No Rep. Involved
2010/11	295	76	5	11	6	28	26
2011/12	460	161	4	44	9	50	54
2012/13	800	431	42	74	71	139	105

(i) This is the number of appeals submitted to TAS. Not all appeals submitted to the Social Security Agency (SSA) will progress to TAS

Benefits: Disability Living Allowance

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of Disability Living Allowance claimants from West Tyrone, broken down per council area, who have (i) challenged a decision to disallow benefits; and (ii) been successful in the last three years in overturning decisions to disallow or refuse their relevant benefit; and to detail representation provided for claimants by (a) the Citizens Advice Bureau; (b) Omagh Independent Advice Service; (c) political representatives; and (d) others.
(AQW 30124/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information cannot be provided in the format requested as The Appeal Service (TAS) arranges for Disability Living Allowance (DLA) appeals to be heard at venues throughout Northern Ireland determined by the postal district within which the appellant resides.

The total number of DLA appeals received by TAS for claimants from West Tyrone in the last three financial years, the number who have been successful and the representation provided by the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), Omagh

Independent Advice Service, political representatives and others is set out below.

			Representation at successful appeals				
Financial Year	Number of DLA Appeals received (i)	Number of successful appeals	CAB	Omagh Independent Advice Service	Political Reps	Others	No Rep. Involved
2010/11	295	72	9	5	6	22	30
2011/12	203	101	11	8	8	27	47
2012/13	242	112	21	6	24	29	32

(i) This is the number of appeals submitted to TAS. Not all appeals submitted to the Social Security Agency (SSA) will progress to TAS

Social Housing

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development why the supply of social housing is outstripped by the demand.
(AQW 30205/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive, who manage the Social Housing Development Programme, assess the social housing need requirement for Northern Ireland taking account of demographic, new build, demolition and vacancy data (Net Stock Model). The annual social housing need requirement for Northern Ireland over the past ten years is set out in the table below; together with the new build social housing programme starts facilitated by the budget for each year of the same period.

The major factors that explain demand exceeding supply are: continued demographic growth, continued low level output in the private sector, availability of suitably located and priced land, and capacity constraints within the housing associations sector. The availability of funding is not considered a constraint at this time.

The cumulative shortfall between social housing need and the social housing starts over the past 10 years is 7,732 units.

	2012/13	2011/12	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09	2007/08	2006/07	2005/06	2004/05	2003/04
Housing Need	2000	2000	2500	2500	3000	2500	2500	2200	1600	1600
New Starts based on budget	1379	1410	2418	1838	1136	1595	1032	1519	1317	1526
Shortfall	621	590	82	664	1864	1405	1468	681	283	74

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Warm Homes Scheme: Coleraine Borough Council Area

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of (i) applications; and (ii) approvals for the Warm Homes Scheme in the Coleraine Borough Council area in the 12 months (a) before; and (b) after 31 October 2010.
(AQW 30215/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive manages the Warm Homes Scheme on behalf of the Department for Social Development. The Housing Executive collects information on completed measures for the Warm Homes Scheme by Council area.

The Warm Homes Scheme manager arranges to have measures installed by their own contractors once it has been established that an applicant is eligible for assistance.

In the Coleraine area, a total of 644 homes have received measures under the Warm Homes Scheme. The table below shows the measures by type:

Warm Homes Scheme Coleraine

Intervention	01/11/2009 – 31/10/2010	01/11/2010 – 31/10/2011	Total
Insulation	318	259	577
Heating	3	25	28
Heating & Insulation	17	22	39
Total	**338**	**306**	**644**

The Information provided in this response is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Charitable Status

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development what barriers exist to prevent an existing commercial enterprise becoming a charitable foundation.
(AQW 30216/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are no barriers to prevent an existing commercial enterprise becoming a charitable foundation.

A charitable foundation's purposes must be exclusively charitable and for the public benefit. Any profit from trading or commercial activity must be applied in accordance with its charitable purposes and its assets must remain within the charity sector. A charitable foundation is required to register with the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

Shared Surface Streets

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development to outline his Department's position on minimum kerb heights in shared surface streets.
(AQW 30244/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department for Social Development has been working with a number of councils on Public Realm Schemes which may involve shared surface streets. The Department does not have any specific position on shared surface streets but where these are planned the Roads Service is consulted in relation the planning approval for such schemes and must give its approval to the specification and ensure that it meets with their standards as ultimately the Roads Service will be responsible for adopting the completed scheme.

Review of Public Administration

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the areas of responsibility under his departmental remit that will be transferred to local government under the Review of Public Administration, including (i) the budget for each project or programme; and (ii) whether staff will also be transferred.
(AQW 30313/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Executive has committed to the Reform of Local Government and as part of this has agreed a package of functions that should transfer from Central Government to Local Government. The package includes an extension of powers from DSD to Councils to enable them to address area based regeneration and community development; in addition functions to transfer include Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), Housing Unfitness and Laganside. Costs associated with HMOs and Unfitness are in the region of £2m per annum. The annualised cost for Laganside has been calculated as £2.7m per annum. In relation to the budgets for area based regeneration and community development, these are estimated at £62m although this sum may be subject to efficiency savings as part of the Executive's 2015/16 Budget process.

For the HMO, Unfitness and Laganside functions, staff involved in delivery will transfer to Councils under TUPE provisions. For staff involved in the delivery of regeneration and community development, TUPE does not apply but we are working with Councils on the principles of a scheme that will provide Councils with access to experienced DSD staff.

Staff: Support Grades

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development (i) to outline the rationale for his Department's privatisation of its Support Grade Band functions; (ii) whether his Department is aware of any issues regarding the performance of other private sector providers of these services; (iii) if so, to provide further details; and (iv) to outline the rationale for the inclusion in the same tender of the unconnected function of Health and Safety Risk Assessments in departmental buildings.
(AQW 30323/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

(i) The decision by the Department for Social Development to outsource its Soft Services was an operational one driven by a need to improve performance and achieve efficiencies.

The Department is working to support the affected staff who have the option to: (i) transfer to another NICS department; (ii) transfer laterally to an administrative post within DSD (where staff meet the qualifying conditions); or, (iii) transfer to the new provider under TUPE.

This question was previously asked and addressed under AQW 26721/11-15

(ii) The Department is not aware of any issues regarding the performance of other private sector providers of these services

(iii) Not applicable

(iv) Health and Safety Risk Assessments are to be included in the same tender to assure that they are conducted in a comprehensive, timely and consistent manner across the Departments' estate by professionally trained experts.

Welfare Reform: Impact on Staff

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of civil servants employed at Lisahally to carry out tasks directly related to benefit claims and entitlements in Great Britain, whose employment is directly linked to Welfare Reform proceeding in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 30346/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are currently 179 staff located in Lisahally who carry out tasks directly related to benefit claims and entitlements in Great Britain. They are part of a wider group of staff who provide such services. The remaining 485 staff are employed in Belfast. This business area is titled the Belfast Benefit Centre and it provides processing for a number of working age benefits for the South East of England (London and the Home Counties) on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Department for Work and Pensions have already indicated that their jobs may be at risk if Northern Ireland does not progress with welfare reform because many of the competitive advantages which Northern Ireland offers the Department for Work and Pensions will disappear as the staff will no longer be operating the same social security systems.

Welfare Reform: Social Security Work

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development how many civil servants' jobs will be lost as a result of the removal of Social Security related work carried out locally for agencies in Great Britain should the Welfare Reform Bill not be implemented.
(AQW 30347/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Around 664 staff are currently employed in Belfast Benefit Centre which provides processing for a number of working age benefits for the South East of England (London and the Home Counties) on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions. There are also 800 staff employed in the Child Maintenance Service providing services to the Eastern Region of England on behalf of the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Department for Work and Pensions have already indicated that their jobs may be at risk if Northern Ireland does not progress with welfare reform because many of the competitive advantages which Northern Ireland offers the Department for Work and Pensions will disappear as the staff will no longer be operating the same social security systems.

Financial Transactions Capital

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development what projects his Department is exploring for potential delivery under Financial Transactions Capital.
(AQW 30364/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department is currently utilising Financial Transactions Capital to deliver four projects namely:-

- The purchase of vacant/repossessed homes by Housing Associations for renovation and re-sale;
- A shared equity scheme akin to the current co-ownership model;
- An affordable Home Loans scheme; and
- An empty Home Loans scheme.

Since January 2013, £27.7m in financial transactions capital funding has been made available for these four projects.

Financial Transactions Capital

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to outline any plans he has to utilise Financial Transactions Capital in the delivery of housing.
(AQW 30365/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am of the opinion that Financial Transactions Capital funding provides real opportunity for the housing sector. My Housing Strategy "Facing the Future" outlines a number of commitments where such funding may bear fruit.

Four housing-related projects are currently being taken forward with Financial Transactions Capital. These are:

1 Purchase of vacant/repossessed homes by Housing Associations for renovation and re-sale

2 New shared equity scheme akin to the current co-ownership model

3 Affordable Home Loans scheme

4 Empty Home Loans scheme.

Since January 2013, £27.7m in financial transactions capital funding has been made available for these four projects.

These projects will help assist wider economic growth though the income generated for the construction sector in undertaking these works.

Social Housing: Waiting List

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the current number of applicants on the social housing waiting list that are deemed to be in housing stress.
(AQO 5430/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that at 1 January 2014 there were 21,354 applicants on the waiting list who have 30 or more housing need points under the Housing Selection Scheme Rules and are therefore deemed to be in Housing Stress.

The definition of housing stress is a household on the Housing Executive waiting list and assessed to be in the most need, for reasons of health, intimidation, insecurity of tenure and housing conditions.

Social Housing: Newbuilds

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the target for social home starts in the 2014/15 financial year.
(AQO 5432/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Plans, which I approved in December, are to start 2,000 new social homes in 2014/15 and in each of the following two years. The new programme, which details each of the new schemes, can be viewed on the Housing Executive website.

These plans will next year see the biggest number of new homes started for the past four years and underpins my commitment to deliver higher levels of new social housing.

Stepping up to an annual output of 2,000 new homes is a significant challenge. Whilst funding is already in place to deliver the 2014/15 programme, it has yet to be agreed for the following two years. You can be assured that I will be continuing to make the case to Executive colleagues for sufficient funding to allow these higher levels of output to be maintained.

Regeneration: Shared Space

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Social Development to outline how he ensures that urban regeneration planning takes account of the need to promote shared space.
(AQO 5433/11-15)

Mr McCausland: As Minister for Social Development I have made it one of my ministerial priorities 'to bring divided communities together by creating urban centres which are sustainable, welcoming and accessible to live, work and relax in peace'. This is one of the strategic objectives in my Department's Corporate Plan for 2011 – 2015 and what we do to implement it is detailed in the Department's Annual Business Plan.

Two of my Department's main policy statements; the Urban Regeneration and Community Development Framework and the Housing Strategy reflect this priority and the need to promote shared space.

The Regeneration Framework, published in July 2013, supports the development of shared and accessible town and city centres and other development sites. But promoting shared space is not just about physical development. It is also

important that communities are supported so that they can also contribute to improving their neighbourhoods through the development of networks and partnerships within and between communities.

The Housing Strategy and its Action Plan, also published in July 2013, outlines how proposals will be developed to support shared communities 'which are welcoming to everyone' by building on the success of the Shared Neighbourhood Programme.

Another important planning tool is the Town Centre Masterplans that my Department has developed in partnership with local councils. These have been the catalyst for the successful design and delivery of many public realm schemes and other regeneration interventions which have at their core the creation of attractive open and shared places where people can live, work and visit. My Department's work in this area was highlighted in the Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring report which recognised 'the value of new confident and vibrant shared urban spaces'.

With the transfer of regeneration powers and their associated budgets to councils in 2015 I plan to bring forward the Regeneration and Housing Bill which will ensure that councils have due regard to the policy guidance provided by DSD and continue to promote shared space in our town and city centres in future.

Neighbourhood Renewal

Mr Maskey asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of whether councils are fit for purpose in relation to managing the transfer of Neighbourhood Renewal under the Review of Public Administration.
(AQO 5434/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Neighbourhood Renewal is not transferring to the new Councils in terms of a formal transfer of function. However, I would expect that many of the new Councils will wish to continue to tackle area-based deprivation, at least in the short to medium term, using the approaches that my Department has developed and managed over the last decade.

However, I am concerned that significant challenges lie ahead in ensuring that the transfer to the new arrangements is as smooth as possible. In order to assist the new councils in discharging their new responsibilities I have tasked my officials to work closely with the Statutory Transition Committees, and later the Shadow Councils, to assist them in putting in place effective arrangements to meet the needs of their communities.

Welfare Reform: Implementation

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on any discussions on the implementation of welfare reform.
(AQO 5435/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since coming into office in May 2011, I have been engaged with ministers within the Executive and in Westminster to seek ways to ameliorate some of the more negative aspects of the reform of the welfare system to meet the needs of Northern Ireland.

The outcome of this is that I have developed a package of measures designed to tailor how the reform of the welfare system is implemented in Northern Ireland. This package will not only help simplify the social security system but more importantly it will involve measures which protect the most vulnerable in our society.

I presented the current package of measures to the Welfare Reform Executive sub-committee on 27 January and indicated my intention to bring it to the Executive meeting on the 30 January; however, the ultimate decision to bring it forward rests with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Housing: Funding Bids

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the difference between the total departmental funds bid for, against those received, in the last 4 monitoring rounds, specifically in relation to funds allocated to housing.
(AQO 5436/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department submitted bids totalling £33.7million and was allocated £23.7million over the period. The difference was £10m.

- In January 2013 no bids were made.
- In June 2013 a £15million bid was made for Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association (NICHA). Of this £10million was allocated.
- In October 2013 bids valued at £18.7 million were submitted. This was made up of £10million from NICHA, £5million Affordable Home Loans and £3.7million Empty Homes Loans. £5million was allocated to NICHA and the Affordable Home Loans/Empty Home Loans bids were met in full.
- No bids were made in January 2014.

Affordable Warmth Scheme

Mr Cree asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the Affordable Warmth Scheme pilots.
(AQO 5437/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The University of Ulster's evaluation of this Affordable Warmth Pilot has indicated that the area based targeting approach to tackling fuel poverty was a success. Phase one of the pilots was primarily about testing the effectiveness of this targeting tool in identifying those vulnerable households. Phase two commenced in September 2013, testing how the energy efficiency measures can be delivered using local installers to carry out the work. My Department intends to launch a public consultation on the future delivery of energy efficiency improvements for low income households in late February 2014.

Social Housing: Victims and Survivors

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on how Victims and Survivors can be supported through the housing selection scheme for social housing.
(AQO 5438/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has advised that the Housing Selection Scheme includes provision for an award of intimidation points to applicants or tenants who have been the victim of hate crime and have been intimidated from their home. A Health and Social Well Being Assessment is also carried out which includes an assessment of functionality within the applicant's existing accommodation, support care needs, social needs and complex needs. This assessment includes an award of points in recognition of circumstances such as violence or risk of violence, harassment, distress or anxiety caused by trauma.

By way of additional support, the Housing Executive also operates several schemes to help victims of hate incidents. This includes a Hate Incident Practical Action Scheme (HIPA) with the NIO and PSNI. The purpose of this scheme is to provide personal and home protection measures to victims of incidents perceived to be racial, homophobic, disability, sectarian, transphobic and religious. The scheme will ensure that residents of non-Housing Executive as well as Housing Executive properties who have been the subject of a hate incident - at or close to their home - are afforded support both during and after normal working hours.

In addition, the Supporting People programme for housing related support aims to help tenants sustain their tenancies and vulnerable people live as independently as possible in the community.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

MLAs' Staff: Register of Interests

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission to detail any consideration that has been given to introducing a Register of Interests for Members' Staff.
(AQW 29966/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission has not given active consideration to the introduction of a Register of Interests for Members' staff. As support staff are employed directly by Member, it would be appropriate for each Member to assure himself or herself that no conflict of interest arises for support staff. However, this would be for each individual Member to decide upon. The eligibility criteria for the use of OCE to pay support staff are no longer a matter for the Assembly Commission. The Independent Financial Review Panel now determines such issues.

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.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Revised Written Answers

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

In this Bound Volume, page WA 266 please replace AQO 5468/11-15 with:

Ulster Rugby

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department supports Ulster Rugby.
(AQO 5468/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is currently delivering the redevelopment of the Ravenhill Rugby Grounds which is the Headquarters of Ulster Rugby. My Department's investment in the Stadium will total £16.4m by the time the whole project is complete.

In support of my Department's key priority of promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion Ulster Rugby has been awarded £1.5m (£0.5 each year 2012-13. 2013-14, 2014-15). This funding to Ulster Rugby will be applied to increasing participation in the sport in the top 30% of areas of multiple deprivation, to increasing the number of accredited coaches working within Disability by 10% and also to increase female participation including coaches.

In addition to this support, my Department over the past three years, through Sport NI has awarded just under £850,000 to Ulster Rugby thorough programmes which include the 'Investing in Performance Sport Programme', the 'Stadia Safety (Urgent Works) Programme'and the 'Sport Matters Capital Equipment Programme.'

In terms of planned support, a further £917,000 is anticipated, predominantly through Sport NI's Performance Focus Programme.

Department of Education

In Bound Volume 90, page WA 328 please replace AQW 29022/11-15 with:

Schools: Newbuilds

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail the cost of (i) planning fees; (ii) architects; (iii) consultants; and (iv) other associated costs for school new builds in the last ten years which have not been built.
(AQW 29022/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): It is not possible, without incurring disproportionate expense, to provide the breakdown of costs on new school builds in the way requested. However, costs have been provided as detailed below.

The costs for new build schools included in Capital Announcements but where construction work has not yet commenced are detailed in the table below. The information provided covers all costs incurred since the commencement of planning up to 31 March 2013.

School Ref No.	Scheme	Total spend to 31 Mar 2013 £000s
306-6551	Braidside IPS, Ballymena	36
104-6596	Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain	67
124-0291	Colaiste Feirste, Belfast	2,717 - includes site purchase of £2.35m
306-6561	Corran IPS, Larne	13
203-2277	Craigbrack, Mullabuoy, Listress PS, Derry	16
223-0138	Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore	133
503-2585	Edendork PS	91
242-0229	Foyle & Londonderry College	15,073 - includes site purchase of £14.5m

School Ref No.	Scheme	Total spend to 31 Mar 2013 £000s
204-6638	Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh, Strabane	40
504-6637	Gaelscoil Ui Neill, Coalisland	45
506-6553	Portadown IPS	26
303-6562	Holy Family PS,Magherafelt	155
523-0278	Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	227
123-0009	Little Flower Girls SS, Belfast	153
242-0065	Loreto College, Omagh	43
142-0022	Methodist College, Belfast	221
206-6552	Omagh IPS 03/04	486 - includes site purchase of £400,000
342-0058	Rainey Endowed, Magherafelt	70
503-1387	St Bronagh's PS, Rostrevor	519
503-6435	St Clare's Abbey PS, Newry	654
423-0107	St Columbanus College, Bangor	671
203-2737	St Columbkilles's PS, Carrickmore	247
203-6116	St Conor's PS, Omagh	112
503-6675	St Joseph's & St James, Newry	0
542-0045	St Louis GS, Kilkeel	672
503-6043	St Mary's PS, Banbridge	85
303-0625	St Mary's, Cargan, Glenravel PS, Ballymena	0
542-0056	St Mary's, St Paul's, St Michael's, Lurgan	0
523-0076	St Patrick's College, Banbridge	243
542-0268	St Patrick's GS, Armagh	378
542-0304	St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	621
203-1898	St Paul's PS, Irvinestown	26
503-1160	St Teresa's PS, Lurgan	186
503-1103	Tannaghmore PS, Lurgan	207
142-0264	Victoria College, Belfast	376
201-6068	Artigarvan PS, Strabane	112
301-3315	BallyKelly PS, Limavady	169
231-0015	Belmont Special School	3
331-6676	Castletower Special school	10
221-0305	Devenish College	59
501-1575	Dromore Central P.S.	337
201-0382	Ebrington PS, Derry	151
101-6485 111-0003	Glenwood P.S./Edenderry N.S. Belfast	226
201-2245	Eglinton PS, Derry	154
201-6152	Enniskillen Model PS	132
421-0046	Glastry College, Ballyhalbert	697
421-0086	Knockbreda HS, Belfast	1189
431-6516	Knockevin Spec School, Downpatrick	323

School Ref No.	Scheme	Total spend to 31 Mar 2013 £000s
231-6662	Limegrove/Glasvey (Rossmar) Special School	6
541-0057	Lurgan College	434
201-2261	New Buildings PS, Derry	92
321-0207	Parkhall College, Antrim	956
541-0067	Portadown College	243
101-0307	Springhill P.S. Belfast	128
101-0252	Strandtown PS, Belfast	308
421-0029	The High School, Ballynahinch	385

To the end of the 2012/13 financial year £3.8m has been spent on the Lisanelly Shared Education Campus. However, of this total amount circa £600k relates to the "carrying cost" of the Department owning the Lisanelly site (i.e. site security and utilities). Please see the table below for a breakdown of expenditure.

Area of Spend	Total Spend to 31/03/13
Development of Exemplar Designs and Programme Director costs	£2,754,337.76
Development of Strategic and Outline Business Cases	£116,600.97
Legal Advice for input to Business Cases	£32,344.88
Decontamination Survey Costs	£260,818.27
Holding Costs (Security and Utilities)	£614,505.63
Total	**£3,778,607.51**

In Bound Volume 90, page WA 335 please replace AQW 29199/11-15 with:

North Eastern Education and Library Board: New Capital Developments

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) all primary schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area identified as requiring new capital development; and those identified as being priorities.
(AQW 29199/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): In my statement to the Assembly in January 2013, I announced the following Primary Schools in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area to advance in planning:

- St Mary's Primary School/Glenravel Primary School;
- Braidside Integrated Primary School;
- Corran Integrated Primary School, Larne;

I had also announced a proposal to meet the needs of children in the Islandmagee area however following discussions with the NEELB the project announced at that time has been withdrawn. The NEELB is considering an alternative solution in that area.

The Department continues to work with all the managing authorities on the strategic planning of the schools' estate, including the potential for future capital investment. There will always be greater demand for investment than funds available and at such time as any future capital announcement is made it will take account of strategic priorities identified across all sectors.

Department of Finance and Personnel

In Bound Volume 90, page WA 449 please replace AQW 27675/11-15 with:

Civil Service: Showers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel which Civil Service offices that offer shower facilities for people that cycle to work; and whether there are plans to install shower facilities across all offices.
(AQW 27675/11-15)

Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): There are a total of 116 buildings in the NICS and Agency estate that have showers available for cyclists. Provision of additional shower facilities are planned in a further 2 buildings.

There is currently no plan to provide shower facilities throughout the NICS estate for cyclists as it is a matter for the Department with premises officer responsibility to consider the appropriateness of such facilities in a particular building.

In existing buildings for which my Department has premises officer responsibility, where circumstances allow, where space is available, it is appropriate to do so and budget constraints permit, shower facilities are provided.

Department for Regional Development

In Bound Volume 90, page WA 464 please replace AQW 29426/11-15 with:

Street Lighting: Costs

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the cost of street lighting in each district, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 29426/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Details of my Department's expenditure on street lighting in each Council district, in each of the last five years, are provided in the table below:

Council	2008-09 £'000	2009-10 £'000	2010-11 £'000	2011-12 £'000	2012-13 £'000
Antrim	703	799	807	734	1,360
Ards	999	822	866	608	1,066
Armagh	822	514	947	1,203	764
Ballymena	1,449	993	872	1,250	1,114
Ballymoney	282	338	438	538	307
Banbridge	552	273	469	770	615
Belfast	3,530	3,290	3,592	3,577	3,830
Carrickfergus	457	636	316	692	439
Castlereagh	936	706	712	553	752
Coleraine	2,306	1,052	1,316	1,466	1,169
Cookstown	399	392	392	455	412
Craigavon	1,143	2,454	1,286	2,126	1,148
Derry	1,748	2,075	1,759	2,415	2,438
Down	994	588	505	1,137	825
Dungannon & South Tyrone	739	682	659	741	695
Fermanagh	1,014	725	749	1,058	868
Larne	399	377	298	519	470
Limavady	481	387	495	489	395
Lisburn	1,935	1,346	1,016	888	962
Magherafelt	480	446	1,040	466	432
Moyle	206	176	166	222	177
Newry & Mourne	1,299	1,016	1,263	786	1,111
Newtownabbey	1,206	1,759	1,246	1,627	1,412
North Down	1,164	1,048	1,008	1,086	1,079
Omagh	817	860	632	786	757
Strabane	660	586	648	636	582

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: Meetings about Double Glazing

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail all the meetings he has had in the last year in relation to the Housing Executive double-glazing scheme; and who he met on each occasion.
(AQW 11512/11-15)

The original answer was issued by the Department on 28 May 2012:

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I and the Chief Executive of the Housing Executive met with representatives of the Glass and Glazing Federation and Fusion 21 to discuss double glazing specifications in Housing Executive properties in relation to the Glass and Glazing Federations guidelines 'The Good Practice Guide for the Installation of Replacement Windows and Doors'. I also met with DUP colleagues Ian McCrea, Mervyn Storey and Paul McClean on 15 May 2012 to discuss issues they had about the manufacture of double glazing units.

A revised answer was published on 24 January 2014:

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I and the Chief Executive of the Housing Executive met with representatives of Turkington Holdings Ltd on 16 April 2012 to discuss double glazing specifications in Housing Executive properties in relation to the Glass and Glazing Federation's guidelines 'The Good Practice Guide for the Installation of Replacement Windows and Doors'.

I also met with Fusion 21 on 23 April 2012 to discuss generally their procurement model. Fusion 21, in early May 2012, then raised the issue of the Housing Executive's double glazing programme with my officials who advised that, as this was an operational matter for the Housing Executive, they should contact the Housing Executive's Head of Procurement to discuss this.

I also met with DUP colleagues Ian McCrea, Mervyn Storey and Paul McLean on 15 May 2012 to discuss issues they had about the manufacture of double glazing units.

I also met with Superseal on 27 September 2012.

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Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 January 2014

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 17 January 2014 to the Road Races (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - North South Ministerial Council Institutional meeting

The deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuinness, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council Institutional meeting, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

3.2 Statement – North South Ministerial Council meeting in 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, following which she replied to questions.

3.3 Statement – British-Irish Council Ministerial meeting in Housing Workstream Sectoral format

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, made a statement regarding the British-Irish Council Ministerial meeting in Housing Workstream Sectoral format, following which he replied to questions.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Consideration Stage – Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, moved the Consideration Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 5 stand part of the Bill.

Schedule

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedule 1 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

The Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15) stood referred to the Speaker.

4.2 First Stage – Reservoirs Bill (NIA 31/11-15)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, introduced a Bill to make provision about the regulation of the management, construction and alteration of certain reservoirs, in particular in relation to their safety to collect and store water; and for connected purposes.

The Reservoirs Bill (NIA 31/11-15) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion – Rural Development Funding within the Common Agricultural Policy

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses dissatisfaction with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her failure to effectively consult with Executive colleagues on her plans to transfer funds from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 within the Common Agricultural Policy; notes with concern the ensuing events which saw the issue brought before the High Court; accepts that, whilst farmers will benefit through increased direct payments, they and many rural communities and organisations may now lose out through significantly reduced rural development funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to commit to seeking sufficient funding for the future Rural Development Programme to efficiently and effectively deliver a range of schemes, including those to support our burgeoning agri-food sector, increase farm safety measures, incentivise farm modernisation and capital investment, promote agri-environment measures and support our rural economy and communities.

Mrs J Dobson
Mr R Swann

5.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out from 'for her failure' to 'plans' and insert:

'and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for their failure to effectively consult with each other or with their Executive colleagues over the recent attempt'

Ms A Lo
Mrs J Cochrane

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

6.2 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster.

7. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion – Rural Development Funding within the Common Agricultural Policy

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** (Division 1).

The Question being put, the Motion as Amended was **negatived** (Division 2).

The Speaker took the Chair.

7.2 Motion – Smithwick Tribunal Report

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the findings of the Smithwick Tribunal Report; calls on the Irish Government to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; and further calls upon the Minister of Justice and the Chief Constable of the PSNI to have urgent discussions with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that they take all practical steps to prevent any repeat of such atrocities.

Mr P Givan
Mr J Wells
Mr W Humphrey
Mr S Anderson

7.3 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Irish Government' and insert:

'and authorities to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; acknowledges the response of An Garda Síochána to learn lessons and do whatever is necessary arising from the Report; further acknowledges the exceptionally good co-operation between Justice Departments, PSNI and An Garda Síochána respectively and the commitment to together fight terrorism, organised crime and wrong doing from whatever source; welcomes the decisive response of An Tánaiste to the Report and endorses the recommendations of the Report, including those around a structured framework for cross border policing.

Mr A Maginness
Mrs D Kelly

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** (Division 3).

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** (Division 4).

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.36pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

20 January 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 January 2014
Division 1

Motion – Rural Development Funding within the Common Agricultural Policy - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out from 'for her failure' to 'plans' and insert:

'and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for their failure to effectively consult with each other or with their Executive colleagues over the recent attempt'

Ms A Lo
Mrs J Cochrane

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 60
Noes: 37

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Milne, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment was **made**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 January 2014
Division 2

Motion – Rural Development Funding within the Common Agricultural Policy

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses dissatisfaction with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Finance and Personnel for their failure to effectively consult with each other or with their Executive colleagues over the recent attempt to transfer funds from Pillar 1 to Pillar 2 within the Common Agricultural Policy; notes with concern the ensuing events which saw the issue brought before the High Court; accepts that, whilst farmers will benefit through increased direct payments, they and many rural communities and organisations may now lose out through significantly reduced rural development funding; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to commit to seeking sufficient funding for the future Rural Development Programme to efficiently and effectively deliver a range of schemes, including those to support our burgeoning agri-food sector, increase farm safety measures, incentivise farm modernisation and capital investment, promote agri-environment measures and support our rural economy and communities.

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 34
Noes: 63

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGimpsey, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mrs Dobson and Mr Swann.

NOES

Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McMullan and Mr Milne.

The Motion, as amended was **negatived**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 January 2014
Division 3

Motion – Smithwick Tribunal Report - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Irish Government' and insert:

'and authorities to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; acknowledges the response of An Garda Síochána to learn lessons and do whatever is necessary arising from the Report; further acknowledges the exceptionally good co-operation between Justice Departments, PSNI and An Garda Síochána respectively and the commitment to together fight terrorism, organised crime and wrong doing from whatever source; welcomes the decisive response of An Tánaiste to the Report and endorses the recommendations of the Report, including those around a structured framework for cross border policing.

Mr A Maginness
Mrs D Kelly

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 46
Noes: 52

AYES

Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr Byrne.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, 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 G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

20 January 2014
Division 4

Motion – Smithwick Tribunal Report

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the findings of the Smithwick Tribunal Report; calls on the Irish Government to take the necessary action to ensure that those responsible for criminal acts within their jurisdiction are brought to justice; and further calls upon the Minister of Justice and the Chief Constable of the PSNI to have urgent discussions with their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that they take all practical steps to prevent any repeat of such atrocities.

Ms P Givan
Mr J Wells
Mr W Humphrey
Mr S Anderson

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 58
Noes: 39

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr 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, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, 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 G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Attwood, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Ms Ruane.

The Motion was **carried**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 15 - 20 January 2014

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 Enterprise, Trade and Investment Petroleum Production Account for the year ended 31 March 2013 (DETI)

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Mineral Development Account for the year ended 31 March 2013 (DETI)

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2011-12 (DE)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S. R. 2014/3 The General Dental Services (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DHSSPS)

S. R. 2014/6 The Disert Road, Draperstown (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

For Information Only:

S. R. 2014/4 The Waiting Restrictions (Ballykelly) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/5 The Loading Bays and Parking Places on Roads (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/7 The Parking Places on Roads (Electric Vehicles) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People Consultation (OFMDFM)

9. Departmental Publications

Rural White Paper Action Plan - Annual Progress Report 2013 (DARD)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 January 2014

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 Statement - Public Expenditure: 2013-14 January Monitoring

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, made a statement regarding Public Expenditure: 2013-14 January Monitoring, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

2.2 Statement – North South Ministerial Council Inland Waterways

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council Inland Waterways, following which she replied to questions.

2.3 Statement – North South Ministerial Council Language Body Sectoral format

The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding the North South Ministerial Council Language Body Sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion – Non-farming Rural Dwellers

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of the Environment to bring forward revised legislation which would adequately meet the needs of this and future generations of rural dwellers, given that rural planning policy PPS21 on sustainable development in the countryside restricts the majority of non-farming rural dwellers from applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside.

Mr C Boylan
Mr I Milne
Mr B McElduff

3.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Proposed: Leave out all after 'revised' and insert:

'planning policy as part of the Single Planning Policy Statement, inclusive of PPS21, which would adequately meet the needs of current and future generations of farming and non-farming rural dwellers, applying for planning permission and obtaining planning approval to build in the countryside.'

Mr A Maginness
Mr C Eastwood

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.33pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark H Durkan.

4.2 Finance and Personnel

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Motion – Non-farming Rural Dwellers

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion as amended was **carried** without division.

6. Adjournment

Mr Ross Hussey spoke to his topic regarding the Addictions Treatment Unit at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.44pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

21 January 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 21 January 2014

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
5. Assembly Reports

   Report on a complaint against Mr Jimmy Spratt MLA (Committee for Standards and Privileges)

   Report on a complaint against Mr Phil Flanagan MLA (Committee for Standards and Privileges)

6. Statutory Rules

   For Information Only:

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publication

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 20 January 2014

2011-2015 Mandate
Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13				
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13			
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13				
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13				
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14			
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14			
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14					
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14

2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14					
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15		09.12.13						

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 27 January 2014

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 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mrs Judith Cochrane replace Mr Trevor Lunn as a member of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development.

Mr S Dickson
Mr K McCarthy

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement – The Outcome of the December Fisheries Council 2013

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill made a statement regarding the Outcome of the December Fisheries Council 2013, following which she replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15).

Twenty amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mr Martin McGuiness. The junior Minister, Ms Jennifer McCann, also answered a number of questions.

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 Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15)

Debate resumed on the Bill.

Clauses

After debate, Amendment 1 to Clause 5 was **negatived** (Division 1).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Clause 9 was **negatived** without division.

The debate was suspended.

7. Assembly Business

7.1 Motion - Extension of sitting on Monday 27 January 2014 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 27 January 2014 be extended to no later than 12.00pm.

Mr P Weir

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

8. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

8.1 Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15)

The debate on the Bill was resumed.

The Speaker took the Chair.

After debate, Amendment 3 to Clause 10 was **negatived** (Division 2).

After debate, Amendment 4 to Clause 10 was **negatived** (Division 3).

After debate, Amendment 5 to Clause 10 was **negatived** (Division 4).

Amendment 6 was not moved.

After debate, Amendment 7 to Clause 10 was **made** without division.

As Amendment 7 was made, Amendments 8 and 9 were not called.

After debate, Amendment 10 to Clause 10 was **negatived** (Division 5).

After debate, Amendment 11 to Clause 10 was **made** without division.

As Amendments 3 and 5 were not made, Amendment 12 was not called.

After debate, Amendment 13 to Clause 18 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 14 to Clause 28 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 15 inserting a new Clause 29A after Clause 29 was **made** without division and it was agreed that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

Amendment 16 was not moved.

As Amendment 12 was not made, Amendment 17 was not called.

As Amendment 10 was not made, Amendment 18 was not called.

After debate, Amendment 19 to Clause 36 was **made** without division.

As Amendment 10 was not made, Amendment 20 was not called.

The Public Service Pensions Bill NIA 23/11-15 stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

9. Private Members' Business

9.1 Motion – Nursing Staff Levels in Key Hospital Wards

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the important role that nurses play across the Health Service; notes with concern the pressures faced by hospitals and the importance of the Health and Social Care Trusts in providing sufficient numbers of nurses on key wards such as critical care; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to ensure that appropriate staffing levels are in place.

Mr J Spratt
Ms P Bradley

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** .

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 9.23pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

27 January 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

27 January 2014
Division 1

Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) – Amendment 1

Proposed:

Clause 5, Page 3, Line 43

At end insert -

', and must include representation from any trade union recognised by the employer'

Mr A Attwood
Mr D Bradley
Mr S Rogers
Mr S Agnew

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 41
Noes: 54

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Eastwood and Mrs McKevitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

27 January 2014
Division 2

Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) – Amendment 3

Proposed:

Clause 10, Page 6

Leave out lines 15 and 16 and insert -

'specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65'

Mr D McKay
Mr M McLaughlin
Ms M Boyle

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 40
Noes: 48

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKay and Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

27 January 2014
Division 3

Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) – Amendment 4

Proposed:

Clause 10, Page 6, Line 22

At end insert -

'(b) prison officers; or

(c) paramedics and ambulance care attendants'

Mr S Agnew

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 41
Noes: 47

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Agnew and Mr McKinney.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

27 January 2014
Division 4

Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) – Amendment 5

Proposed:

Clause 10, Page 6

Leave out lines 27 and 28 and insert -

'specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65'

Mr D McKay
Mr M McLaughlin
Ms M Boyle

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 40
Noes: 48

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKay and Mr Mitchel McLaughlin.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

27 January 2014
Division 5

Further Consideration Stage: Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) – Amendment 10

Proposed:

Clause 10, Page 6, Line 36

At end insert -

'(5D) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review of the provisions of section 10 as to how such provisions may affect the persons set out in section 1(2)(a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) of this Act, shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly and shall do so in advance of commencement of section 10 (apart from this subsection) further to the relevant commencement provisions at section 36 of the Act.'

Mr A Attwood
Mr D Bradley
Mr S Rogers
Mr S Agnew

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 40
Noes: 48

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McKinney and Mr Rogers.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson.

The Amendment **fell**.

Public Service Pensions Bill
Annotated Marshalled List of Amendments
Further Consideration Stage
Monday 27 January 2014

Amendments tabled up to 9.30am Thursday, 23 January 2014 and selected for debate
The Bill will be considered in the following order-
Clauses, Schedules and Long Title

Amendment 1 [*Negatived on division*]
Clause 5, Page 3, Line 43
At end insert -
', and must include representation from any trade union recognised by the employer'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 2 [*Negatived without division*]
Clause 9, Page 6, Line 11
Leave out '5' and insert '7'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 3 [*Negatived on division*]
Clause 10, Page 6
Leave out lines 15 and 16 and insert -
'specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65'

Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Michaela Boyle

Amendment 4 [*Negatived on division*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 22
At end insert -
'(b) prison officers; or
(c) paramedics and ambulance care attendants'

Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 5 [*Negatived on division*]
Clause 10, Page 6
Leave out lines 27 and 28 and insert -
'specified by the scheme regulations for the scheme; and such regulations may specify any age not exceeding 68, but not less than 65'

Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Michaela Boyle

Amendment 6 [*Not moved*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 29
Leave out from the beginning to the first 'the' on line 33 and insert 'Any'

Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Michaela Boyle

Amendment 7 [*Made without division*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 36
At end insert -

'(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—

(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and

(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons is such age as the order may provide.

(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.

(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure.'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 8 [*Not called*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 36
At end insert -

'(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—

(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and

(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons must in the order specify 60.

(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.

(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure.'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 9 [*Not called*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 36
At end insert -

'(5A) The Department of Finance and Personnel may by order, made in relation to persons under a scheme under section 1 who are persons of such description as is specified in the order, provide—

(a) that subsections (1) and (4) do not apply in relation to such persons, and

(b) that the normal pension age and the deferred pension age in relation to such persons may in the order specify any age not exceeding 60 but not less than 55.

(5B) Before making an order under subsection (5A), the Department must consult such persons (or representatives of such persons) as appear to the Department likely to be affected by the order.

(5C) An order under subsection (5A) is subject to the affirmative procedure'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 10 [*Negatived on division*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 36
At end insert -

'(5D) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review of the provisions of section 10 as to how such provisions may affect the persons set out in section 1(2)(a), (b), (c), (d) and (e) of this Act, shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly and shall do so in advance of commencement of section 10 (apart from this subsection) further to the relevant commencement provisions at section 36 of the Act.'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 11 [*Made without division*]
Clause 10, Page 6, Line 36
At end insert -

'(5E) The Department of Finance and Personnel must conduct a review at intervals of not less than every two years following commencement of section 10 of the Act as to how the provisions of the Act affect the persons set out in section 1(2) of the Act and shall lay a report of the review before the Assembly on or before six months following the commencement of the review.'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 12 [*Not called*]
Clause 10, Page 7, Line 7
Leave out paragraph (c)

Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Michaela Boyle

Amendment 13 [*Made without division*]
Clause 18, Page 11
Leave out lines 32 to 34 and insert '31 March 2015'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 14 [*Made without division*]
Clause 28, Page 16, Line 19
Leave out '2014' and insert '2015'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 15 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 29 insert -
'Police pensions

29A.—(1) Regulations C9 and C9A of the Royal Ulster Constabulary Pension Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 (S.R. 1988 No. 374), as substituted by Schedule 1 to the Police Service of Northern Ireland Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, (S.R. 2006 No. 152) (widow's, etc. pension or gratuity to terminate on re-marriage or other event) shall cease to have effect as from the reinstatement date.

(2) Where any person's entitlement to receive payment on account of a pension or a gratuity under the Regulations of 1988 was terminated by virtue of regulation C9 or C9A, the pension or gratuity shall be reinstated and become payable as from the reinstatement date.

(3) Nothing in this section authorises or requires any payment on account of a pension in respect of any period before the reinstatement date.

(4) For the purposes of this section the reinstatement date is 1 July 2014.'

Mr Jim Allister

Amendment 16 [*Not moved*]
Clause 32, Page 18, Line 18
Leave out from 'is' to 'higher' on line 20 and insert 'does not exceed 68, but is not less than 65'

Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Michaela Boyle

Amendment 17 [*Not called*]
Clause 33, Page 20
Leave out line 24

Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Michaela Boyle

Amendment 18 [*Not called*]
Clause 36, Page 21, Line 11
At end insert -
'( ) section 10(5D);'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Amendment 19 [*Made without division*]
Clause 36, Page 21, Line 13
At end insert -
'( ) section 29A;'

Mr Jim Allister

Amendment 20 [*Not called*]
Clause 36, Page 21, Line 15
At beginning insert -
'Subject to section 10(5D)'

Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr Sean Rogers
Mr Steven Agnew

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 - 27 January 2014

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

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S. R. 2014/8 The Green Road, Conlig (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/10 The Deregulation (Improvement of Enforcement Procedures) (Food Safety) (Revocation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/11 The Infant Formula and Follow-on Formula (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DHSSPS)

S. R. 2014/14 The Slieveboy Road, Claudy (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DHSSPS)

S. R. 2014/Draft The Public Bodies (Abolition of the National Consumer Council and Transfer of the Office of Fair Trading's Functions in relation to Estate Agents etc) Order 2014

For Information Only:

S. R. 2014/9 The Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DSD)

S. R. 2014/12 The Magistrates' Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DOJ)

S. R. 2014/13 The Waiting Restrictions (Dungannon) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust Procurement Issues (DHSSPS)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on a New Strategic Framework to Tackle Economic Inactivity in Northern Ireland - Driving Social Change Through Economic Participation January 2014 (DETI)

Consultation on Legislative Proposals for Energy Licence Modifications and Appeals 24 January 2014 (DETI)

9. Departmental Publications

Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Public Bodies (Abolition of the National Consumer Council and Transfer of the Office of Fair Trading's Functions in relation to Estate Agents etc) Order 2014 (DETI)

Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Children and Families Bill (DHSSPS)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 28 January 2014

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matter of the Day

2.1 The cessation of trading of Mivan and resultant job losses

Mr Trevor Clarke made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the cessation of trading of Mivan and resultant job losses. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Consideration Stage – Carrier Bags Bill (NIA 20/11-15)

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark H Durkan, moved the Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill (NIA 20/11-15).

Four amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 8 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 1 inserting a new Clause 8A after Clause 8 was **made** without division and it was agreed that the new clause stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Clause 9 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 3 to Clause 9 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 9 as amended stand part of the Bill.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 10 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 4 to the Long Title was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that the Long Title as amended stand part of the Bill.

The Carrier Bags Bill (NIA 20/11-15) stood referred to the Speaker.

3.2 Further Consideration Stage: Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15) stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

3.3 Motion – The Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Proposed:

That the Jobseeker's Allowance (Domestic Violence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Minister for Social Development

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4. Private Members' Business

4.1 Motion – Crisis Conditions at Accident and Emergency Departments

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the crisis conditions recently experienced by patients at the Accident and Emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this, and other occurrences where Accident and Emergency departments have been over stretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times.

Mrs D Kelly
Mr F McKinney

4.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'concern' and insert:

'the pressures recently experienced at the Accident and Emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast and their impact on patients; notes that the operational escalation procedures invoked worked effectively, and expresses gratitude for the dedication and efforts of health care staff who can often work long hours in challenging environments; further notes that the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are reviewing the Royal Victoria Hospital incident to see whether refinement in Health and Social Care business continuity planning is required; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this, and other occurrences where Accident and Emergency departments have been over stretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times.'

Mr J Wells
Mrs P Cameron
Mr D McIlveen
Mr G Dunne

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.30pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) in the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

5.2 Regional Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

6. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

6.1 Motion – Crisis Conditions at Accident and Emergency Departments

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** (Division).

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Speaker took the Chair.

7. Adjournment

Mr Paul Givan spoke to his topic regarding the Lagan Valley Hospital Accident and Emergency Department.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.50pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

28 January 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

28 January 2014
Division

Motion - Crisis Conditions at Accident and Emergency Departments - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'concern' and insert:

'the pressures recently experienced at the Accident and Emergency departments in Craigavon Area Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast and their impact on patients; notes that the operational escalation procedures invoked worked effectively, and expresses gratitude for the dedication and efforts of health care staff who can often work long hours in challenging environments; further notes that the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust are reviewing the Royal Victoria Hospital incident to see whether refinement in Health and Social Care business continuity planning is required; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to investigate this, and other occurrences where Accident and Emergency departments have been over stretched, with the aim of providing adequate resources to ensure that every patient admitted to hospital is treated in a safe and controlled environment at all times.'

Mr J Wells
Mrs P Cameron
Mr D McIlveen
Mr G Dunne

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 31
Noes: 60

AYES

Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Anderson and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr McKinney.

The Amendment **fell**.

Carrier Bags Bill
Annotated Marshalled List of Amendments
Consideration Stage
Tuesday 28 January 2014

Amendments tabled up to and including Thursday, 23 January 2014
The Bill will be considered in the following order-
Clauses, Schedules and Long Title

Amendment 1 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 8 insert—

'Amendments of the 2013 Regulations

8A.—(1) The Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 ("the 2013 Regulations") are amended as follows.

(2) For regulation 3 substitute—

"**Meaning of "carrier bag"**

3. In these Regulations "carrier bag" means a bag of any material supplied or designed for the purpose of enabling goods to be taken away or delivered.".

(3) Except in regulation 1(1) (citation) and regulation 3 (meaning of "single use carrier bag")—

(a) for "single use carrier bag" (wherever occurring) substitute "carrier bag";

(b) for "single use carrier bags" (wherever occurring) substitute "carrier bags".

(4) In regulation 6, for the words from "for the purpose" to the end substitute "at a place where goods are sold".

(5) In paragraph 1 of Schedule 1 (exemptions)—

(a) in sub-paragraph (1), after head (k) add—

"(l) bags which are sold to customers for a price of not less than 20 pence each;

(m) multiple reuse plastic bags that are issued as free replacements for a corresponding number of worn out multiple reuse plastic bags.";

(b) in sub-paragraph (3), after the definition of "medicinal product" insert—

""multiple reuse plastic bags" means bags which—

(a) are made wholly or mainly from plastic;

(b) have either maximum dimensions of 404 mm (both width and height) or a maximum dimension of 439 mm (either width or height);

(c) are manufactured from material which is greater than 49 microns in thickness;

(d) are purchased by the customer; and

(e) when worn out are returnable to the seller from whom they were purchased to be replaced free of charge;".

(6) This section comes into operation on 19th January 2015.

(7) Nothing in this section affects any power to amend or revoke the 2013 Regulations.'

Minister of the Environment

Amendment 2 [*Made without division*]
Clause 9, Page 3, Line 21
Leave out 'Act' and insert 'section'

Minister of the Environment

Amendment 3 [*Made without division*]
Clause 9, Page 3, Line 30
Leave out subsection (4) and insert—

'(4) Subsections (1) and (2) do not affect the generality of subsection (5).

(5) The Department may at any time review whether any description of carrier bag should attract the requirement to charge.

(6) Expressions used in subsection (5) and in the charging provisions have the same meaning in that subsection as in those provisions.

(7) In this section—

"charging provisions" means section 77 of and Schedule 6 to the 2008 Act and any regulations made under those provisions;

"the Department" means the Department of the Environment.'

Minister of the Environment

Amendment 4
Long Title[*Made without division*]
After 'bags;' insert 'to amend the Single Use Carrier Bags Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013;'

Minister of the Environment

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 28 January 2014

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
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Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 29 January 2014

2011-2015 Mandate
Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13				
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13			
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14			
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13				
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14		
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14		
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14					
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14

2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14					
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15		09.12.13						

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 3 February 2014

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Public Petition

2.1 Public Petition – Proposed closure of Immaculate Conception College

Mr Pat Ramsey was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition regarding the proposed closure of Immaculate Conception College.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion – Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Simon Hamilton as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr P Weir
Lord Morrow

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Legislative Consent Motion – Children and Families Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees that the UK Parliament should consider the extension to Northern Ireland of amendments to the Children and Families Bill dealing with the regulation of retail packaging etc of tobacco products.

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland.

5.2 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

6. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

6.1 Legislative Consent Motion – Children and Families Bill

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

7. Committee Business

7.1 Motion – Health Inequalities Experienced by People with a Learning Disability

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the health inequalities experienced by people with a learning disability; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to use the opportunities associated with Transforming Your Care to prioritise and tackle this issue.

Chairperson, Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business

8.1 Motion – Mental Wellbeing of the Farming Community

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the detrimental impact the current financial situation, compounded by adverse weather conditions during the past year, is having on the mental wellbeing of those within the farming community; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to liaise with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to bring forward proposals to promote the mental health service provision available to farmers, agricultural and agri-food workers; and further calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to address the stigma of mental health issues and promote the development of therapies and practices best suited to supporting those working in the agricultural sector.

Mr O McMullan
Ms M McLaughlin

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.22pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

3 February 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 January – 3 February 2014

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 Climate Change Adaptation Programme January 2014 (DOE)

OFMDFM Retention and Disposal Schedule 7 October 2013 (DCAL)

Special EU Programmes Body Annual Report 2012 (DFP)

Northern Ireland Law Commission - Annual Report for the year ended 31 March 2013 (DOJ)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S. R. 2014/20 The Misuse of Drugs (Designation)(Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DHSSPS)

S. R. 2014/21 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DHSSPS)

For Information Only:

S. R. 2014/XX The General Register Office (Fees) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DFP)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

Improving Planning – Preparing for 2015 (DOE)

Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (DOE)

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

Review of Salting Actions – 12/13 January 2014 (DRD)

Northern Ireland Estimates - Vote on Account 2014-2015 (DFP)

Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-2014 (DFP)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 February 2014

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 Statement – Draft Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland

The Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark H Durkan, made a statement regarding the Draft Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland, following which he replied to questions.

2.2 Second Stage - Reservoirs Bill (NIA 31/11-15)

The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, moved the Second Stage of the Reservoirs Bill (NIA 31/11-15).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Culture, Arts and Leisure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

3.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Second Stage – Reservoirs Bill (NIA 31/11-15)

Debate resumed on the Bill.

The Reservoirs Bill (NIA 31/11-15) passed Second Stage without division.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4.2 Final Stage – Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, moved that the Final Stage of the Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) passed Final Stage (Division).

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

5. Adjournment

Mr Phil Flanagan spoke to his topic regarding the range of Health Services provided at the South West Acute Hospital, Enniskillen.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.41pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

4 February 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

4 February 2014
Division

Final Stage – Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15)

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 77
Noes: 13

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Buchanan, Mrs Cameron, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Eastwood, Mrs D Kelly, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKevitt, Mr McKinney, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mr McKinney.

Resolved:

That the Public Service Pensions Bill (NIA 23/11-15) do now pass.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 4 February 2014

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
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules

S. R. 2014/15 Salmon Netting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DCAL)

S. R. 2014/16 Salmon Drift Net Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DCAL)

S. R. 2014/17 Fisheries Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DCAL)

S. R. 2014/19 Police Service of Northern Ireland and Police Service of Northern Ireland Reserve Pensions (Amendment) Regulations 2014 (DOJ)

For Information Only:

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
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Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

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Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 05 February 2014

2011-2015 Mandate
Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13				
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13			
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14			
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13				
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13				

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14		
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14					
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14

2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14					
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15		09.12.13						

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 10 February 2014

The Assembly met at noon, the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement – Emergency Department Review

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding an Emergency Department Review, following which he replied to questions.

2.2 Motion – Suspend Standing Orders

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 10 February 2014.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

2.3 Motion – Supply Resolution for the 2013-2014 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £15,530,883,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,606,564,000, be authorised for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2014 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 3(c) and 2(c) of Table 1 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2013-14 that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued on this motion and the motion on the Supply Resolution for the 2014-2015 Vote on Account.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The debate was suspended at 1.54pm for Question Time.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) 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, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson. The junior Minister, Mr Jonathan Bell, also answered a number of questions.

3.2 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Motion – Supply Resolution for the 2013-2014 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Debate resumed on both motions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

4.2 Motion – Supply Resolution for the 2014-2015 Vote on Account

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £7,062,352,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund on account for or towards defraying the charges for Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 and that resources, not exceeding £7,545,788,000, be authorised, on account, for use by Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2015 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2014-15 document that was laid before the Assembly on 3 February 2014.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

4.3 First Stage - Budget Bill (NIA 32/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, introduced a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2014 and 2015; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31st March 2014 and 2015; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2014.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Budget Bill (NIA 32/11-15) passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

4.4 Further Consideration Stage: Tobacco Retailers Bill (NIA 19/11-15)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Tobacco Retailers Bill (NIA 19/11-15).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The Tobacco Retailers Bill (NIA 19/11-15) stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion – Safer Internet Day 2014 Campaign

Proposed:

That this Assembly endorses and supports the Safer Internet Day 2014 Campaign entitled 'Let's create a better internet together'; recognises that whilst it poses significant dangers to children and young people, used properly the internet can also positively affect social, economic and educational advancement; acknowledges that all users have a part to play in making the internet a safer and better place for everybody; and calls upon Her Majesty's Government to encourage a cross-cutting approach to online safety by incorporating it into the school curriculum, by affording parents and carers easy access to sufficient information to take necessary action and by encouraging businesses and industry to self-regulate their web-based content and services.

Mr M Storey
Miss M McIlveen
Mr P Givan
Mr P Frew

5.2 Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'everybody;' and insert:

'calls upon the Northern Ireland Executive and Her Majesty's Government to encourage a cross-cutting approach to online safety by incorporating it into the school curriculum, by affording parents and carers easy access to sufficient information to take necessary action and by encouraging businesses and industry to self-regulate their web-based content and services; and further calls upon the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to assist with the prompt establishment of an e-safety forum, as recommended in the recent Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, 'An exploration of e-safety messages to young people, parents and practitioners in Northern Ireland', and to co-ordinate e-safety responsibilities across all Executive Departments.'

Mrs S Overend

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.14pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

10 February 2014

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on
5 – 10 February 2014

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 North/South Language Body Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 December 2011 (DCAL)

Department of Finance and Personnel Memorandum and the Seventeenth report of the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2015 - DCAL: Management of Major Capital Projects (DFP)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

S. R. 2014/22 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DFP)

S. R. 2014/26 The Explosive (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DOJ)

For Information Only:

S. R. 2014/18 The Charities (2008 Act) (Commencement No.5) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DSD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 11 February 2014

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 Statement – Organ Donation

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding Organ Donation, following which he replied to questions.

2.2 Further Consideration Stage: Carrier Bags Bill (NIA 20/11-15)

The Further Consideration Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill (NIA 20/11-15) stood on the Order Paper in the name of the Minister of the Environment.

The Further Consideration Stage was **not moved**.

2.3 Final Stage – Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15)

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, moved that the Final Stage of the Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill (NIA 27/11-15) passed Final Stage without division.

2.4 Consideration Stage – Financial Provisions Bill (NIA 22/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, moved the Consideration Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill (NIA 22/11-15).

Ten amendments were tabled to the Bill, five of which inserted new clauses.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 and 2 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 1 inserting new Clause 2A was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 2 inserting new Clause 2B was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 3 inserting new Clause 2C was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 4 inserting new Clause 2D was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 5 inserting new Clause 2E was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 6 to Clause 3 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 3 as amended stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question that Clauses 4 and 5 stand part of the Bill was **agreed** without division.

After debate, Amendment 7 to Clause 6 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 6 as amended stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question that Clause 7 stand part of the Bill was **agreed** without division.

After debate, Amendment 8 to Clause 8 was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 8 as amended stand part of the Bill.

After debate, the question that Clause 9 stand part of the Bill was **agreed** without division.

After debate, Amendment 9 to the Schedule was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that the Schedule, as amended, stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 10 to the Long Title was **made** without division.

The question being put, the Long Title as amended was **agreed** without division.

The Financial Provisions Bill (NIA 22/11-15) stood referred to the Speaker.

2.5 Second Stage – Budget Bill (NIA 32/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Simon Hamilton, moved the Second Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA 32/11-15).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 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.

3.2 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Mark H Durkan.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Second Stage – Budget Bill (NIA 32/11-15)

Debate resumed on the Bill.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr McLaughlin) took the Chair.

The Budget Bill (NIA 32/11-15) passed Second Stage with cross-community support *nemine contradicente*.

5. Adjournment

Mr Jimmy Spratt spoke to his topic regarding post-primary education in the south and east Belfast area.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 9.37pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

11 February 2014

Financial Provisions Bill
Annotated Marshalled List of Amendments
Consideration Stage
Tuesday 11 February 2014

Amendments tabled up to 9.30am Thursday, 6 February 2014 and selected for debate
The Bill will be considered in the following order-
Clauses, Schedule and Long Title

Amendment 1 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 2 insert -

'Rating of owners instead of occupiers in certain cases

2A. In Article 20 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (rating of owners instead of occupiers in certain cases)—

(a) in paragraph (1)—

(i) in sub-paragraph (a), after "hereditament" insert "(where the hereditament does not have a net annual value and a capital value)";

(ii) in sub-paragraph (b) for "£55,000" substitute "£150,000";

(iii) in sub-paragraph (c), for head (ii) substitute—

"(ii) its net annual value does not exceed £1,590;";

(b) in paragraph (1A), for the words from "both conditions" to the end of that paragraph substitute "the conditions in sub-paragraphs (b) and (c)(ii) of paragraph (1) must be satisfied, but the condition set out in sub-paragraph (c)(i) of that paragraph does not apply in relation to such a hereditament.".'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 2 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 2 insert -

'Repeal of Articles 23 and 24 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977

2B. Articles 23 (liability of occupier for rates unpaid by owner) and 24 (recovery of rates from tenants and lodgers) of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 are repealed.'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 3 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 2 insert -

'Power of Department of Finance and Personnel to require information

2C.—(1) Article 26 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (power of Department to require information as to ownership, etc.) is amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph (1)—

(a) at the end of sub-paragraph (a) insert "and the date on which he acquired that interest";

(b) after sub-paragraph (c) insert—

(2) "(cc) the date on which he began to occupy the hereditament;".

(3) After paragraph (1) insert—

(3) "(1A) The Department may, for the purposes of this Order, serve a notice on the owner of any hereditament requiring him to state to the Department in writing, within a period and in the manner specified in the notice—

(4) (a) the date on which he acquired ownership of the hereditament; and

(5) (b) the date, if any, on which he began to occupy the hereditament.".

(4) In paragraph (2B)(a) after "(1)" insert ", (1A)".'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 4 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 2 insert -

'Discount on rates on dwellings

2D.—(1) Article 30 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (discount on rates on dwellings) is amended as follows.

(2) After paragraph (2) insert—

(6) "(2ZA) An allowance shall be granted in accordance with paragraph (2ZC) to any person entitled to possession of a hereditament to which paragraph (2ZB) applies who pays the net amount due on account of a rate in respect of that hereditament in a single sum before such date as the Department may notify to him.

(7) (2ZB) This paragraph applies to a hereditament in the capital value list in respect of which rates are chargeable under Article 25A where the hereditament is a hereditament which—

(8) (a) is not in use; and

(9) (b) is a hereditament which the Department considers will, when next in use, be a dwelling-house or, though not a dwelling-house, will be used partly for the purposes of a private dwelling; and

(10) (c) is not the subject of an agreement under Article 21.

(11) (2ZC) The allowance shall be by way of a discount of 4% on the amount payable on account of the rate as is computed by reference to the rateable capital value of the hereditament.".

(3) In paragraph (2A) after "(2)" insert "or (2ZC)".'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 5 [*Made without division*]
New Clause
After clause 2 insert -

'Temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments

2E. In Article 31C of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments)—

(a) in paragraph (1) after "percentage" insert "or a specified amount";

(b) in sub-paragraph (a) of that paragraph for "exceed a" substitute "exceed such other".'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 6 [*Made without division*]
Clause 3, Page 2, Line 13
Leave out 'make provision as' and insert 'give directions in relation'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 7 [*Made without division*]
Clause 6, Page 3, Line 6
After 'regulations' insert 'subject to negative resolution'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 8 [*Made without division*]
Clause 8, Page 3, Line 21
Leave out 'Section 5 comes' and insert 'Sections 2A, 2B, 2C, 2D and 5 come'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 9 [*Made without division*]
Schedule, Page 4, Line 15
At end insert -

'The Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977	Articles 23 and 24.'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 10 [*Made without division*]
Long Title
After 'authorities;' insert 'to amend the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 11 February 2014

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

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

For Information Only:

S. R. 2014/24 The Parking Places and Loading Bays on Roads (Glengall Street, Belfast) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/25 The Parking Places (Disabled Persons' Vehicles) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/29 The Waiting Restrictions (Carrickfergus) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

S. R. 2014/30 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Portrush) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2014 (DRD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation of the Proposals for the Introduction of a New Technical Specification for a Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle (DOE)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as at 12 February 2014

2011-2015 Mandate
Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Marine Bill 5/11-15	21.02.12	05.03.12	06.07.12	05.07.12	30.04.13	13.05.13	21.05.13	17.09.13
Welfare Reform Bill 13/11-15	01.10.12	09.10.12	19.02.13	14.02.13				
Education Bill 14/11-15	02.10.12	15.10.12	08.04.13	08.04.13				
Planning Bill 17/11-15	14.01.13	22.01.13	07.06.13	06.06.13	24.06.13 & 25.06.13			
Tobacco Retailers Bill 19/11-15	15.04.13	23.04.13	18.10.13	09.10.13	3.12.13	10.02.14		
Carrier Bags Bill 20/11-15	03.06.13	11.06.13	30.11.13	26.11.13	28.01.14			
Financial Provisions Bill 22/11-15	17.06.13	01.07.13	13.12.13	11.12.13	11.02.14			
Public Service Pensions Bill 23/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	29.11.13	27.11.13	14.01.14	27.01.14	04.02.14	
Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill 24/11-15	17.06.13	25.06.13	13.12.13	05.12.13				

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Health and Social Care (Amendment) Bill 27/11-15	16.09.13	24.09.13	11.12.13	04.12.13	20.01.14	28.01.14	11.02.14	
Local Government Bill 28/11-15	23.09.13	01.10.13	20.02.14					
Road Races (Amendment) Bill 29/11-15	18.11.13	26.11.13	/	/	2.12.13	9.12.13	10.12.13	17.01.14

2011-2015 Mandate
Non-Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 25/11-15	17.06.13 Bill fell. Re-introduced as Bill 30/11-15 (see below)							
Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 26/11-15	24.06.13	23.09.13 & 24.09.13	11.04.14					
Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill 30/11-15		09.12.13						

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

** Please note that any bills that received Royal Assent in the previous session have been removed from the table.