



Northern Ireland
Assembly

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)
and
**JOURNAL OF
PROCEEDINGS**

Volume 71

(30 January 2012 to 19 February 2012)

BELFAST: THE STATIONERY OFFICE LTD
£70.00

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Ramsey, Ms Sue (West Belfast)
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Minister of Justice	Mr David Ford

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Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister	Ms Martina Anderson
	Mr Jonathan Bell

Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Settings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 30 January 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Bangor Central Integrated Primary School

Mr Speaker: Mr Steven Agnew has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr Agnew: I present this petition on behalf of the Bangor Central Integrated Primary School parents' action group. The school has almost 600 pupils and, as its name suggests, is situated in the heart of Bangor town centre. The original school building, in which the school is still housed, was built for 300 pupils — half the number currently in attendance. For the school to expand to meet its requirements, it was proposed that a land swap take place between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and North Down Borough Council. That would have allowed the school to expand on to the land on which Bangor Castle Leisure Centre is situated. Cairtriona Ruane, the then Minister of Education, said in July 2009:

"I want to emphasise that officials are conscious that there is a limited timeframe available to facilitate the purchase"

of the Bangor Castle Leisure Centre site. However, in just over two years, very little progress has been made, and now North Down Borough Council proposes to sell off the land to a private developer, putting at risk the sustainability of the school in the town centre.

The petition, signed by over 3,000 people, was created by the parents' action group, which feels that Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, its pupils and the wider community have been let down by their council, their education and library board and the Department of Education. All six North Down MLAs wrote to the Education Minister asking him to meet them to discuss the future of the school in the town centre. I appreciate that he is not in a position to grant a new school building at this time, but, if the land is sold, the opportunity to expand the school at its current site will be lost. The Minister's intervention could be crucial. It will be too late after the viability audit; the land will likely have already been sold by then.

On behalf of the parents' action group, I present the petition asking the Minister of Education to meet local elected representatives, the South Eastern Education and Library Board, the principal of the school and representatives of the

council to ensure that the issue is resolved in a satisfactory manner and to ensure the future sustainability of the school in the town centre.

Mr Agnew 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.

Private Members' Business

Housing: Tenancy Deposit Scheme

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

Mr Copeland: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the safeguards which tenancy deposit schemes offer to landlords and tenants within the private rented sector; expresses concern that many landlords often make unjustified deductions or are slow to return deposits at the end of a tenancy, particularly for tenants living in student accommodation; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to urgently bring forward his plans to introduce a mandatory tenancy deposit scheme which would safeguard tenants' deposits and provide a fair and effective mechanism to resolve disputes.

Few words resonate in the history of this island and its jurisdictions like the word "landlord". It conjures up memories of people doing things that they should not have been doing and people living in squalor. To some, it brings to mind foppish Victorian gentlemen in the gaming houses and pleasure houses of London while their tenants suffered in squalor. The truth then was as now: some are good landlords, and some are bad.

I am grateful, sir, to the Business Committee for selecting the motion for debate today. To avoid confusion from the outset, I would like to clarify that I am fully aware that the Department for Social Development previously announced plans for a tenants' deposit scheme. I am also aware that the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, passed by the House in the previous mandate, requires that the Department for Social Development lay subordinate legislation and regulations before the Assembly by November 2012 to introduce a landlord registration and tenancy deposit scheme. We would like to see those regulations laid well in advance of November, so that students can start the new academic year knowing that their rights and deposits will be protected by legislation. Therefore, the Ulster Unionist Party will not accept or support the Sinn Féin amendment. Frankly, we feel that it adds little to the motion. Some could even consider it to be an attempt to weaken it by taking the impetus away from the Department.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Copeland: Not at the minute, Fra.

I have no idea why Sinn Féin seeks to make life easier for officials in the Department. Perhaps it will elaborate on that subsequently.

The purpose of the debate is twofold: first, to inform the Department that the delay in introducing a tenancy deposit scheme has simply not been good enough and to seek an

explanation for it; and, secondly, to put forward the case for having the scheme in place by September 2012. Senior officials in the Department, as well as their Ministers, have sat back and watched successive schemes in Great Britain go from the earliest embryonic stages of planning to full implementation in the same time as it has taken us to make lukewarm public comments about the potential of similar schemes. That is one point that, I respectfully ask, the Minister should consider answering in his response.

I hope that Members, in advance of the debate, sought to find out the clear definition of what we in the Ulster Unionist Party are referring to in calling for a tenancy deposit scheme. I will clarify for those who did not. In short, such a scheme would protect tenants' deposits by placing them with an independent third party. Any organisation seeking to take part in the scheme would need to be approved by the Department in advance. In addition to holding the money, those third parties would include arrangements to resolve disputes arising in connection with deposits paid. That would create a more professional approach to tenancy deposits and would, we hope, in all likelihood reduce the number of disputes. The dispute service would be free, and the scheme would apply to anyone who lets property and receives or holds a deposit.

One in six people in Northern Ireland lives in private rented accommodation. Between 1991 and 2009, the number of properties in that category increased fourfold to more than 125,000 — and those are properties, not people. Of the total housing stock in Northern Ireland, 17% is used for private rentals. That far exceeds the entire Housing Executive permanent stock, which is between 85,000 and 95,000. The sector is diverse. It is made up of a multitude of differing types of dwelling owned by a range of people. Even in relation to landlords, it is difficult for me to describe anything that could be described as or apportioned the title "typical". Some own one or maybe two properties to supplement their income, while others own dozens — sometimes hundreds — of multiple-occupancy properties. Nevertheless, no matter how large the property portfolio or how great the rents brought in, no landlord should be immune from regulations brought about as the result of a tenancy deposit scheme.

The reason the motion that I brought to the House refers particularly to students is that they are a demographic that such a scheme would especially benefit. They are by no means the only group, however, and I know that Members will, in all likelihood, make that point continually throughout the debate. That recognition is important. A scheme would protect the pensioner living in a rented bungalow as much as the six students sharing a house in south Belfast. Nevertheless, 60% of those living in the sector are under the age of 40, and I wish to focus on students, who are most often exposed to the dishonest actions of unscrupulous landlords.

I could give an example or two, or three or four or five. Time will limit the examples. I am aware of a group of young people living in a five-bedroom mid-terrace house in a well-known university area who paid a deposit of £1,245, only to be told at the end of the tenancy that they would get back £370. Although they were mature enough to accept that they needed to pay for some costs, those were minor. Nevertheless, when the young people challenged the landlord on the extent of the charges levelled against them,

telling him that they would take it to the small claims court if needed, he threatened to do exactly the same to them, conveniently mentioning a broken door that appeared long after they had left the property. In truth, there was little they could do. Even if they had proceeded to the small claims court, they would have ended up paying the costs, with little chance of a reasonable hearing. It would, in fact, have been hardly worth their while. We have to remember that, at the end of the day, students are young people living away from home for probably the first time and therefore are not experienced with the legal process and are possibly even daunted by it.

I will also refer quickly to another example of which I am aware. This one demonstrates another benefit of having a scheme in operation. I know of students living in another student area of Belfast who did not get a single penny of their £750 deposit back despite leaving the property in excellent condition and initially being told that they would get their money back in full. The landlord was based in the Republic of Ireland and effectively cut off all contact with the young people when the deposit was due to be paid back. They never received a penny. If a tenancy deposit scheme had been in operation in Northern Ireland, that landlord would not have been able to touch the students' money, as he or she would never have got near it.

12.15 pm

Those are only two examples. However, such instances happen every year and on what can only be described as a startling scale. The NUS-USI conducted research recently that revealed that, from a sample of 1,302 students, 48% had their deposit unfairly withheld.

Robin Swann and other party colleagues will speak about other groups of people who depend heavily on the private rented sector, including professionals and migrants, who also fall victim to the acts of dishonest landlords.

I hope that I have been able to get the point across as to why Northern Ireland needs a deposit scheme. Not only would it enable money to remain wholly with independent third parties but it would give students the right to appeal, which is regrettably missing at the moment.

In Belfast, another case occurred on an even greater scale. The landlord and the repairman appeared to be one and the same person, and deductions from the deposit were used to fund repairs that were, in the opinion of those involved, erroneous.

It is not my intention to mark landlords with a negative light. As I said, some are bad, and some are good. Many are perfectly reasonable people. However, the fact remains that, in Northern Ireland, there are people with vast property portfolios who, in some cases, see tenancy deposits as a tax-free bonus. I hope that Members on all sides of the House recognise that there are serious problems in the private rented sector in the Province. We are the only part of the United Kingdom that does not offer protection to tenants. It is about time that that changed, and we really should not have to wait until November.

Mr F McCann: I beg to move the following amendment: After "Social Development" insert:

"to consider the workings of the Private Residential Tenancies Board, which is based in Dublin, as a potential way forward for dealing with unscrupulous landlords who cheat their tenants out of deposits; and"

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Members responsible for bringing this issue to the Assembly for debate. It was discussed last year when the Housing Bill was before the House. At that time, we in Sinn Féin argued for strong legislation to deal with the private rented sector, which, until that time, had been unregulated. Although the legislation was not as strong as we would have liked, we supported the Housing Bill after we were advised that it could fall at the end of the mandate. So, we are happy that this issue is back in front of the Assembly, and we view it as unfinished business.

I should point out that not all landlords are bad landlords. However, a sizeable rump are poor providers of housing. That is recognised in the sector and the broad housing family. I hope that the Minister uses the opportunity to advise us what protections are in place to deal with the issue, which was also in the last Housing Bill. That point is also crucial to today's debate.

I recently attended the AGM of Shelter, at which they had a guest speaker from Galway university who was an expert on housing law and housing in general. He delivered what I thought was a good lecture on some of the antiquated laws that still guide housing law on both sides of the border. He spoke about the introduction of a private residential tenancy board, which he described as the result of an effective piece of legislation. The Private Residential Tenancies Board (PRTB) was established and came into operation on 1 September 2004. That aspect of the legislation in question dealt with security of tenure, tenancy termination procedures, registration of the private rented sector, laws to deal with antisocial behaviour and offences relating to standards in houses. The remainder of that Bill became law on 6 December 2004, which meant that, for the first time, effective legislation was enacted to deal with the unregulated private rented sector in that jurisdiction. We have heard periodically that there were problems with the implementation of the legislation, although it seems to me, having listened to that lecture, that we have come a long way from those early days. The legislation is now seen as an important weapon in bringing order to a sector that controls a huge section of housing provision in the South.

In the North, there has been a huge increase in the private rented sector. Landlords in the private rented sector are now the biggest providers of housing across the North, and they draw down tens of millions of pounds in housing benefit from government each year. We have an obligation to protect tenants from the activities of unscrupulous landlords. Although the Ulster Unionist Party motion touches on protection, it does not state what protection it would like to see. The motion limits itself to the protection of students rather than all those who have their deposit withheld. My office has dealt with a number of cases in which deposits have been withheld. The most recent case is probably one of the worst examples of that abuse. A young person approached a well-known estate agency to ask for accommodation. He filled in the relevant forms, paid his deposit and was asked to get people to support his application. He was unable to get anyone to supply the necessary letters because people are reluctant to take on

the responsibility in case they are left liable for unpaid debts or breakages. He went back to the agents, advised that he was finding it difficult to obtain the letters and asked for his deposit back, but he was refused. It is not the first time that I have heard such a story from young vulnerable people. It is an abuse of their rights. How many people just walk away from those shops and landlords and accept that they will not get their money back? In many cases, people have gone into debt to raise the deposit in the first place. They believe that challenging those unscrupulous people is a waste of time. We need to ensure that we legislate to protect them.

I have had occasion to speak to those who supply private rented properties. Some of them are well-known high street names. The arrogance of some when challenged is atrocious. The company of which I spoke earlier was also the first that I heard of to implement the four-weekly rent cycle in place of the calendar month so that it could get the extra week over the year. The withholding of deposits is wrong, putting at risk the person who paid the deposit. Many people are not in a position to raise the additional deposit for whatever new property they seek.

People have spoken of landlords using the flimsiest of excuses to withhold deposits. We need to ensure that whatever legislation we enact stops that practice. Sinn Féin believes that a solution could lie in the Residential Tenancies Act 2004. It is self-funding, has dispute resolution at its core and deals with deposit refunds, breaches of tenancy obligations, lease terms, termination of tenancies, market rent, rent arrears and neighbour complaints. Either the tenant or the landlord can initiate a complaint and choose mediation or adjudication. The proceedings are confidential and, if they go to stage two, consist of a three-person tenancy tribunal. The decision of a tribunal can be appealed only to the High Court on a point of law, and the Private Residential Tenancies Board can award damages.

The Minister is about to make an announcement on the future of the Housing Executive. The equivalent of the tenancies board could sit with the regulatory element of his proposals. I understand that the Minister is moving towards more use of the private rented sector in the provision of social housing. That should be done only if there are tenant protections in place, such as an effective deposit retention scheme. A private residential tenancies board, similar to that in the South, can offer the safeguards and protections required to deal with the sector. I ask for support for the motion as amended.

Mr Campbell: The issue has been outlined by the proposer of the motion, Mr Copeland. It certainly has the interests of a number of tenants, particularly those in the private rented sector, at heart. As the Member said, we have seen significant growth in the private rented sector in recent years. In all probability, according to the stats for housing provision, the sector is likely to continue to grow over the next year or two. At the moment, we have considerably in excess of 100,000 dwellings in the private rented sector, which indicates that there is an area of concern.

Mr Copeland outlined some examples. I will not multiply the number of examples, but we should lay it open to public scrutiny, as regards acceptance, that, although there are unscrupulous landlords, many landlords are entirely scrupulous. The scheme would not be aimed at them. Unfortunately, however, there are examples of several

hundreds of pounds being held and not returned, even though the terms of the tenancy have been adhered to by the tenant and the landlord. A tenancy deposit scheme, such as that outlined by Mr Copeland, would take care of that. I am glad that the Minister is in the business of implementing such a scheme. I am sure that he will discuss it when he addresses the motion, and I hope that the Committee for Social Development will get time to examine it.

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

With regard to Sinn Féin's amendment, I do not see the relevance of the scheme in the Irish Republic as regards any scheme implemented in Northern Ireland. Hopefully, the Assembly will be able to introduce a scheme that will not only protect tenants from landlords who try to act unscrupulously and retain deposits to which they are not entitled but give landlords security and ensure that they get good tenants. Therefore, there would be double and mutual reassurance.

Given that the Minister is about to introduce such a scheme and bring it to the Committee for Social Development, I hope that there will be unanimous approval in the Assembly and that we can make significant progress in the next few weeks.

Mr Durkan: I support the motion. A couple of Members referred to the size of the private rental sector; indeed, it accounts for 20% of housing stock in the North. That is a staggering statistic. It seems that students are the motion's main priority. Indeed, I am sure that they are seen as soft targets by unscrupulous landlords. However, that is really only the tip of the iceberg as far as that situation is concerned. A much bigger percentage of residences is rented by people who are unemployed or on a very low income. In my opinion, that is indicative of the Assembly's inability to provide sufficient social housing. We really need to work together to address that.

There is a huge ongoing issue with the affordability of deposits, particularly for those who are on benefits. Many of them are lone parents. The Simon Community is working on a scheme through which it provides assurances or sureties to landlords, which is helping to alleviate the ongoing problem of homelessness.

Although people have difficulty paying deposits, there is, as the motion identifies, a lot of difficulty in getting them repaid. It is important to stress that the majority of landlords are not unscrupulous, and Mr Campbell touched on that. I am sure that we have all encountered altruistic individuals who go above and beyond their responsibilities to tenants. I am also sure that we have all encountered tenants who are less than respectful towards the properties that they rent. However, we must act to protect people from unscrupulous landlords who see their properties as cash cows rather than as people's homes. The introduction of any scheme to prevent such abuses would be welcome. We should look at similar models in other jurisdictions to learn what would work and suit best here. It is important that we work to build relationships and trust between tenants and landlords.

If we are to act on the issue, we should, at the same time, look at other protective measures for tenants. Last week, I received depressing figures on houses that have been repossessed during the past few years. I have been contracted by families who are tenants in such houses. In my experience, they have, now, been made homeless

with no recourse to deposits whatsoever. At least, with an independent or third-party body holding the deposit, so to speak, it could be ensured that such dire situations were avoided. Another issue might be the accrual of interest on deposits. I have yet to hear of any instance when that has been returned to tenants when they leave a property.

As I have stressed, I support the motion. I have no great difficulty with the amendment. We can learn from the Private Residential Tenancies Board in Dublin. We may need to look at more robust mechanisms for registering tenancies because, undoubtedly, the most unscrupulous landlords will attempt to avoid registration.

Every effort must be made to regulate the sector and to ensure protection for all private rental tenants, including students, many of whom are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

12.30 pm

Ms Lo: Over the years, I, too, have received a number of complaints regarding tenancy deposits from students and tenants in my constituency of South Belfast. When moving out of a privately rented property, tenants are faced with a wholly unregulated process in trying to get their deposit back from the landlord. Some had unfair deductions, unacceptable delays or all their deposit withheld. Not only is that unjust but it can leave tenants unable to pay a deposit upfront on their next rental. The visas of overseas students or workers run out within weeks of their education or work permits ending, so if they do not get their deposit returned quickly enough, they have to leave without it. Many landlords know that, and some look to abuse the situation.

Due to the current economic downturn and the fact that mortgage finance is increasingly difficult to access, more and more people, in addition to students and migrant workers, are turning to the private rented sector. In Northern Ireland, the private rented sector is now the second largest tenure after owner-occupied. As a result of the boom that was followed by the recession, a new kind of landlord emerged: those who bought properties as an investment and are now unable to sell them on. To help to pay the mortgage on those properties or to create an income from their investment, they are now becoming amateur landlords and are renting out their properties. That is all done without any regulation or checks being carried out.

Citizens Advice states that tenants who have been told that they are not entitled to their full deposits back from their landlords are often forced to pursue court action in the small claims court. However, given the daunting nature of such action and the fact that it can be a very slow process, many tenants simply write off the loss. Tenancy deposit schemes are designed to act as an independent middleman between landlords and tenants and, therefore, take the hassle out of such disputes. They also encourage landlords and tenants to draw up a comprehensive agreement as to what condition the property should be left in and an inventory of terms that are included in the contract.

With welfare reform well on its way, we cannot ignore the large numbers of people who will be affected by the significant changes to housing benefit, including the changes to the local housing allowance, which will be calculated at the 30th percentile of rents rather than the median, and the extension of the shared room rate to

include those aged under 35. Those changes will create new challenges for tenants, landlords, housing associations and the Housing Executive. Less housing benefit will be available to those who are currently eligible and more people will be expected to move into shared accommodation.

With respect to the amendment, when I was on the Committee for Social Development, we looked at Dublin's Private Residential Tenancies Board. It really is an example of good practice, and I think that we should consider it.

I recognise that the Department for Social Development (DSD) has made a significant attempt, such as the registration scheme, to provide a regulatory framework for the private rented sector. However, the time has really come for the Minister to bring forward a mandatory tenancy deposit scheme, as included in the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The scheme has proved successful in the South and in other parts of the UK, in that it protect tenants' rights and regulates the process for all involved, while providing an effective mechanism in which to resolve landlord and tenancy disputes. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Easton: The current economic climate has led to an inevitable rise in the use of the private rented sector. With that in mind, the tenancy deposit scheme, which the Minister is planning to introduce, can come at no better time.

The scheme described in the motion will ensure that deposits are protected by ensuring that landlords enter into mandatory schemes, which will allow the quick and fair resolution of all disputes around deposit returns. Similar schemes are in place in England and Wales, with Scotland following suit. Therefore, it is important that the private rented sector in Northern Ireland is not left behind.

Since the implementation of the schemes in England and Wales, in the first two years of operation, over 1.5 million deposits have been protected, totalling nearly £1.4 billion, with an average deposit of £906. That evidence shows the real need for such a scheme and the need for the scheme to be brought in sooner than planned.

At present, our private rented sector is our second largest housing tenure after owner-occupiers. It is well known that the need for a vibrant and growing private rented sector is important for the economic growth of countries. The current economic climate has seen the rise of accidental landlords; that is, people who are forced to rent out properties, as they cannot afford to sell.

Although no one doubts that landlords want to provide the best service possible for their tenants, it is important to ensure that, financially, tenants who want to move on from their property should not be forced to enter into a lengthy process through the small claims court for the return of part or all of their deposit that they feel entitled to. The scheme will ensure that the need of tenants to have quick access to their deposit funds will be balanced with the needs of landlords to protect their property and to ensure that any damage is compensated for and any moneys due in regard to rent arrears are covered.

Research conducted in 2009 by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive shows that 17% of people who took part in the survey failed to get their deposit back and felt that that was unjust. By bringing forward the scheme, we will

have in place a clear and transparent process, which can be used by tenants and landlords to resolve such disputes quickly and will provide a degree of security to all involved.

The motion specifically mentions the plight of students. Although students make up a very small number of private rented sector tenants, they are some of the most vulnerable when it comes to the return of their deposits. This group is often made up of young people who are living away from home for the first time, and they are often unaware of their rights or how to access the small claims court system to pursue the return of part or all their deposits that they feel they deserve. They are also often living on very low incomes, which means that they rely on the return of their deposits to secure accommodation for the next academic year. By bringing forward the scheme, we can afford everyone involved in the private rented sector the feeling that their money and property are protected.

It is important that we remember that a high number of people have a very positive experience of our private rented sector. That has been evidenced in research and by the continual growth in the sector. Although some of that growth will no doubt be down to necessity, research shows that 48% of tenants viewed the private rented sector as being more desirable than the social housing sector.

The tenancy deposit scheme will not in itself ensure that vulnerable tenants and others do not fall victim to bad landlords. However, in conjunction with other changes in legislation, the education package already endorsed by the Department for Social Development for landlords and the support services that guide tenants and landlords, that relationship will be managed and sustained in a way that means that the private rented sector can continue to be a viable, attractive option for housing for many people in Northern Ireland.

By bringing the tenancy deposit scheme forward, we can build on those positive experiences, by ending the uncertainty surrounding the return of deposits or part of deposits for both landlords and tenants. That can only be a positive outcome for the sector and for the economy of Northern Ireland, and the early implementation of this mandatory scheme will allow that to begin earlier.

Ms Lewis: I support the motion as a member of the Committee for Social Development. However, I reject the Sinn Féin amendment because I believe the scheme referred to in the Republic of Ireland is not comparable to the system that the Minister is committed to bringing into being. Furthermore, instead of looking just at tenancy deposit schemes in the Republic of Ireland, we could look at numerous examples of such schemes across the European Union, including those in areas where renting takes precedence over purchasing homes. We could also look closer to home at the scheme that operates in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The failure of tenants to secure their deposits when they finish their leases is widespread and, in many ways, is taken for granted. I believe that under schedule 2 of the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, we have the solid basis for a scheme that can help to develop and secure tenants' rights. I know that the Minister is committed to that Act and will lay legislation for a scheme before the House by November.

A tenancy deposit scheme would provide for an independent third party to hold tenants' deposits and to resolve any disputes that may arise between landlords and tenants. At present, deposits are held by landlords or property management companies, and tenants are often likely to come into dispute with landlords over their deposits. Deposits are paid with the first month's rent to cover any damage that is done to a property or to furnishings during the time that tenants live there. However, many landlords, and I make it clear that this does not mean all landlords, are keen to make any excuse to keep the deposits.

As many other Members stated, the main body of the population that rents in Northern Ireland are students. That is a section of the population that has little or no money and to whom a deposit of £100, £200 or much more is a great deal of money. Queen's University, Belfast Students' Union recently surveyed 1,500 students, and just under half of those felt that they had lost their deposits unfairly when they had been withheld by a landlord or letting agency. Of those, only 40% chose to contest that decision, and of that, only 35% reported that they were able to get back their deposits in full or in part. My concern is that tens of thousands of pounds are being lost in that way each year via unscrupulous landlords. Normal mechanisms and processes that are available to tenants who are in dispute over deposits are open to ensure fairness, but many do not make use of them.

As we heard, the private rented sector now represents 17% of the total housing stock in Northern Ireland and consists of some 125,000 dwellings. Indeed, it is now larger than the total social housing sector. People rent for a variety of reasons, and renting is especially more prevalent during a recession when young people, who are capable of purchasing their own homes but unable to secure a mortgage, are forced to rent. As research by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive shows, those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to rent. Therefore, such a tenancy deposit scheme stands to protect tenants and, I would add, landlords. I, therefore, support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I congratulate my colleague Michael Copeland for tabling the motion. I declare an interest as the landlord of one house, and I wonder whether some other Members should also have declared an interest.

The scheme has been a long time coming. I remember that when I first entered the House in 2009, I heard of the probable introduction of a tenancy deposit scheme. I also recall similar discussions when the Housing (Amendment) Bill was discussed at the start of last year. However, it would appear that little or no substantive preparation has been put into its operation.

It has been said that the introduction of such a scheme in Northern Ireland would provide benefits for landlords and tenants. I emphasise that the purpose of the motion is not to cast the same aspersion on all landlords. However, as in many such situations, it is the minority that let the majority down. A landlord can own one property or 100; the scheme will apply to them all equally.

I am aware that students are paying close attention to the debate. That is perhaps not overly surprising, given that they are most frequently affected by the unfair withholding

of tenancy deposits. I wholeheartedly agree with Michael Copeland that the scheme should be in place by the start of the new academic year, so it is important that in advance of its coming into effect later this year, appropriate discussions take place with those who rent privately. I know that the NUS-USI has a campaign that is ready to go the moment the scheme is announced, and its Brick by Brick campaign will be crucial in informing students of their rights. However, the Department must also realise that landlords will need to be educated about the scheme as much as the tenants who would benefit from it most.

12.45 pm

It is not only students who should be the focus of this debate. Many families in South Antrim live in private rented accommodation. I will give two examples from my nearly three years as an MLA. The first concerns a single mother who was thrown out of her home because she was having difficulty paying. Her situation was made particularly difficult because of Child Support Agency payments. I suspected that the landlord put pressure on the people who lived beside her to cause her an uncomfortable life in the house in order to make her leave, with the result that when she left, she did not get her deposit back. We have to keep that in mind.

The second example occurred during last year's thaw. A lady from Ballyclare who was pregnant and had four children under the age of 10 called me to say that her boiler had burst in the roof and that water was running down all the walls. The weather was still freezing. It was Christmas Sunday, if I may call it that, the day between Christmas and Boxing Day, because Boxing Day was on the Monday. Her house was freezing, and every wall was wet. I rang the landlord three or four times and heard a foreign dialling tone. I texted him, but I got nowhere. Eventually, I e-mailed the Minister — I congratulate him for being on the end of an e-mail between Christmas and Boxing Day as we tried to find my constituent a home. In the middle of all that, the landlord meant to text a friend but texted me by mistake. I knew that he knew what was going on, but he ignored every request. Eventually, we tried to find a home for my constituent elsewhere.

Many migrants who have moved to Northern Ireland over the past decade also live in rented accommodation. It is those people to whom we should pay particular attention, given their vulnerability because of language barriers and social isolation. It is vital that they are offered the protections that they deserve. It is regrettable that the current situation of differing protections being in place across the regions of the UK has occurred. However, it is my hope that the Minister will be able to rectify that problem.

I ask him, in particular, to look at the model in place in Scotland as well as those in the Republic of Ireland and in England. I want the Minister to detail whether his Department has yet investigated whether there are any companies in Northern Ireland that, it believes, will come forward if a tenancy deposit scheme is introduced. The issue is too important to get wrong; it will affect too many people, and, therefore, whatever format the Minister decides on, I urge him to look at the experiences of those who rent in the private rented sector. I support the motion.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):

First, I thank all those who have contributed to the debate. If

my response fails to address any Member's specific points, I will, of course, write to them separately.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion, which calls on me:

"to urgently bring forward ... plans to introduce a mandatory tenancy deposit scheme which would safeguard tenants' deposits and provide a fair and effective mechanism to resolve disputes."

I am somewhat bemused, however, because, as most Members will know, I am already committed to legislation to introduce tenancy deposit schemes. In fact, my Department is legally bound to lay draft regulations before the Assembly no later than November this year. Nevertheless, there is scope to have the regulations laid before the summer recess, depending on the scrutiny undertaken by the Committee for Social Development. If that is the case, tenancy deposit schemes should be operational by the end of this year.

The problems associated with the return of deposits in the private rented sector have been a long-running and constant concern of mine. Since taking up the reins as Minister with responsibility for housing, I have been determined to tackle the issue swiftly and decisively. Therefore, I am very pleased to use the opportunity of this debate to inform Members of my plans, which are already well advanced, to introduce appropriate schemes here later this year.

It is well known that the private rented sector is a vital part of the Northern Ireland housing market and makes a significant contribution to meeting housing need. It provides homes for a wide, diverse range of households across many locations, and the sector has grown considerably over the past number of years. It now represents approximately 17% of the total housing stock in Northern Ireland, consisting of 125,000 dwellings. It is now larger than the total social housing sector. Traditionally, the sector was popular with students and young professionals, but, over the past decade, the profile of private rented tenants has greatly changed. More families and more people who live on low incomes and people with a wider range of vulnerabilities, such as lone parents and those with disabilities, are moving into the sector to meet their housing needs.

'Building Sound Foundations - A Strategy for the Private Rented Sector', which was published in March 2010, included plans for the introduction of a tenancy deposit scheme in Northern Ireland. Since then, new legislation in the form of the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 was passed in May 2011. Among other issues, it made provision for the introduction of regulations for schemes to safeguard tenancy deposits paid for private tenancies in Northern Ireland together with an associated dispute resolution service, including for houses in multiple occupation. Since then, I have tasked officials with preparing and introducing the necessary legislation and ensuring that it is introduced as early as possible to give tenants and landlords in the private rented sector the necessary protections. I assure the House that I will bring forward those regulations for consideration by the Assembly as quickly as possible.

The amounts paid by way of deposits are generally large sums of money and not easily come by. The average tenancy deposit is around £300 and is frequently accompanied by a month's rent in advance. On average, 60% of privately

renting tenants are asked for a deposit, yet many people who pay deposits and many landlords who receive deposits are not clear about what those actually cover and in what circumstances they will be returned. In 2011, the Social Development Committee noted a report by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive that suggested that up to 28% of tenants' deposits may not be returned at all or not returned in full. Northern Ireland Housing Executive research published in 2009 showed that only 14% of tenants got their deposit back in part and that 17% did not get it returned at all. More than half of those felt that the landlord was not justified in retaining any of the deposit.

The introduction of tenancy deposit schemes will not only ensure that all deposits are properly safeguarded during the life of the tenancy but that the availability of a free independent arbitration process will be properly and efficiently handled. When the proposals for the Building Sound Foundations strategy for the sector were being developed, careful analysis of the experience of the Irish Republic, where the Private Residential Tenancies Board was established to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants, was undertaken. Without going into too much detail, it is sufficient to say that the process for dealing with disputes was time consuming and resource intensive. That is the principal criticism of the system in the Irish Republic.

It is also worth pointing out that the Private Residential Tenancies Board is not a tenancy deposit protection scheme but purely a dispute resolution service. As I have already indicated —

Mr F McCann: What you said about the tenancies board at the beginning was correct, but if you were to check on the workings of the board, you would see that it has come on leaps and bounds since then. Although it may not be a tenancy deposit protection scheme, the board's findings are binding and can carry fines. The private rented sector in the South has bought into the scheme because of the stringent measures taken to ensure that the sector abides by instruction from the board.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention. Indeed, there may well have been an improvement over the years. I will return to that towards the end of my remarks, if I may.

As I indicated, the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 legally bound the Department to bring forward tenancy deposit schemes with associated dispute resolution services. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government in the Irish Republic has learned from the experience elsewhere and has plans to establish a tenancy deposit protection scheme.

In line with England and Scotland, I intend to bring forward provisions to allow for two types of tenancy deposit schemes in Northern Ireland: a custodial scheme and an insurance-based scheme. Subsequently, the Department will approve scheme providers capable of delivering those schemes in accordance with the regulations. The custodial scheme — similar to the scheme that has been operational in England since 6 April 2007 and is due to be implemented in Scotland later this year — will be free for the landlord to use. It will work on the basis that the landlord pays the deposit to a scheme administrator to safeguard in a designated account until such times as it has to be repaid

to the tenant. The custodial scheme will be self-funding from any interest accrued on the designated account. The insurance-based scheme will be similar to that which currently operates in England. It will allow the landlord to hold the deposit for the duration of the tenancy, on the condition that he pays a fee for the scheme administrator and a contribution in respect of the insurance that the scheme administrator will have to hold. The insurance-based scheme will also be self-funding, with the costs covered through insurance premiums paid by landlords.

Only tenancy deposit schemes that demonstrate the ability to implement and operate in accordance with the regulations, which will include an associated dispute service that is free to both tenant and landlord to use, will be approved by my Department. As a further safeguard and to ensure that the landlord complies with the law and the timescales for safeguarding and returning deposits, the regulations will require approved schemes to work effectively alongside our local councils and our courts service in the administration of their duties and enforcement actions. Provisions will include arrangements for sharing information, so that local councils can use all relevant data sources to ensure that private landlords comply with the law, particularly as a large number of private landlords receive housing benefit in respect of their tenants' housing costs.

Members will know that the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provided for the sharing of information held by the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Housing Executive for the purpose of the administration of housing benefit with local councils and to assist them in the regulation of the private rented sector. That was a major development in improving regulation and accountability of the private rented sector here, where more than 60% of privately renting tenants depend on housing benefit to meet their housing costs.

The introduction of tenancy deposit schemes is an important part of the Building Sound Foundations strategy to raise standards in the private rented sector to ensure that it is fit for purpose, capable of meeting housing need and to do so in a professional and accountable environment. Hand in hand with safeguarding deposits, I am introducing mandatory landlord registration so that all those who let properties privately will be required to register and to provide relevant details. Local councils, which already have a wide range of responsibilities and powers to regulate the private rented sector, will use that registration scheme to ensure that the practice of private landlords in managing their tenancies is in line with the law. For the first time, local councils will have a comprehensive register and an effective means to monitor the operation of private landlords.

Good progress has been made in the development of the necessary legislative provisions to allow mandatory landlord registration to be introduced later this year or early next year. I look forward to debating the detail of those provisions and the tenancy deposit regulations with Members shortly.

I want to pick up on two points that were raised. Danny Kinahan seemed to suggest that little preparatory work has been done. I assure him that intensive work has been carried forward by officials to bring all this into place. I also assure him that we have met with relevant stakeholders, including representatives of landlords.

In addition, the housing strategy, which we will bring forward in due course — certainly within a few months — will have significant implications for the private rented sector.

1.00 pm

The scheme in the Irish Republic, administered by the Private Residential Tenancies Board, was established in 2004, primarily to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants. Five years after it was established, the board had dealt with over 368 applications for dispute resolution, which works out at around 70 or 75 a year, of which approximately 60% concerned deposit retention. Although only 1% of tenancies had resulted in PRTB disputes, the bureaucracy and timescale associated with dealing with them was significant. For example, it took 15 months in the Republic to process an application to determination order stage; that is, nine months from application to hearing and six months from hearing to determination order.

The PRTB does not currently operate a tenancy deposit protection scheme, and what this Department is already committed to, as contained in the 2011 legislation, is making regulations to provide for securing tenancy deposit schemes. However, the Department in the Irish Republic, in its Programme for Government in 2011, stated that it:

“will establish a tenancy deposit protection scheme to put an end to disputes regarding the return of deposits.”

It therefore intends to learn from the experience of schemes in place elsewhere. The schemes in England and Scotland are particularly good examples. In summary, the criticism one has of the Irish Republic's system is that it is resource-intensive and slow in operation. That is why it now intends to establish a tenancy deposit protection scheme.

I would welcome a strong vote of support for the motion. It would show support right across the Chamber for such a scheme, work on which is already well advanced. It will be going out for legal advice in a matter of weeks and will then be passed on to the Committee for Social Development. The introduction of the scheme, which will provide an effective and enforceable dispute mechanism, will go a long way to improving the conditions of renting for all tenants in the private rented sector, particularly our students and the most vulnerable in our society. I look forward to bringing the draft regulations before the Assembly in the not-too-distant future.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the debate today. One of the things that has come out of it is that everybody is in favour of having a tenancy deposit scheme. I will just go through what some Members, if not all, have said.

Michael Copeland proposed the motion. He talked about protecting tenants' deposits. He talked about a third-party independent scheme and reducing the number of disputes. He talked about the statistics for the private rented sector, which now consists of something in the region of 125,000 properties, as opposed to people. Obviously, more people are involved. The private rented sector deals with 17% of the total housing stock.

He also said that no landlord should be immune from regulations. Students are a demographic that the scheme would benefit, but the scheme would actually protect across the board, and rightly so. He gave an example of a deposit

of over £1,000 of which only £370 was returned and other examples of deposits not being returned in full. Resolution is achieved through the small claims court and is a lengthy and expensive process.

He talked about a deposit scheme protecting 48% of students whose deposits have been withheld. He talked about the fact that not all landlords are the same and that the majority are not involved in retaining deposits. He talked about tenancy deposits in some cases being regarded as a tax-free bonus by some owners.

I make the point to Mr Copeland that his co-signatory to the motion, Mr McCallister, was patently absent in the previous mandate in input to the housing legislation that was being proposed. Perhaps he has had a conversion thanks to Mr Copeland. I am sure that you will convince him of the merits of getting involved in these debates and dealing with issues such as this.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Member for giving way and for those comments: I have been accused of many things, but being absent is not one of them. If I have played any part in the conversion of John McCallister, I will very kindly accept the kudos.

Mr Brady: I am sure that Mr McCallister has good reason for being absent today.

Mr Swann: Mr McCallister is in Washington on party business at this minute.

Mr Brady: He obviously could not arrange a video link to the debate. I think he can be excused this time because of the distances, although it may be argued that he was distant from debates on the issue in the last mandate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Deputy Speaker is not in Washington: he is here, and all remarks should be made through him.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, for that reining-in.

In proposing the amendment, Fra McCann spoke about housing legislation being debated at length last year. He mentioned the “sizeable rump” of the landlord sector being a poor housing provider. He talked about listening to a professor from Galway University who spoke about effective legislation to deal with the private rented sector in the South. He also mentioned the PRTB and its inception in December 2004. He talked about it bringing order to a sector that deals with large amounts of housing.

There is a duty to protect tenants from unscrupulous landlords. Again, examples were given of deposits not being returned. The withholding of deposits is wrong, as are the flimsy excuses given by landlords. The equivalent of the tenancy board would lie within the remit of proposed legislation on private tenancies.

Mr Campbell spoke about the interests of the private sector tenants being at the heart of the motion. He talked about statistics and mentioned the 100,000-plus dwellings in the private rented sector. He talked about areas of concern around unscrupulous landlords, and, true to form, he dismissed with impunity anything that might be connected with the Twenty-six Counties in relation to possible examples of good practice.

Mark Durkan supported the motion, and gave statistics about the —

Mr Campbell: The Member said that I dismissed it “with impunity”. I did not really dismiss it with impunity. I dismissed it, but not with total impunity.

Mr Brady: Sorry; I will qualify that. I meant to say “out of hand”.

Mark Durkan spoke about the Simon Community having a scheme to provide surety to landlords and the difficulty in providing deposits and getting them back, particularly for people who have difficulty even in accessing the private rented sector for housing. He said that people must be protected from unscrupulous landlords, that we should look at models in other jurisdictions and that the independence of a third party should ensure that deposits are protected. He had no difficulty with the amendment and said that we could possibly learn from the PRTB.

Anna Lo made a very good point about the wholly unregulated process of trying to get deposits back. I think that has been the crux of the problem for many people, particularly students.

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

Mr Brady: In closing, everybody seems to be in agreement. The Minister has indicated that legislation will be brought forward this year —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr Brady: That is to be welcomed sooner rather than later.

Mr Swann: I congratulate my party colleague Michael Copeland on proposing the motion, and I thank everyone who has spoken on it. I will refer to contributors' comments shortly; however, at this stage, I will make a few of my own.

The case for a scheme in Northern Ireland is clear. It would offer protection for tenancy deposits whatever the circumstances. It would also provide landlords with a mechanism through which their decisions could be independently verified and, therefore, provide tenants with confidence that what they are being charged is fair and justified. Finally, it would rectify any unfairness that has, unfortunately, been allowed to develop between here and the rest of the United Kingdom over recent years. I represent a constituency that, at the moment, has a relatively small student population. However, it has many younger families and other demographic groups deciding to bide their time in the private rental market. Local estate agents across north Antrim, particularly those in Ballymena town, say that the demand for private accommodation remains high. Therefore, although many of the points raised about students in Belfast are entirely valid, they are equally applicable to tenants living in properties anywhere in Northern Ireland.

The population in the Ballymena Borough Council area is projected to grow by 6.2% by 2019. That is in addition to the increase of 8.7% between 1999 and 2009. That increasing population, combined with the declining average household and a slump in the construction of newbuilds, inevitably means that greater numbers of people will look to the private rented sector as a way forward. That increased demand has already been met by vendors who look to the

private rented sector to provide an income from properties that are unlikely to be sold in the current circumstances.

The recent growth of the private rented sector has also been partly underpinned by housing benefit. The fact that 60% of tenants in that sector get full or partial housing benefits shows that, in many circumstances, deposits can represent a large sum of money for the people involved. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that there may be financially vulnerable people renting from private landlords. Consequently, the introduction of a tenancy deposit scheme would provide significantly more protection for them.

In opening the debate, my party colleague Mr Michael Copeland referred to the number of unscrupulous landlords who provide low-grade housing and withhold deposits illegally. Mr Copeland gave a colourful description of them and referred to many as absentee landlords. Unfortunately, most now reside in the Republic of Ireland, charging exorbitant deposits and making it increasingly hard to reclaim them.

I will now refer to other contributors to the debate. Unfortunately, Mr McCann has covered most of what was said. However, he spent a bit of his time referring to the absence of John McCallister from the debate. Sinn Féin moved an amendment —

Mr F McCann: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I never mentioned John McCallister; he was mentioned by my colleague.

Mr Swann: Sorry, I apologise. I do not know how I mixed up the two of you. Sorry, Mr Brady. The seconder of the amendment covered most of what other Members said and referred to the absence of Mr McCallister from the Chamber today. The proposer of the Sinn Féin amendment made his case weakly, and the seconder was the only other Member from Sinn Féin to speak on its amendment. I think that it is a bit unjust to challenge the Members who are here in the House —

Mr F McCann: The point was made that a debate went on for months last year on the shape that the Bill would take, and the tenancy deposit scheme was mentioned. The Ulster Unionists were absent for more meetings than they attended so took no part in the debate. Therefore, it is a bit rich for you to turn round and say that only two Sinn Féin Members spoke today, when your Member did not turn up to take part in the debate on the Bill.

Mr Swann: We are here to talk about today, and I am a bit disappointed that the Member had to bring that up. It was your party colleague who introduced that subject to the debate and brought it to this level, not us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Deputy Speaker has to remind Members once again that he is present here and that all remarks should be made through him.

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will get back to what other contributors said. My party colleague Mr Michael Copeland reiterated the point that 48% of a sample of 1,302 students had their deposit unfairly held. The proposer of the amendment referred to the fact that it mentioned students. However, I must point

out that the wide-ranging motion did not concentrate solely on students but referred to all in the private rented sector.

Mark Durkan referred to the lack of social housing as a major factor. However, he made the point that charities provide deposits for individuals. They, too, need protection, and that should be looked at further when the Minister brings forward legislation, as should the need for a third party to regulate the deposit scheme as necessary.

Ms Lo said that it was time to enforce the Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, and I agree that the time is now. We have been waiting because of delays and, as the Member said earlier, it has been talked about. The Minister said that he hoped to bring the scheme forward sooner rather than later, and I welcome that.

In supporting the motion, Ms Lewis said that we have the basis of a scheme, that there were other examples of good practice across Europe and that we should not concentrate solely on the one in the South.

I thank Mr Kinahan for his contribution. He said that the scheme needed to be in place by the start of the next academic year to protect the students coming forward.

I thank Mr Campbell for his dismissal of the amendment.

1.15 pm

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that this needs to be in place well in front of the next academic year, because tenancies will probably be signed up to at the start of the summer?

Mr Swann: I agree with the Member. That is a very good point, and, I think, one that Mr Kinahan introduced.

I thank the Minister for his comments. The motion has been brought forward today, and I thank him for realising that the matter needed to be brought forward earlier; sooner rather than later. Co-operation between him and the Social Development Committee will be a way forward. That is why we in the UUP have called for this as a matter of urgency. That is why the word "urgently" was used in the motion.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I assure the Member that the Minister made it very clear that he is absolutely committed to having the measures in place as soon as possible. However, the Member must remember that there are due processes that must go on before any of this comes to a final resolution in the House.

Mr Swann: Certainly, and that is why I welcome the Minister's comments. However, it has taken us two years to get here, so I hope that we can move on it now.

Mr Humphrey: It has taken two years to get here. We have had this Ministry since June of last year. Please remember that.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments, and I congratulate him on the work that is being done, but we can still move quicker. I congratulate the Minister on his pledges to move swiftly. I look forward to that.

I look forward to the regulations that will see the enforcement of a mandatory landlord registration scheme. Look at the tenants discussed in the debate and the tenants who are out there. The last thing we need is a

private rented housing sector that moves under the black market, with pirate landlords rather than private landlords.

In conclusion, it is vital that we have those protections in place, not only for those already renting but for those who will be taking it up in increasing numbers over the coming years.

At the moment, people can already take precautions to limit the chances of landlords unfairly withholding their deposits. Tenancy contracts should always be closely read before being signed. What deposits can be used for should always be established by both sides in advance. Nevertheless, there are landlords in Northern Ireland who, at the moment, look at deposits as a way to supplement what is, most likely, an attractive tax-free income. Tenants who find it difficult to recover deposits from landlords once their tenancy comes to an end are forced to pursue court action to get their money back. However, many tenants simply write off the loss of their money because the process is too slow and cumbersome. Some landlords abuse that, often repeatedly.

Northern Ireland should be looking towards Scotland's scheme as a model. The Sinn Féin amendment refers to the Private Residential Tenancies Board in Dublin as a potential way forward, but I would prefer to look at a scheme that we know for certain is the way forward and is effective.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I have great pleasure in seconding the motion.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the safeguards which tenancy deposit schemes offer to landlords and tenants within the private rented sector; expresses concern that many landlords often make unjustified deductions or are slow to return deposits at the end of a tenancy, particularly for tenants living in student accommodation; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to urgently bring forward his plans to introduce a mandatory tenancy deposit scheme which would safeguard tenants' deposits and provide a fair and effective mechanism to resolve disputes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while there is a change in the Chair.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Marian Price

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I must give Members the strongest possible warning to be very careful about their contributions to this debate. The focus of the motion is the detention of Ms Price at Maghaberry prison as a result of the Secretary of State's decision to revoke her licence. It is not about any other issue or any other person. If Members stray from the motion, I will certainly intervene this afternoon. More importantly, there are currently a number of prosecutions before the courts. Members should not make any remarks that may interfere with those ongoing legal proceedings in anything that they say or do today. Members should avoid the risk of prejudging those proceedings. I hope that that is clear.

I know that Members will be able to focus on the motion and the decision of the Secretary of State without straying into the domain of the courts. I want to say to the whole House that I will intervene. Members know how far they can stray into this particular debate with the contributions that they might make. If Members stray too far, I will ask the relevant Member to take a seat, and I will move on to the Member who is next on the list to speak. If that is clear, let us proceed.

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

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the continuing detention of Marian Price in Maghaberry prison, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision to revoke her licence; further notes her ongoing medical and social needs; believes that reliable evidence and the necessary process should govern judicial and quasi-judicial actions; and calls on the Minister of Justice to engage with the Secretary of State on the reasons for the revocation of her licence, and for her detention, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision, to be reviewed urgently.

I listened to and welcome your words of caution to all of us speaking in this debate today. I take the opportunity to thank your office, Mr Speaker, and that of the Business Committee for their guidance and assistance going forward. That is much appreciated. I also welcome the Minister of Justice to the debate.

In my view, the motion covers three distinct but connected issues. The first is the wider impact on society of Marian Price's detention. Sadly, there still exists here in the North a small minority of people who have yet to come to the realisation that violence is not the solution to the aims that they wish to achieve. The violent actions of those dissidents have been all too real in recent weeks in our constituencies, particularly in the constituency that you and I represent, Mr Speaker, and they must be utterly condemned. Likewise, the horrendous murders of Sappers Azimkar and Quinsey and those of Ronan Kerr and Stephen Carroll must be utterly condemned. Those of us in elected office must do everything in our power to prevent dissidents

from succeeding. Unfortunately, however, the actions of the Secretary of State have unintentionally provided a recruiting tool for those individuals who are so intent on reigniting violence.

Through our local justice system, Marian Price was granted bail at Derry Magistrates' Court. On the previous night, however, the Secretary of State had signed an order to revoke her licence. That action gave the appearance of a local judge being overruled by a politician from North Shropshire, and it served to damage public confidence in the devolution of justice for many people in this region, particularly in my constituency. The action provided the dissidents with the opportunity to arouse the long-held suspicions of the British justice system imposing its will on the people across Northern Ireland. It provided the dissidents with further evidence to support that world view. Those groups have been able to stoke a sense of injustice in the community, use it for political gain and seek to mobilise young people in their actions against the democratic will of the people.

The situation was further aggravated when the Northern Ireland Office and the Secretary of State would not release, even to Members of Parliament, any information on the specifics of why Marian Price's licence was revoked. That connects to the second issue, which is that of the clear questions arising for the accountability of future justice arrangements in Northern Ireland. My colleague Alex Attwood raised those questions prior to the Hillsborough agreement.

Unaccountable security services cannot be justified in a democratic society, especially one with a history such as ours, but that is what we have: a Justice Minister who is not able to hold MI5 to account, and a London Government who are determining what information pertaining to national security can be shared and in what terms it should be provided. Northern Ireland is unlike Britain; we have had a bitter experience around policing. We have had MI5 involvement in very serious incidents, including providing money to the police to pay agents who were involved in serious incidents, including murder.

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At the commencement of the debate, you said that Members' comments would be restricted to what is in the motion. What has MI5's accountability got to do with the motion?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure him that I am listening to the debate very carefully. Once again, I remind the Member and the whole House that we should try, as far as possible, to stick to the subject of the debate and what the motion is asking the House.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Member's intervention, and I will explain the point, if he is interested to know why I am raising the issue of MI5. We need mechanisms to ensure that MI5, if it is involved here, is subject to some level of control and accountability. We should not allow the arrest of individuals such as Marian Price, no matter what they have been accused of, to be based on the suspicions of an MI5 officer. It is essential that our Justice Minister raises with the Secretary of State the need to review current inadequate accountability and scrutiny mechanisms.

Mr Allister: Is it not the case, at least according to what the NIO has said, that the licence was revoked under article 9(1) of the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001?

If that is correct, does it not follow that it was on the advice of parole commissioners that such a course was taken? So, it was not on the advice of MI5 but on that of the parole commissioners. Is that not the case?

Mr P Ramsey: I am glad that the Member raised that point. There was a royal prerogative of mercy granted to Marian Price in 1980 that was not subject to the Good Friday licences, as they were commonly known. The Secretary of State's Office, the Northern Ireland Office, cannot find that royal prerogative. They cannot find written details of it. Mr Speaker, I make the point very clearly that there is something very suspicious about the fact that the Northern Ireland Office cannot find that document. Either it is withholding it or is too embarrassed to share it.

The Justice Minister must raise with the Secretary of State the volatility of current processes within our prison system. They are brought into further doubt by this case, which includes the loss of the royal pardon that was granted to Marian Price. It is distinctly worrying how such important information and documents have been so badly mismanaged, and that reinforces doubts about current processes.

Finally, I wish to raise the rights implications of this case. Marian Price is a vulnerable person. Many in the Chamber may not want to sympathise with her, but I ask them to put aside preconceived judgements and look at the human rights and medical problems associated with the case.

Marian suffers from severe arthritis and has had operations, including joint replacements. Despite contracting serious infections in Maghaberry prison, she has been forced to wait days for antibiotics to be delivered. These are the facts. In addition, she has received no occupational therapy for a debilitating deformity and disfigurement of hands and wrists. She has great difficulty sleeping and has severe pain in both feet.

I have been given just a short snippet from the list of medication that Marian Price is taking at the minute. Mr Speaker, with your indulgence, I inform the House that she is in receipt of a cancer drug that is used to treat severe psoriatic arthritis. Left unmonitored, it can cause liver and kidney failure. Mixed with antidepressants, the medication can cause seizures. A drug used to treat depression and bulimia nervosa is also on the list and so, too, are serious painkillers that are potent enough to kill if overused.

1.30 pm

There is clear evidence — I say this directly to our Minister — that holding people indefinitely causes mental health problems, a subject that has been covered by the 'British Medical Journal'. Marian Price has pre-existing health problems and concerns, has been in prison since May of last year and was charged only recently. It is hard to believe that this imprisonment will not have further medical impact.

In Northern Ireland, we still work on the presumption of innocence until proven guilty. Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights requires that anyone arrested must be promptly informed why he or she has been arrested and what charges are against them. It also intends to impose a strict limit on pre-charge detention and an obligation to provide a trial within a reasonable time and release on bail. It is essential that we recognise that proper

process and good evidence are vital to proper judgements and the future of justice in Northern Ireland, something that has not happened in this case. It is our duty to ensure the human rights of all citizens, and it is essential that we do nothing that provides further fuel for the violent campaign of dissident republicans.

Marian Price is in isolation 24 hours a day, with the exception of three visits a week from family members. Today is her 262nd day in solitary confinement. She cannot avail herself of the one hour a day recreation because her mobility is so restricted, so she is locked up for 24 hours in a cell, as her arthritis clearly does not enable her to do that. When I met Marian Price twice in the past three years, she made several references to the effect that isolation was having on her. I will not break confidence, but even a member of the prison staff made very clear to me the noticeable change over recent weeks in this lady. Marian Price, at this time, should not be in prison. She should be in hospital receiving medical care or at home with her family. I ask Members to support the motion.

Mr Givan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion, however irresponsibly tabled by the SDLP. It is interesting to note that Mr Ramsey not once commented on Marian Price's history and why her licence was revoked. So, let us take a quick opportunity just to mention that.

Marian Price was convicted because of her part in an IRA bombing unit that was responsible for bombing the mainland, with the Old Bailey being the most notorious target of them all, and she was given a life sentence in 1973. That is who we are talking about, not some little old lady who was sent to prison because she stole a bag of peas out of a shop. So, let us get real about what it is we are discussing in the Chamber today. Why the SDLP now wants to act as proxy for the 32 County Sovereignty Movement is beyond me.

Marian Price was released on licence in 1980 on compassionate grounds. Al-Megrahi has become the most high-profile individual to be released because they were at death's door. Worldwide, such stupidity is attributed to the decision that was taken with regard to al-Megrahi. Actually, Marian Price set the template for that. She was released, we are told, because she was at death's door and her life was in imminent danger. Robert Bradford, speaking in the House of Commons — I note Mr Ramsey is shaking his head — said that the advice on which the then Secretary of State took the decision was that, if she remained in custody, she would, within days, have been in imminent danger of her life. He went on to say that they were told then that she could be recalled to resume the remainder of her sentence, if her health improved. She had tuberculosis and anorexia and apparently weighed 5st at that time. The reason she was allowed to be released was that she was at death's door. Lo and behold, we are now in 2012, and she is still alive. It would appear that the justice system still does not learn.

This individual has had her licence revoked by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State has a duty — Mr Ramsey talked about the wider interests of society — to protect the wider interests of society.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member differentiate between a royal pardon and a licence being revoked?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the extra minute. I will need it.

Republicans are now saying, "Long may she reign over us because we need the royal pardon of mercy". The irony that they now wish to use the Queen in that manner is not lost on people on this side of the House. Marian Price is not the first; other republicans are seeking to use the Queen's pardon. Of course, there is no proof that the pardon ever existed, so it would be wrong for me to comment further.

Mr Allister: Marian Price had two separate life sentences and one determinate sentence of 20 years for a third offence, so is it not likely that the licence pertained to the life sentences and that it would not be possible to attach a licence to the determinate 20-year sentence? Therefore, the royal prerogative, if it was used, is likely to have been used on the determinate sentence. There are still two life sentences that would be subject to licence, for which she has been recalled. Is that not likely to be the real situation?

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that contribution.

Importantly, it is for the Parole Commissioners to determine whether the licence should be reinstated. That is where we need to be very clear. An attempt is being made to have undue influence brought to bear on how the Parole Commissioners exercises its duty, as was the case with Brendan Lillis. Again, we have pressure being put on the Parole Commissioners to have the licence reinstated. If we are to have confidence in a system, it is important that the process be opened up to allow us to know what, for example, the Department of Justice is saying to the Parole Commissioners in the representations that it makes.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: No, I want to continue. I have only a minute left.

We had the case of Brendan Lillis. I tabled numerous questions about the Department of Justice's role and the information that was being provided. Let us shine a light on the role that our current Minister of Justice has to play in all of this. The Department of Justice can release an individual on compassionate grounds. There is a clear attempt being made to say, "Here we go again. I fooled you once, now let me fool you twice. Release me on compassionate grounds, because my health is deteriorating to such an extent that I should not be held in Maghaberry prison". I would like to know what the Department of Justice is saying in the representations that it is making. I know that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety made representations to the Department of Justice. In response to my questions, the Minister of Justice has consistently said that no such representations were made. The Health Minister says that they were. Someone is telling lies, and I would like to know how the Department of Justice will deal with the representations that it makes to the Parole Commissioners on whether to reinstate Marian Price's licence.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. First, I thank the Members responsible for tabling the motion. Our party will support it.

Mr Speaker, you gave your ruling at the beginning, but we attempted to table an amendment that would have made the motion go further. It is important to remember that Martin Corry is also in Maghaberry prison, having had his licence revoked in the same circumstances as Marian

Price's. It is important to remember that, and he has been there since April 2010.

I have listened to the debate so far. From our party's perspective, the continued imprisonment of Marian Price and Martin Corey is tantamount to internment without trial, as the normal legal processes whereby a person appears in court and is given the right to a trial have not been carried out. The proposer of the motion said in his opening remarks that Miss Price was granted bail for what she was charged with and immediately rearrested. That shows that there is a need to look at the whole justice system. The Justice Committee has been looking at access to justice and the right of all individuals, including witnesses and victims, to a fair hearing. It is very important that everybody has that right when brought into a situation like that.

As we move forward, and given the new position that we are all in, we are totally opposed to all ex-prisoners being treated in any way as second-class citizens. It is for reasons such as licences being revoked without charges that the prisoner group Coiste has tried to get the records of ex-prisoners who were imprisoned for conflict-related offences destroyed. Prisoners need to be treated with dignity and respect.

It has been said here today that Miss Price is in solitary confinement. She has been there for quite a long time and is in total isolation. Obviously, her mental and physical health has been affected as a result. A number of weeks ago, we listened to the Justice Minister talk in the Chamber about the report by Anne Owers on the prison review. It is important that we recognise the need for root-and-branch change to the prison system. We have all discussed at different times Miss Price being in Maghaberry. The ongoing situation in Maghaberry's Roe House is totally unacceptable. In August 2010, an agreement was reached with all prisoners. There is an onus on representatives in the Chamber, the Minister of Justice and the prison administration to ensure that all prisoners are treated with dignity and respect.

I want to go back to the situation in Maghaberry for Marian Price, Martin Corey and others —

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the whole House and the Member that the motion is clear: it is on Marian Price. To mention any other prisoner would be absolutely wrong procedurally and in every other way. Let us try to stick to the focus of the motion.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In making that ruling, are you talking about any other prisoner or a specific prisoner because of a judicial review?

Mr Speaker: The motion is very clear: it is on Marian Price and the issues in and around the Secretary of State's decision. We need to focus on the motion. It would be wrong to mention any other prisoner. I am trying to guide the House as best I can. Members should focus on the motion. I understand that, sometimes, Members might want to generalise. There is nothing wrong with that, provided that Members do not talk too widely around the issue.

Ms J McCann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Thank you for the intervention. I am conscious of what you are saying.

A suspicion of breaking the law or associating with people who break the law is not enough to imprison someone who has already served a life sentence. That person is as entitled to due process as anyone else. That is why our party supports the motion. We believe that it is wrong for Marian Price to be in prison and wrong for anyone to be in prison because their licence has been revoked. We call for the release of prisoners who are currently in Maghaberry jail because of the revoking of their licence.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, I acknowledge your advice that the matter is before the courts, so I will mention some matters of fact, as I understand them, but make no supposition one way or the other; that is for the courts.

I draw the House's attention to the fact that it is a matter of record that Marian Price was one of nine IRA volunteers sentenced to life for the planting of four bombs in London. In 1980, she was given a pardon due to the fact that she was, apparently, suffering from anorexia and believed to be close to death. I will move on rather than commenting on that. In 2009, Marian Price was arrested in connection with the murder of two soldiers. We know all about that. Subsequently, in 2010, she was also charged with encouraging support for a proscribed organisation, which, presumably, the majority of people in the House do not support.

1.45 pm

Mr McCartney: Does the Member accept that that person was granted bail?

Mr Speaker: The Member will have a minute added to his time.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. She was released on bail following the charge in 2010. However, the Secretary of State revoked her licence.

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I am trying to guide the Member. You are going slightly too far outside the subject of the motion. I am trying to be as helpful as possible to all Members and to the entire House. Once again, I ask the Member to be careful.

Mr B McCrea: OK, Mr Speaker. I take your advice. I just want to set the scene with regard to the person with whom we are dealing.

It has gone unsaid that the debate is as much about how to deal with other organisations and the potential threat to society as it is about the individual mentioned in the motion. The SDLP's argument, as I understand it, is that the party looked at three issues: first, inadequate oversight by MI5 and others who advise on such matters, although the issue of parole commissioners was raised in an intervention; secondly, the question of the royal pardon and, although it cannot be found, whether it should supersede anything on licence; and, finally, whether human rights conflict with the rights of society.

I have to say that, during my time as chair of the Policing Board's human rights and professional standards committee, we were aware of the oversight arrangements that had to be brought to bear. Members here present who also sat on that Policing Board will know that there are, indeed, adequate or, at least, existing arrangements for checking those matters, albeit at arm's length. I also have

to say that human rights tend to be a balance between conflicting rights. There is the right of society to defend itself, the right of victims to have justice and the right to life. All those rights are engaged. It is with some sensitivity that you try to make the argument on behalf of an individual. Therefore, the real issue is that there is a judicial process that needs to be respected. Perhaps, the Minister will shed light on that matter. As with all judicial processes and the entire criminal justice system — not just in this particular case — speedier justice is usually better justice. We need to reach a situation in which the law is able to make its appropriate determination without encumbrance. Therefore, it is unhelpful that the motion has been brought to the Chamber. There is a danger or perhaps a wariness that you have, rightly, drawn to the Assembly's attention, Mr Speaker, that we might interfere with the judiciary's independence in making the appropriate call.

With regard to the individual circumstances of the person named in the motion, I will conclude by saying that I have, recently, been to Maghaberry prison on a number of occasions. Although I was not inside Roe House, I went past it. It seemed to me to be not so much a unit of solitary confinement as a large building with only one person in it. It is a fact that the building was built for other purposes, and I understand that appropriate adjustments have been made. It is appropriate that people should be able to get —

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Mr B McCrea: I will if the Member is brief. I am short of time.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Member accept that Marian Price is not an inmate of Roe House?

Mr B McCrea: I am talking about making the necessary adjustments to ensure that people are taken care of adequately. I say to the Member that I believe that all reasonable adjustments have taken place.

The issue of medical assistance has been raised. Of course, anybody who needs medical assistance should get it in a timely manner. If that is not the case, that point must be made. However, my understanding — I am not 100% sure, and I am happy to get clarification if it is not the case — is that there is a matter of choice about where that particular person resides and there are other places where she could be put up. There were certain political decisions that she wished to make. If I am wrong about that, I am happy to have clarity about where it goes back in. The situation, in general terms, is that people were let out on licence because they said that they were going to put the past behind them and move forward. I say to the proposers of the motion that the record that I am aware of — I make no judgement on it because that is for the courts — does not lend support to the issue.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr B McCrea: The real way of resolving this is for adequate medical supervision to be provided, but that is as far as it goes.

Mr Dickson: I recognise the concern felt by many regarding Ms Price-McGlinchey's detention, the resulting isolation and issues surrounding her physical and mental well-being. Maghaberry is a designated male prison, and, therefore,

the arrangements are obviously not ideal. However, I am sure that the Minister will explain to us that measures have been taken to address those concerns by making her accommodation more suitable and by comparing it with that which is available to female prisoners at Hydebank Wood. I, therefore, contest the description of solitary confinement with regard to this. It is my understanding that the legal definition of solitary confinement is not met in this case.

I know that meeting the needs of prisoners, particularly their healthcare needs, is a priority for the current Minister. We want to see the same care in prisons strengthened to assist the most vulnerable inmates. That is part of the required transformational change identified in the prison review team's report last year, which made a number of recommendations regarding the improvement of prisoners' health and well-being. Again, I am sure that the Minister will elaborate on those arrangements. The Minister has expressed his commitment to delivering the required change, and that is visible in the actions of the Department. For example, we have seen the recent opening of new facilities that were developed in partnership with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and the Department of Health.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. I am pleased to hear that the Minister is making some progress, but it seems to be pretty slow in the face of such glaring reports, which have been very critical of the Prison Service. In relation to DEL and the education strategy, does the Member agree that there needs to be a co-ordinated approach if we are serious about the rehabilitation and resettlement of young offenders, in particular, and that a full education strategy needs to be developed in the Prison Service?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Dickson: The relevance of that escapes me, but the answer is yes.

I am surprised by the failings of the motion on the most basic levels. Surely when formulating a motion to bring before the House, one would wish to consider carefully whether it is within the remit of the relevant Minister to whom it is directed. It appears that there may be a tendency for Members to assume that all matters relating to prisoners are the sole responsibility of the Justice Minister and should be directed to him. At the heart of today's motion are issues around the revocation of Ms Price-McGlinchey's licence. In her case, that occurred due to national security concerns, which places responsibility for this clearly in the hands of the Secretary of State. Article 9 of the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 makes that very clear. This, therefore, is not a matter for the Justice Minister. I am surprised that my fellow Assembly Members in the SDLP and others do not seem to appreciate that. They are normally very aware of the remits and boundaries of responsibilities, particularly when it comes to justice and security matters. I know that we in the Alliance Party are committed to respecting those boundaries and to the care and welfare of all prisoners in Northern Ireland. I hope that the SDLP reflects on that and respects them as well.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I am just about to close.

It is for that reason that we will oppose the motion.

Mr Campbell: Very often, when we are dealing with issues such as this, we have to establish the bona fides or otherwise of the person at the centre of the dispute. Sometimes, we can get carried away with people's concerns. Of course, prisoners have certain rights, and, as I understand it, there is no suggestion that any of those rights have been contravened in relation to Marian Price.

We should be absolutely clear about the nature of the person we are talking about. In 1973, a detective questioned Marian Price after her arrest at Heathrow Airport. He recalls that, just before 3.00 pm, she calmly looked at her watch and smiled. An hour earlier, the IRA had phoned a bomb warning to a newspaper, but only two of the four car bombs that it had positioned at New Scotland Yard and the British forces broadcasting offices in Westminster were defused in time. The other two ripped through the Old Bailey and Whitehall army recruitment centre. One man died of a heart attack, but, with 200 injured, it was by sheer chance that there were not many more fatalities.

After that, Marian Price was interviewed by a number of press reporters, because, as my colleague Mr Givan said, she apparently had severe health problems in 1980, which was seven years after she had been imprisoned. Of course, 32 years later, miraculously, she is still alive. That seems to be a thing with prisoners who are at the point of death. Whether their name is al-Megrahi, Price or Lillis, they all seem to manage to keep living, when we are told that they are going to die in a few weeks. I do not know of any who actually died within a few weeks, but we are all told that they are about to die.

When Marian Price was interviewed after her release, she said:

"I've never had a sleepless night over anything I've done as an IRA volunteer. Bombs are weapons of war."

The difference between Marian Price and some people in here is that she does not seem to have learned the lesson that they do not win. Some others have finally come to terms with that and have managed to find out that they do not win and they cannot win and they are now in the democratic process. Hopefully, that will continue.

If we consider the regime under which Marian Price is currently being held, again, we hear people talk about rights. Sinn Féin talks about treating prisoners with respect and dignity. My colleague Lord Morrow tabled a question a couple of months ago regarding what facilities Miss Price had. According to the answer, in September 2011, Glen House in Maghaberry prison was set aside as a dedicated facility, with a flat-screen TV/DVD combination set. It would not do to have a TV and a DVD player that had to be operated separately; it is a combination set, if you do not mind. That is what we are told in terms of treating prisoners with dignity and respect. I will not go through the list of other things that she has that many people outside who never murdered anybody and never planted any bombs do not have in their home. Marian Price has those things in her prison cell. People ask for respect and dignity, when they already have many things that others do not.

The Minister needs to provide a robust response. This society and community are content that people abide by the law. When they break the law, they serve the sentence in jail until they are released. That is dealing with matters that Marian Price was sentenced for almost 40 years ago. She is

in prison at the moment. She is being treated appropriately, and she ought to continue being treated appropriately. Hopefully, at some point in the future, the sentences and the regime that brings charges will do that and we will see the outcome of the judicial system. However, the judicial system at the moment should run its course appropriately.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like my party colleague, I support the motion and thank the Member for bringing it before the House today.

It seems to me, as I listen to the debate, that there is a lot of confusion around the continued detention of Marian Price. The Secretary of State revoked the licence that was granted to her in 1980, which was over 30 years ago. It now appears that he may have acted outside his remit. There is some confusion around that. Nine months after her arrest, Marian Price's continued detention seems to me to be nothing more than internment without trial.

The Minister will argue that her detention is not his decision and that it falls outside his remit. However, as the motion states, he should

"engage with the Secretary of State"

and seek the reasons for Marian Price's continued detention.

Finally — because I do not want to go on about this — I agree with my colleague Jennifer McCann that Marian Price and others who have had their licences revoked should be released as a matter of urgency.

2.00 pm

Mr S Anderson: Those who tabled the motion have made great play of human rights, compassion, humanity, clemency and mercy, which are all noble and commendable principles. We have also heard much about Marian Price's plight and the legalities of her case. However, before we get too carried away by our concerns for Marian Price, we should get a grip on reality.

During and after the Troubles, those who tabled the motion have prided themselves on their support for civil rights. However, they often seem to show more concern for the perpetrators of violence than they do for victims. That is reflected in the motion. Price is a convicted terrorist. She is involved with the 32 County Sovereignty Committee, which is the mouthpiece of the Real IRA. The 'Socialist Worker' website states:

"Marian Price has devoted her entire life to ending British Rule in Northern Ireland. She firmly believes this can only be won by an armed struggle."

Mr T Clarke: I am sure that the Member will recognise another quote of Marian Price's. She wrote:

"I have dedicated my life to a cause and because of that I am prepared to die."

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr S Anderson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. Marian Price has made many comments, and I will touch on her wish to die later in my speech.

Marian Price has supported and was active in a campaign of murder and destruction against the British, unionist and Protestant people. She has the blood of innocents on her hands and she has shown no sign of remorse or repentance. Indeed, since her release from prison, she has continued with her evil intent.

Marian Price deserves no pity or respect from right-thinking people and especially not from those who have suffered at the hands of terrorism. As was stated, she was part of the gang that planted four car bombs at the Old Bailey and other parts of London in 1973. Around 200 people were injured in those attacks and one man later died of a heart attack. It is no thanks to Price and her cohorts that more people did not lose their lives on that occasion. We hear much about her ill health, which some say can be traced back to 1973 when she went on a self-imposed hunger strike. She said that she had a fear of dying — this touches on the Member's intervention — but I find it ironic that someone who was prepared to consign innocent victims to an early grave should have such a fear of death.

Rev Robert Bradford, the former MP for South Belfast, who was himself violently murdered by republicans, commented on Price's supposed ill health in the House of Commons in February 1981. He said:

"Marian Price is probably... healthier than I am tonight. She is touring the length and breadth of Ulster."

Over 30 years later, Marian Price is still alive and well enough to remain active in militant republicanism.

I want to be careful of what you have said, Mr Speaker. However, as we all know, two charges are currently being pursued against her. One of those dates from last May for encouraging support for an illegal organisation relating to —

Mr Speaker: I am trying to be helpful to Members. I ask the Member to be careful that he does not stray into legal issues.

Mr S Anderson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was just referring to what has been well publicised. Following that incident, the Secretary of State quite rightly revoked her licence. Mr Paterson said:

"My priority is the safety of the people of Northern Ireland."

He took the right decision, and he has correctly concluded that, because of the terrorism charges that she now faces, Price is a risk to the public. The protection of the public must always take priority and that is why the motion is so unbalanced and flawed; its sympathies rest with the terrorist and not the public.

We have been told that Mr Paterson had no right to revoke the licence as Marian Price had obtained a royal pardon, which is another part of a saga that is so rich in irony. There are also concerns about the conditions that Marian Price is being held in and about her being interned in solitary confinement and all that nonsense. The conditions seem quite reasonable to me; indeed, as has been said, they seem rather luxurious. She remains in custody, as we have said. However, bearing in mind what you said, Mr Speaker, about another charge relating to Massereene Barracks in Antrim, I will not touch on that. I am aware that those charges are ongoing and I will make no further comment.

The 'Socialist Worker' website also says:

"Everyone who believes in human rights and civil liberties needs to do whatever they can to help free Marian Price."

I take precisely the opposite view. All those who believe in human rights and civil liberties will do all in their power to ensure that Marian Price stays where she deserves to be, which is in jail for a very long time. That, at least, will help to ensure some justice for her victims and will protect us all from further evildoing. I suspect that the Justice Minister has more important matters to attend to than consulting with the Secretary of State about Marian Price. Surely the public would expect the Assembly to be debating more pressing and relevant matters. I oppose the motion.

Mr Nesbitt: I believe that Mr Givan said that he welcomed the opportunity to speak in this debate and that he was glad of an intervention that gave him an extra minute, because he would need it. Mr Speaker, I am afraid that I do not particularly welcome the opportunity to speak, nor will I take five minutes to tell you why.

You asked me to stick to the motion, and I shall. It asks me to note:

"with concern the continuing detention of Marian Price".

I do note it, Mr Speaker, but I am not convinced that I should have particular concern. I am told that she is a vulnerable person, but, perhaps, being in prison is the best place, at times, for vulnerable people. I am told that she is being given medication that, if inappropriately dispensed, could prove fatal, but is there any question that anyone dispensing the medicine is not properly qualified so to do? I doubt that very much.

We are asked to note her ongoing medical and social needs. Perhaps we should decamp to the Commission for Victims and Survivors and allow it to gather a small group of victims and survivors of our conflict who can tell us about their medical and social needs. Perhaps we should meet someone who was physically injured 40 years ago and is still waiting for Northern Ireland — for us — to provide the proper physical support for their pain.

Perhaps we should look at the tens of thousands of people who have severe mental health issues because of our conflict; people for whom a noise, a smell, or, in one case, the sight of a particular chocolate bar that one person's uncle used to give them every time they met before he was murdered, will spark off a memory. It may be that the sight of a particular colour or make of motor car, or, perhaps, even, a debate on someone such as Marian Price, will spark off mental health issues for the people whom we are here to serve.

Finally, I see that we are asked to support:

"that reliable evidence and the necessary process should govern judicial and quasi-judicial actions".

Who is to say that MI5 does not provide reliable evidence? Who is to say that MI5 and the security services, when it is a matter of national security, do not follow necessary process? For those reasons, I oppose the motion.

Mr McCartney: Beidh mé ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún. I speak in support of the motion and I thank Pat Ramsey

for bringing it to the Assembly. I declare an interest as the chairperson of Coiste na nIarchimi, which is the republican ex-prisoners' representative group.

This issue can be divided into two general principles. The first is around the use of licences and of recalling people to prison under the terms of a licence. The second is the particular circumstances of Marian Price. I note that Mike Nesbitt, having made a valuable contribution to the debate, has left the Chamber, which does not allow Members to rebut some of his arguments. For someone who was a former victims' commissioner — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to continue.

Mr McCartney: — to come out with a statement that, perhaps, prison is a good place for vulnerable people, is something that he should reflect on. It is mind-boggling, but there you go.

Since the inception of licences back in the 1980s, Sinn Féin has been totally and absolutely opposed to the idea that someone could be released from prison and then recalled under the terms of the licence without any proper evidence.

Again, Mr Nesbitt talked about various organisations that may have reliable information, yet there are no processes to test that. It is some indictment of the Ulster Unionists that they promote the idea that we should have a court system that is not open to scrutiny and not open to evidence being tested, and tested properly. If there is any evidence that any person who is out on the terms of a licence should be in prison, it should be tested in front of the courts.

That is the place we find ourselves in 2012. This is not the 1970s, nor should we allow it to become the 1970s. On a very clear basis, Sinn Féin and, indeed, Coiste have campaigned for a long number of years. I declare somewhat of an interest in that I was subject to a licence for a number of years until my convictions were overturned by the Court of Appeal. Therefore, perhaps people should be asking questions about the quality of justice. Last week in Question Time, the Minister referred to the need for jury trials, and, indeed, I have often heard many people say that the bulwark of British democracy is jury trials. Let me tell him that many trials were held in the North of Ireland in which many people were sentenced to life imprisonment. Many people are held on licence as a result of those sentences, which came from non-jury trials. Time out of number, over the years, cases have gone in front of the Court of Appeal where the RUC has been exposed as having carried out torture and having fabricated evidence in places such as Castlereagh. That is the basis on which many people are held on licence.

Pat Ramsey talked about Marian Price's particular circumstances. I ask every Member: in their time as elected representatives, have they ever made any representation for a life sentence prisoner? I have heard many unionist representatives saying that they have. I have heard many representatives say that they have made representations for loyalist prisoners who have been recalled and asked that, perhaps, some mercy and compassion should be shown. Sometimes you find that people mix up justice and mercy with revenge. What I have heard in the debate is large doses of revenge.

Bear in mind and have in your head that this woman was released from prison in 1980 — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: — and that, 31 years later, she was returned to prison. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: The person has no right to challenge the basis on which her licence has been revoked. That is the system; it is Kafkaesque. Someone can tell you that you are going back to prison, and, when you ask why, they say that they cannot tell you. When you ask why they cannot tell you, they say that it is in British national interests not to. When we ask what British national interest is, we are told “we cannot tell you”. When we ask “why can you not tell us?”, we are told that that is also in British national interest. It is a circle of lies and deceit. The clear message that should come from this Assembly in 2012 is that no one should be held on the basis of a licence. A person should serve their sentence and be released, and that should be the end of the matter.

Mr Speaker: Time is almost up.

Mr McCartney: We back the motion, and we call for the immediate release of Marian Price on the basis that she is being held in Maghaberry prison on the revocation of her licence.

Mr McDevitt: I support the motion. I have never spoken to Marian Price, and I have never met her. One of the reasons why the party felt it useful that someone in my position would contribute to the debate is that there are, undoubtedly, significant wider issues at play. The first issue that arises is one of the confidence that all of us in this region responsible for a devolved system of criminal justice and for a devolved courts system must be able to have in the criminal justice process as it is applied here in these Six Counties of Northern Ireland. To have that confidence, it is not unreasonable to expect a standard of a degree of accountability in that process. If decisions are going to be taken in the name of criminal justice and in the name of proper order in society, those decisions must be capable of being held to account. What is deeply unsettling and deeply unnerving about this particular case is that, at every point where one looks to seek some reassurance that matters are being conducted in the interests of justice, instead of finding assurance, you find uncertainty.

2.15 pm

That uncertainty started on the day that Marian Price was arrested and returned to prison. She was arrested and returned under the revocation of a licence, when, in fact, the very existence of that licence is questioned. In fact, her lawyers believe that she received a royal pardon, and I understand that there is no conditionality in the vast majority of royal pardons.

The reasonable question asked is: may we establish the terms on which she was released? However, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is unable to produce that document. Marian Price's solicitor wrote the following to the Secretary of State:

“It is difficult to fathom how, even exercising a modicum of care, this document was destroyed without someone, before destruction, ensuring that the original (or at least

another copy) was still in existence ... There is certainly a foundation for suggesting that the document may (and we can put it no higher) have been deliberately ‘buried’ given the embarrassment it might cause.”

The document in question is the one that gave rise to Ms Price's release in 1980; a document, which, we believe —

Mr Campbell: The Member seeks to take us into the territory of questioning whether the legitimacy of the current scenario is appropriate. Yet, he does not appear to be prepared to look back to 1980 to examine the rationale for her original release, which many would argue, 32 years later, was open to question. Given that we were told she was very close to death's door 32 years ago, she seems to have managed to survive reasonably well in the time since.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Campbell for his intervention, and he made an interesting point. The difference between 1980 and today is that there is a degree —

Lord Morrow: Thirty-two years.

Mr McDevitt: Indeed. I was only eight then. You were probably grown up and have a much better memory of the time than I do.

The difference is that, no matter how much we may want to debate the situation in 1980, at least there was a degree of openness and accountability around the process that lay at that time. The one thing that we have today is no openness and accountability. We are reminded often that the standing and test of any society should be its ability to deal with those whom it seeks to deprive of liberty. In other words, if you want to look at the true measure of any society, look to how it treats its prisoners, because that will really test its underlying values. The sad reality —

Mrs D Kelly: Churchill.

Mr McDevitt: By the way, as Mrs Kelly reminds me, those are not my words but the words of Winston Churchill, who is held in very high regard across the House as someone who stood up for the integrity of the state and the values that we all profess to hold dear at a time when they were being challenged fundamentally.

The interesting thing, and it is an important point to make, is that if we are serious about progressing our project of continuing to devolve policing and justice, if we are to really hold true to the onerous responsibility that that places on all of us as legislators and on everyone in this society, we must understand that we cannot do so without the light of accountability being shone into every corner. There is an awful darkness at the heart of Ms Price's return to, and continued, detention.

The second point that I would like to make briefly is that some people suggest that there is nothing here for Mr Ford to address. I put to him and ask him to address specifically in his summation that we are told that it is for “operational reasons” that Ms Price is not today in Hydebank, where she would at least be able to socialise, where she would be among prison inmates. It is for “operational reasons” that she was sent to Maghaberry. Perhaps, in his summation, Mr Ford will specifically address why those operational reasons exist and what steps he could take — in the same way as

he took steps in the case of Mr Brendan Lillis — to ensure that the conditions of her internment are at least proper and to a global standard.

Mr T Clarke: After listening to Mike Nesbitt's contribution, I understand why emotions could be triggered for some people listening to the debate. I came to the Chamber with an open mind in some sense, but, listening to the tenor of the debate, I wondered whether I was hearing about a woman who had served for many years in her community and worked hard for the community. She did work hard in the community: she was working hard to bomb and murder people in it over a number of years, and, rightly, she went to prison for that in 1973. There is a dispute over the just or unjust reason — I suggest that it was unjust then, as it was unjust even after the Good Friday Agreement, to let any prisoners out of jail who had not served their sentence laid down by the law, given that they laid down a tougher sentence on many of the victims on whom they perpetrated their violence. Marian Price was one of those prisoners.

I listened to Raymond McCartney talk about no-jury trials and the reasons for revoking a licence. Any right-thinking person could come up with many solutions. There were no jury trials for the people on whom those people perpetrated murder. They were murdered with no trial and no defence. I think that I could use that as a reason. We can look at the events at last year's Easter Rising commemorations, at which Marian Price was holding a script promoting terrorism. In my mind, that would be enough to hold her or any of her cohorts in prison.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is almost stepping outside the parameters of the motion and coming close to discussing legal cases that are before the court. Once again, I say to all sides of the House that I am trying to be helpful — I certainly do not want to stifle Members' contributions — but I am just warning the Member.

Mr T Clarke: I take on board your words of caution, Mr Speaker. I will go on. As I said, she was freed and mysteriously disappeared for quite a number of years. Some of us may have wished that she had disappeared for ever, never to be seen again, but unfortunately that was not to be the case. I am not implying anything one way or the other, but we then had the tragic murders in 2009 of the sappers, who, again, had no jury and no trial but were brutally murdered. BBC reports claim that that lady had been charged in connection with the murders. That is as much as I would like to say on that, given your guidance on not saying too much, Mr Speaker. I would hate to interfere with or prejudice any outcome in which we could get a good long sentence for those involved, regardless of whom they may be, but it is interesting that she has been charged in connection with those murders.

The motion pains me, and I cannot understand why the SDLP brought it to the House, other than to try to out-green Sinn Féin. It has failed to do that, as it has been failing to do for a number of years, but here we have it again. I do not understand how SDLP Members can stand here today in defence of someone of such a character and background. I think that Mr Campbell was fairly liberal in his views, which is unlike him, when he read out the sorts of conditions in which this poor, ill woman lives. He omitted to say that she probably has a choice of 14 bedrooms. Most of us have to manage with two or three in our home, but she has a

choice of 14. He mentioned that she had one TV and DVD player, but in fact she has two. She has plush carpets and bookcases. I actually think that the Minister has something to answer for here today. That should be —

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to take the opportunity to apologise to the Member for my oversight.

Mr T Clarke: Apology accepted, and I hope that your constituents will also grant you that apology, Gregory.

The Minister of Justice should reflect on the conditions that Marian Price and others are living in, given that they are part of the justice system. If some of the victims' families knew of the conditions — we have it portrayed that the conditions are poor, but I would say that it is the complete opposite. They are living in the lap of luxury. I suggest that we get back to the days when there was one cell and no luxuries for them. Prison should not be an enjoyable time. It should be a time when prisoners can reflect on what they have done over the period of the murderous campaign that many of these —

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He makes the point that the Minister of Justice should explain some of his actions. I said earlier that I had previously asked what representations were made by the Health Minister concerning Brendan Lillis. The response was that no representations were received. I then asked the Health Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order. We are straying into different areas. Once again, even in interventions, Members need to be very careful. The motion is clear: it is on Marian Price and nobody else.

Mr T Clarke: Thank you for that, Mr Speaker.

In closing, and just to follow on from my colleague's remarks, I think that we should reflect on the conditions of all prisoners. As I said previously, I think that they are living in the lap of luxury, and the sooner they get down to one cell with just the basic requirements the better. We can take televisions as an example, and we can look at what conditions were like in the past and at what they were like in other areas. The sooner we get to that the better. I oppose the motion.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Jim Allister, I am sure that he and the whole House are conscious that we are coming very close to Question Time.

Mr Allister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am surprised at both the origin and the content of the motion, which includes phrases such as:

"believes that...the necessary process should govern judicial and quasi-judicial actions".

That is exactly the process that is under way in respect of Marian Price. There is a process; it is in the 2001 Order. The licence was revoked, and she is now making recourse, as she is entitled to, to the Parole Commissioners. That is the due process. It is a process that is reflected in many common law jurisdictions throughout the world whereby a licence exists, a licence is revoked and the person whose licence is revoked has the right to appeal that revocation. It is beyond me to understand why there is a call for

necessary process when necessary process is already under way in this regard.

We then have the dubious suggestion —

Mr Lynch: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I have been told that I have very little time, so I will not on this occasion.

We then have this dubious suggestion that, in fact, she was never on licence at all and that she was given a pardon. I suggested already that the probable answer is that she was given a pardon on the determinate sentence but was given a licence, which can then be revoked, on the two life sentences.

Many people's licences have been revoked. I have appeared professionally from time to time for people whose licences have been revoked on what appeared to be very slight grounds. I remember one man who was long released and who got into a conflict in a domestic situation and had his licence revoked. He took that to the Parole Commissioners and argued his case. That is exactly the due process that we have here, and so it should be.

Miss Price has certainly had a very charmed existence in that, instead of serving her 20 years and her life sentence, she was released after seven years when she first tried the stunt of ill health. Now she is trying it again. Of course, she is not alone in having a charmed existence; one of her co-accused and co-convictes for the same bombings sits in this Chamber today.

However, the real insight into some of those who back this motion was evidenced in the contributions of Miss McCann, Mr Lynch and Mr McCartney, who boldly said that they wanted to see an end to a process of anyone being recalled on licence. They said that they wanted to see an end to the licence system. Why? The truth is that they want amnesty for themselves and their compatriots for the crimes that they committed.

However, licences are an essential part of due process. If the lady were being held under anything other than due process, there would have been a habeas corpus application long ago, as we still have habeas corpus in this country. Some people ask how the Secretary of State lost the copy of the pardon. How has Miss Price lost the copy of the pardon that she was given? Does she not want to produce it, as it would show that it related only to the determinate sentence, that she is lawfully on licence and that her licence has been lawfully revoked?

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the House to take its ease as we move to Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute: Fish Stocks

1. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of the ability of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute to produce accurate, complete fish stock assessments. (AQO 1151/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) contributes fully to an extensive Europe-wide marine data collection programme and, along with other institutes, provides accurate information on the state of Irish Sea fish stocks. Fish stocks are assessed in an international forum, primarily through an independent scientific body, the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES). The basis of the assessments includes the biological data gathered by fisheries research institutes, such as AFBI, as well as commercial landings data from member states' fishing fleets. Numerical models process that data to provide estimates of what the future fish catch should be in order to maintain sustainable stock sizes. If any of the data streams are missing, which can be for numerous reasons, the models may not work. That can lead to an inability to provide a complete stock assessment.

The work of AFBI has been essential in securing fishing opportunities for our fishing fleet. Pioneering work using new stock assessment methods such as underwater camera surveys of prawn burrows in the Irish Sea has helped us to demonstrate that prawns are being fished in a very sustainable manner, and that information has been used to maintain our prawn quotas.

In recent years, AFBI has also used acoustic methods to survey our herring stocks to address uncertainties in the traditional assessments. Again, that work assures us that the stock is being fished sustainably. Ultimately, we hope that it will result in an increase in the quota figures. I assure the Member that AFBI is supplying all the data required and more. In addition, AFBI scientists fill senior roles in ICES, including representation on its advisory committee that drafts the overall management advice. Therefore, I am satisfied that, where we are required to submit data on fish stocks, it is accurate and complete.

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I must say that it is a bit cold in this part of the House. *[Laughter.]* If there is anything that you might be able to do to warm it up, I would be very grateful.

I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she have information or expect to obtain information in the near future that would encourage her to challenge inaccurate fish stock assessments?

Mrs O'Neill: Absolutely. The Member will be aware from my recent statement on the outcome of the December Fisheries Council meeting that we consistently fought science with science. We thought that our science was sufficient, particularly around the cuts proposed to the herring quota. Therefore, we have to keep engaging with the Commission and ensuring that it is aware of our science. However, the fact that scientists from AFBI sit on ICES is a good advantage. Nevertheless, some work will be carried out on a stock assessment in February, which will, hopefully, lead to an opportunity to go back to the Commission to make the case for an increased herring quota.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for her answer. In advance of the forthcoming ICES benchmark process on cod, what discussions has her Department had with AFBI on identifying the scientific objectives for Irish Sea cod, what those are, what problems AFBI and Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) scientific officers intend to highlight as part of that benchmarking process, and what proposals have been discussed to find a way forward with regard to the sentinel fishery proposal in particular?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member can ask one supplementary question, so I will take my pick as to which of her questions I will answer today. However, I am happy to pick up on the points and write to her in due course.

The industry is making a case for us to examine the sentinel cod fishery. AFBI is working with the industry to see whether that can happen and a case is being built up. Cod stocks are at an all-time low, and we need to ensure that we support the industry to continue to catch white fish. However, there is no doubt that everybody is aware that the cod recovery plan that the Commission put in place is not working and needs to be reviewed. We intend to work with the Commission in the period ahead to ensure that it is aware of the needs of our local industry while maintaining good cod stocks for the future.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister touched on the data for Irish Sea herring. Will she seek an in-year total allowable catch increase for Irish Sea herring?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The scientific benchmarking assessment of the stock, which is scheduled for early this year, will take account of the most recent acoustic data we have on the herring stock. We believe that that will produce a favourable assessment. If the outcome of that benchmarking is strong enough, that will give us the tools to go to back to Europe and argue for an in-year increase for Irish Sea herring. Failing that, we will continue to work with the industry to develop a longer-term management plan for Irish Sea herring and seek to have that adopted by the Commission. If we are able to get positive results from the benchmarking assessment, that will give us what we need to go to Europe to make the case for the increase.

Brucellosis

2. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the drive to eradicate brucellosis. (AQO 1152/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am pleased to state that there were only four confirmed cases

of brucellosis here in 2011 and that our last confirmed outbreak was on 14 July 2011. Our confirmed herd incidence rate for brucellosis is down to 0.045% as of 30 September. Presently, only seven herds are under restriction due to brucellosis. I think the Member will agree that that is a remarkable achievement. Indeed, the figure might have been a lot lower had it not been for the two infection hotspots that developed in 2010, which were attributable, in part, to suspected reckless or fraudulent activities by some herdkeepers.

Despite that, there is good progress. However, we should not be complacent. It is absolutely vital that farmers report any abortions in their cattle to DARD vets and that good biosecurity is maintained. The eradication of brucellosis by 2014 is one of our objectives in the Programme for Government, and it will allow us to subsequently seek EU official brucellosis-free status. Achieving that status would benefit our farmers through the anticipated phased reductions in the level of routine and pre-movement testing. Overall, that would save £7 million in compliance costs to the industry.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she state what steps we will have to take before we become officially brucellosis free?

Mrs O'Neill: Three years must elapse from the last confirmed brucellosis breakdown before we can take the opportunity to apply to the EU Commission to seek brucellosis-free status. As I said, the last confirmed brucellosis breakdown here was on 14 July last year. That is positive. Eradication and achieving brucellosis-free status will benefit all the cattle farmers here through the progressive relaxation of annual and pre-movement testing, which will save the industry £7 million.

Lord Morrow: Will the Minister provide an update to the House on her or her Department's investigations into the deliberate infecting of herds with brucellosis? What steps has the Department taken, and what steps will it take in conjunction with other agencies, to deal with that matter with a view to prosecutions?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The cases the Member refers to occurred back in 2010. A lot of work was done at that time by my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew. She worked with the people in the area affected and with the wider community. The PSNI were involved; prosecution and whether there were deliberate infections are matters for the PSNI. We will continue to work with them in that regard. However, no stone was left unturned. Michelle Gildernew carried out great work at the time to make sure that the interests of the wider community were represented.

Mrs Dobson: Many farmers will welcome the Programme for Government commitment to the eradication of brucellosis. However, turning to an even greater issue, is the Minister aware of recent press coverage reporting a sharp increase in TB? Can she confirm a report that 182 new TB reactor herds were detected across Northern Ireland in November last year, which would be the highest monthly detection figure for almost six years?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that TB and brucellosis are two very different cases. We are making very good progress with brucellosis, but TB is a very

complex disease that is difficult to identify. We have to work constantly with the industry and our vets to find ways forward. Different people have different ideas about how we can deal with it. We have to explore them all and not rule any of them out.

We have to keep the levels of brucellosis continually under review. After today, I will make sure that I clarify for you in writing whether the figures are correct. In trying to further drive down the levels of TB, as you will be aware, we are out to consultation on the issue of TB and brucellosis compensation. The fact that we will cap the level of compensation and the figure of 75% bear out the fact that we need to work harder on TB and make sure that we get to a better position in the future.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I understand that brucellosis has been eradicated in the Republic of Ireland. What lessons are to be learned from how brucellosis was dealt with in that jurisdiction? Are those lessons being acted on here?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As I said, we are in a good position, and I think that we are close to achieving our target of being free of brucellosis by 2014. The all-island animal health and welfare strategy is the vehicle to ensuring that we share knowledge and learn the lessons that can be learned. Our industry is calling for this, and it will be assisted if we achieve that status, which will help us in allowing the free movement of animals across the island.

Agriculture: North/South Co-operation

3. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the progress she is making on building co-operation on a North/South basis.
(AQO 1153/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since I came into office last May, significant progress has been made across a wide range of formal and informal North/South activities, building on the work undertaken by my predecessor Michelle Gildernew. That work has been supported by my Department's North/South unit. I have attended four meetings of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the agriculture and aquaculture sectors. Those meetings are an important vehicle for me to engage with corresponding Ministers from Dáil Éireann and discuss matters of mutual interest. For instance, we have continued to work on implementing the all-island strategic approach on animal health and welfare issues. That has brought about positive outcomes in such areas as sheep identification, the facilitation of trade and co-operation and the testing regimes for TB and brucellosis that I just mentioned. We will continue with our fortress Ireland approach to protect the whole island from the threat of serious diseases such as the bluetongue virus, and we are working towards our ultimate aim of the free movement of cattle across the island.

Outside the normal NSMC arrangements, a range of informal contacts and activities are taking place. One of the highlights of my first few months in office was attending the national ploughing championship in Kildare last September. It was a fantastic event that was attended by more than 180,000 people over three days. It was a massive success

for all those who went down and got involved in the show. The Department had a dedicated stand that allowed the small rural businesses that attended to showcase their products. I know that they got a lot out of it and enjoyed it very much. It also helped them to develop new marketing opportunities.

More recently, I have been working closely with Minister Simon Coveney TD on the CAP reform proposals. I was pleased to meet him again a few weeks ago when the European Commissioner Dacian Cioloş was here and addressed the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Communications, Natural Resources and Agriculture. If we continue to develop relations with the Irish Government, the more support we can garner across the EU for our position and the greater the likelihood of it featuring in the overall final agreement on CAP reform.

It should also be noted, as I said before in the House, that we hope that the Dublin Government will hold the presidency of the EU in the early part of 2013, which is when we believe that the CAP negotiations will conclude. Obviously, that will be very beneficial for us.

I also welcome the participation of the Assembly's Agriculture and Rural Development —

Mr Speaker: I am watching the clock. Unfortunately, the Minister is well over her time.

Mrs O'Neill: OK. I will finish by saying that that is a flavour of the type of work that is going on in the Department.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Your patience is renowned, and it has been well tested today.

I thank the Minister for her response. Will she outline some of the more specific roles of her Department's North/South unit?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, the North/South unit was established by my predecessor Michelle Gildernew to ensure regular reports and monitoring of the work that is going on and to encourage engagement on formal and informal activities. The unit is very proactive in liaising with all the DARD business areas and engaging in a wide range of North/South activities, and it acts as the main point of contact with the joint secretariat in Armagh. The unit also provides important administrative support for my attendance and that of senior officials at NSMC meetings in agriculture sectoral format.

2.45 pm

Outside of the scope of my continued participation in NSMC meetings, I receive quarterly updates from the unit on a broad spectrum of activities covering almost every aspect of the Department's responsibilities. That information is often further supplemented by presentations from individual business areas on existing or emerging ideas on co-operation. Some examples of that are co-operation on the EU floods directive, all-island animal disease contingency planning, rural development, and agricultural education issues. So, it is a very important unit. There is lots of ongoing work within the Department, and the unit will continue to update me quarterly on its work.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her very comprehensive response, which I suspect is more a response to the

stinging criticism of Sinn Féin's commitment to North/South co-operation that was recently published. However, I want to specifically ask the Minister about the InterTradelreland report on the agrifood industry and the fact that she got sight of it only recently, I think, when the Committee forwarded it to her; it was not forwarded by the Enterprise Minister. What discussion will she have with the Enterprise Minister on the report's recommendations?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Sinn Féin is not interested in paying lip service to the North/South issue — we are genuinely proactive in pursuing it.

As for the point that the Committee forwarded me the paper: the paper has been stalled for quite some time. It is a Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) report. My officials and I have had some discussions with DETI on delivering and taking forward the report. I see it playing a key role in the new agrifood strategy that we are developing, because we have to look at all the areas of growth and at where the potential is for the industry to grow.

Mr Campbell: Given the Minister's restated commitment to not paying lip service to "North/Southerly", what assurance can she give farmers and rural dwellers in Northern Ireland that rather than chasing will-o'-the-wisp party political issues that will never come to pass, she will use her time usefully and deploy resources to ensure that the people who live in Northern Ireland get the benefit of the expertise of the Department that she heads?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I think that I have represented the industry quite well over the past seven months. I do not think that anybody could say that they are being ignored or that their views were not heard. I will continue to pursue my own political agenda. The Member may wish to call it will-o'-the-wisp — or whatever reference he used — but that is my agenda. That is why I am elected as a Sinn Féin rep and a republican rep. I am elected on my principles.

Mr Dickson: Minister, are you satisfied with the current cross-border co-operation on animal health issues, and have you any plans to improve on it?

Mrs O'Neill: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. That area is key to supporting the industry as it moves forward. A practical example of co-operation is the ongoing contingency planning that we have in place for an epizootic disease outbreak — the fortress Ireland approach. There are good, positive examples of things that have worked in the past. If we were to have an outbreak of that type, the first thing that we would already have in place is a mapping system in which we could highlight the hotspots, and we look at that on an all-island basis. We need to continue to do more of that and to look at other ways in which we can co-operate positively for the benefit of the whole island and everybody in the agriculture sector.

Agriculture: Production Diseases

4. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for her assessment of whether production diseases should be tackled as part of a wider strategy to assist farmers in increasing their production capacity. (AQO 1154/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: At a farm level, production diseases and conditions such as mastitis, lameness, infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) and bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) can have a significant impact on the productivity and competitiveness of the farmer. For example, we know that BVD impacts on growth rates, increases mortality rates and decreases calving rates, and it may also increase susceptibility to other diseases. Last September, I spoke to Animal Health Ireland, the industry-led organisation that focuses on eradication of those diseases and conditions in livestock in the South. I welcome the fact that it is open to the possibility that issues might be dealt with on an all-island basis. I am also pleased to hear that it is open to further co-operation with the industry in the North, where such an approach could help us to attain similar disease status right across the island. That, in turn, will help us to move towards the goal of free movement of animals across the island.

The initial steps taken by the industry-led cattle health steering group and its BVD working group demonstrate that there is a desire to tackle such issues in the North, too. I very much believe that prevention is better than cure, and, if we can address it, BVD is one of the areas in which we can make improvements and help the industry to increase its productivity.

TB and brucellosis were discussed earlier, and we need to be able to resolve the compensation issue so that I can get officials to move on, enabling us to look at production diseases and how we can support the industry.

Mr Ó hOisín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I am very glad to hear the Minister's proposals. Will she provide the same support as the Government in the South has provided towards the eradication of diseases such as BVD?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said earlier, reducing costs in other areas, such as the TB and brucellosis compensation schemes, may help us to get to a better position. Obviously, all budgets are tight, but it may help to put us in a better position to look towards supporting initiatives here that improve wider animal health issues such as BVD or, in this case, production diseases. Officials are closely engaged with the BVD working group, which is chaired by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), with the aim of identifying what, if any, assistance the Department can provide. I believe that it is going to have to be industry-led, and my Department will continue to work with industry on a research project through the research challenge fund. A lot of good work is going on, and I look forward to being in a position in which we can take a preventative approach to animal health.

Mr Swann: Will the Minister detail how her Department is working towards coming up with a statistically valid figure for the number of herds in Northern Ireland that have, or have recently had, active BVD? Does she agree that, until DARD has the figures, it is unlikely that the disease can be tackled or eliminated?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, a working group has been established, which the UFU chairs. It is with that working group that we are attempting to identify the stats that are there, the needs of the industry and, then, what the Department can do. It is something that I am actively speaking to the UFU and the Agricultural Producers Association about. If we do not take a preventative approach

to animal health, we are always going to be chasing our tail when fighting diseases. We should be trying to look at the preventative approach.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht na bhfreagraí sin. Will the Minister provide us with some detail on where those commitments are reflected in the Programme for Government?

Mrs O'Neill: DARD was able to secure four commitments in the Programme for Government. Animal health was key to them, as were the agrifood industry and eradicating disease. They are all positives. I could have had a long list of 20 issues that I would have liked to have seen included in the Programme for Government. However, obviously, issues are brought to table, and you have to prioritise. That does not mean that only what can be achieved is included in the Programme for Government; just because something is not in the Programme for Government does not mean that it will go away. There will be ongoing work on all those issues, and animal health and animal welfare is a priority for the Department.

Mr Speaker: Questions 6, 7 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Fisheries: Decommissioning

5. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what plans she has for a decommissioning scheme for the fisheries industry, in view of the pressures being faced. (AQO 1155/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department has prepared a business case for restructuring the local fleet by means of a publicly funded decommissioning scheme. I have instructed my finance division to have it with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in the next few days. The work on a business case for a vessel decommissioning scheme took longer than expected. The good reason for that was that, when I met the processing sector, I found that it had identified some additional issues that I felt needed to be fed into the overall business case and needed to be addressed.

On 12 December 2011, the European Court of Auditors (ECA) published a special report titled 'Have EU Measures Contributed to Adapting the Capacity of the Fishing Fleets to Available Fishing Opportunities?'. The audit concluded that overcapacity of the EU fishing fleet continues to be one of the main reasons for the failure of the common fisheries policy in ensuring sustainable fishing activity and that current measures have failed. The ECA made a series of recommendations aimed at the Commission and member states. My Department has considered the findings of that special report carefully, and they will be woven into the context of the business case.

I acknowledge that any future intervention in the form of a decommissioning scheme must result in the permanent reduction of the size of the local fleet. Any proposal will also need to comply with European Fisheries Fund rules and have the appropriate conditions and controls to ensure that the reduction in the white fish and nephrops sectors of the fleet that are being targeted by the scheme will be permanent.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister. Sorry.

Mrs O'Neill: I hope that the Member will appreciate that I cannot get into the whole detail of the business case until

it goes to DFP but, as I said, that is happening in the next few days.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister indicate whether the decommissioning scheme, when it is in place, will apply equally across the sector? Will it be weighted towards the sector that, some would say, has suffered most, namely the white fish sector? Will it be open-ended, and when can we expect to begin the process of applications?

Mrs O'Neill: I hope that the business case will be with DFP within the next couple of days. As soon as that is cleared, we can move quite quickly because all the detail in drafting the business case has been worked up.

There is no doubt that we need a sustainable and profitable white fish fleet. I think that I answered questions from you in previous Question Times around the December Fisheries Council. The white fish fleet represents about 5% of the industry, and those people are obviously concerned about their future. I think that it is two vessels out of 105-odd vessels, which is just to put it in context because, obviously, prawn fisheries are the main stocks here.

There is certainly a decline in white fish stocks, and those vessels that continue to fish for cod will probably need to take up alternative fishing opportunities, spending part of the year on, perhaps, nephrops fishing or in other grounds where there is greater availability of white fish species. The weighting and industry targeted are part of the business case, which will be with DFP very shortly, and then I will be happy to discuss the issue with the Member.

Ms Boyle: Will common fisheries policy (CFP) reform improve matters for the fishing fleets?

Mrs O'Neill: One of my priorities for CFP reform is regionalisation at the level of the Irish Sea. Ideally, those states with direct interest in the Irish Sea should have greater control over management plans for their fish stocks and any tactical or other measures that are required to implement those plans. However, there remains a lack of clarity from the Commission as to how the proposals for regionalisation will work in practice. The Commission is being pressed to provide further explanation. There have been no political negotiations yet on the Commission's proposals that were issued last year, but I assume they will commence and continue throughout 2012.

Mr Copeland: Does the Minister accept that an ageing fleet, no matter how well maintained, will, in certain circumstances, pose additional risks to those involved in the industry? Will she further take on board the fact that the absence of full details of the decommissioning scheme is, or could be seen as, preventing the necessary future investment in expensive upgrades to the fleet?

Mrs O'Neill: To give DFP its proper place, and until it clears the business case, it would be inappropriate to comment on the detail of it. However, the whole principle behind the decommissioning scheme is to make sure that we have a fleet that can go out and fish for our quota. If we have an ageing fleet, this will be an opportunity for some of those industry people to get a chance to leave because of the decommissioning scheme. I think that it will support the industry. It is something the industry has been calling for. I know that it is eagerly awaiting the outcome of the business case and wants to move forward with it.

Mr McCarthy: I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for getting the good old Comber spud onto the European best quality food list last week. In relation to the fishing, she mentioned the business case, and of course that is very important. When the business case goes to DFP, what faith does the Minister have in the Minister of Finance and Personnel having the money to cough up for the decommissioning scheme?

Mrs O'Neill: If the business case weighs up, we hope to be able to move forward with it very quickly. Comber potatoes, Lough Neagh eels and, hopefully, Armagh Bramley apples are all coming, so that is very positive for the local industry. DFP will consider the business case. We will ensure that officials continue to liaise with DFP and make sure it is dealt with in the speediest fashion.

3.00 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Ulster Covenant

1. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she is taking to mark the centenary of the signing of the Ulster covenant. (AQO 1166/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Significant centenaries and events in the decade ahead provide us all on this island with an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of our shared past and how it shapes and identifies relationships today.

My Department, through the Public Records Office, is revamping its Ulster covenant web resource by incorporating additional historical content. PRONI will also feed into a BBC production by Brian Henry Martin and William Crawley on the Ulster covenant, which is to be transmitted in September this year. PRONI is also partnering a Belfast City Council exhibition to be opened at City Hall in August this year. Other activities, such as exhibitions and talks on the covenant, are being planned by museums and libraries. I am also supportive of the plans by the Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund to hold a lecture series exploring the historical content of the period from 1912 to 1922.

Mr Wells: I am not exactly overwhelmed by the answer from the Minister. We are entering a very important phase in the history of Northern Ireland. We start with a celebration of the covenant of 1912, leading up to the centenary of the foundation of the state of Northern Ireland. Will the Minister and her Department enthusiastically support the commemorations to mark the foundation of the state of Northern Ireland? That will take us well past the anniversary of 1916, so we can celebrate the fact that we, as an integral part of the United Kingdom, have survived 100 years and intend to survive another 100 years.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The list of events and commemorations that my Department is enthusiastically bringing forward is inclusive. It is not triumphalist or vitriolic; it is everything it should be. We are trying to build and develop better relations for a good and shared society. We do not want people beating their chest. So, if the Member is genuine

about the suite of events that we hope to bring forward over the next decade, I am happy to write to him.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. Further to that answer, will you expand on some of the other commemorations that will take place? I seldom agree with Jim Wells, but I agree with him that we are entering a very historic period. It is one that crosses both traditions, so maybe you could expand on the other commemorations.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have alluded to some of the other commemorations at Question Time before. As regards the forthcoming decade of centenaries, there is a list of significant events, including the Ulster covenant, the plantation of Ulster, the First World War, the Treaty of Versailles, the Easter rising, the battle of the Somme, the rise of the labour movement and the Belfast strike, Lloyd George's convention, universal male and limited women's suffrage, general election, the war of independence, the Government of Ireland Act, the civil war and partition. That is to name but a few. I repeat that it is not about what we commemorate but about how we commemorate it and make sure that it is done in an inclusive way.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has indicated that she has had discussions with Belfast City Council on the issue. What other Departments or agencies has she had discussions with about marking the signing of the Ulster covenant, which is an event of huge importance to the state of Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have met a range of bodies. First and foremost, I have met representatives of my own arm's-length bodies that deal with libraries and museums but not exclusively. There was mention of the exhibition by Belfast City Council. I am holding meetings with other Departments on how they intend to bring commemorations forward so that there is no overlap. I am trying to ensure that that is done in an inclusive way so that the principles of the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund, which I mentioned, are brought forward by all the Departments and all the bodies that are using this year as the start of a period of marking significant commemorations and events.

Film Production: Security

2. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she has met with representatives from NI Screen, given the recent attacks on film crews and extras in Belfast, and if she can give any assurances that these incidents will not deter agencies from choosing Northern Ireland as a production location. (AQO 1167/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have arranged a meeting with NI Screen, which will happen this week. I am assured that NI Screen will continue with its robust and aggressive marketing to the global screen industry. I am confident that the growing reputation for film and television in the North of Ireland is undiminished.

The attack on the young men, who were left traumatised, was at the very least regrettable and at the very worst absolutely shocking. The whole incident — the attack on the young men — reflects poorly, but it is not reflective of the people from that community. I am confident that NI Screen is doing everything that it can to learn lessons from the incident and move forward.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Department hope to encourage other agencies and companies to get involved in more film production right across Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. I am sure that the Member is aware that one of our local film-makers, Terry George, has been nominated for an Academy award for the short film 'The Shore'. He is shortlisted fifth out of a pool of 107 people, which is absolutely brilliant for the local film industry. We are content that NI Screen is doing everything that it can to attract other film producers and film-makers to these parts.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Go raibh maith agat, a Aire, as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister outline what actions NI Screen is taking, has taken or plans to take to reassure actors and crews that the North remains a safe and welcoming environment for film and TV production?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The head of production of NI Screen has spoken to the film producer who employed the team of young extras and to the young men who were attacked. They also spoke to other production companies that are enquiring about filming here, if they have not already started filming here, about what happened. They have been reassured that the attack does not represent the experience of the film and television industry in the North of Ireland and is not reflective of communities here. I am assured — I will raise this again at the meeting — that everything that can be done will be done to attract inward investment.

Ms Lo: The incident was due to sectarianism in the area among some people. What actions are the Minister and her Executive colleagues taking to improve community relations to ensure that no localities are seen as no-go areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. It is a very important question; it is more important than some of the hysterical knee-jerking that we have heard in the past. The Executive condemned the attack clearly and unequivocally, and I know that that meant a lot to the young men involved. I think that the community was unequivocal in its condemnation of what happened, and the community and voluntary sector in that community, for the best part, was unequivocal in saying that what happened was wrong.

NI Screen is one of the companies that go to hard-to-reach areas. In other words, it goes to some of our most disadvantaged and deprived areas. It is involved in after-school and outreach programmes to get young people who may not be involved in other activities involved in the film and TV industry. The programmes have proved very successful. For example, the AmmA Centre in Armagh and the Nerve Centre in Derry in particular have made it their business to attract young people. In the past, perhaps deliberately, people have felt that it was easier to move on than go back and bring those people with them. I am confident that NI Screen can continue to do that, and I encourage other companies and other industries to follow its example.

2012 Olympics: Torch Relay

3. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the development of the plans for the Olympic torch relay. (AQO 1168/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Olympic torch will travel round the North for five days from 3 June to 7 June and will visit all 26 councils, with evening celebrations in Portrush, Derry, Newry and Belfast. The street-level route will be released closer to the time of the relay. The torch will also visit Dublin on 6 June. The route in the North and the involvement of local community, cultural and sporting groups is the responsibility of the relevant councils. In order to identify opportunities and allocate roles and responsibilities, councils hosting an evening celebration have each set up a community task force. The other councils have also been encouraged to set up their own task force in relation to the torch relay. My officials are liaising with the task forces and the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken and opportunities are maximised. In October, a local panel met to select torch-bearers for the North. LOCOG issued conditional offers in December last year. Places will be confirmed in February this year.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the update from the Minister. As she is more than aware, the Chinese gymnastics team, which won 18 medals in Beijing, will be based at Salto in Lisburn for its pre-Olympic training. It appears, however, that that has been given no consideration with regard to the agreed torch route. Can the Minister liaise with the organising body to ensure that Salto is highlighted?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the torch route lies with Lisburn City Council. LOCOG has met NILGA, SOLACE and the 26 district councils. I see that a Member opposite is shaking his head. If there is any information that suggests that that is not the case, he needs to bring it forward. I am very supportive of Salto. In Lisburn — on our doorstep — we will host the number one gymnastics team. It is ranked first in the world. If an opportunity is missed by Lisburn and, indeed, the rest of the North and this is bypassed, that is exactly what it will be — an opportunity missed. I have been told that the decision on the route lies with councils. It is arranged between councils and LOCOG. If the Member feels that I need certain information, I would really appreciate its being brought forward. I am really keen to make sure that Lisburn is highlighted and Salto's role and huge achievement are supported.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. The Minister has touched on this in her answer to the previous supplementary question. Will she outline her plans for the Paralympic torch relay?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The Paralympic torch relay will start on 24 August with the first flame-lighting event in London. Greater Belfast will host a flame-lighting event on 25 August, followed by Edinburgh and Cardiff on 26 and 27 August. The four flames, under the theme of the power of human endeavour, will be brought together to create a Paralympic flame at a special ceremony at Stoke Mandeville Stadium on 28 August. Later that evening, there will be a 24-hour torch relay to carry the Paralympic flame to London for the opening of the Paralympic Games. After the flame-lighting event in greater Belfast, the flame will visit communities before arriving at a flame festival later that evening.

Mr Kinahan: We all really look forward to the torch being in Northern Ireland. What steps and action are being taken

with the Tourist Board to ensure that, while the flame goes around Northern Ireland, it shows off and links together everything that is fantastic about Northern Ireland, so that we keep the launch of Northern Ireland tourism for this year high in everyone's minds?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. It is important that he and, indeed, other Members realise that the Tourist Board has sat on the organising committee from the very start. That simply proves the Member's point that tourism is essential. We need to use the asset of the Olympic torch being here to work with, join up with and promote tourism, particularly in smaller rural towns and villages. Therefore, the Tourist Board sits on the leadership group and the group that is organising the torch route. It has worked with my Department and, indeed, LOCOG throughout the whole process.

Mr Eastwood: Is the Minister content that the torch relay will be inclusive of our whole society, including ethnic minorities and people with disabilities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Part of the criteria was that it had to demonstrate inclusion, particularly of young people, marginalised groups and minority ethnic communities. Indeed, the strapline for it all was, "Ordinary people doing extraordinary things" — not so much athletes or the usual suspects who are involved in such events. I am fairly content with the information that I have received so far. If the Member has any cause to suggest that that is not the case in his constituency, I would be happy to forward that. We cannot have a situation where we have an opportunity like this but people who are already marginalised have to stand aside and have no opportunity to be involved.

3.15 pm

Irish Language Strategy and Ulster-Scots Culture and Heritage Strategy

4. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the consultations on the strategies on Irish language and Ulster-Scots culture and heritage will begin. (AQO 1169/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the draft Programme for Government for 2011-15, the Executive included among its building blocks a strategy for the Irish language and a strategy for Ulster-Scots language, heritage and culture. The Programme for Government is currently out for consultation, which will end on 22 February. Following the Executive's consideration of the responses to the consultation, I intend to set out a timetable for consultations on both strategies. I am committed to taking that forward in line with the 1998 Act, which places duties on the Executive to adopt a strategy setting out how they propose to enhance and protect the development of the Irish language and Ulster-Scots heritage and culture.

Mr F McCann: Will the Minister ensure that both strategies meet the needs of the Irish language and Ulster Scots? Can she outline how they will be funded?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assure the Member that consultations on the strategies will be robust and that, unlike previous consultations, Members' views will certainly be incorporated into them. It is likely that individual Departments will have

to decide what level of funding they wish to allocate to the strategies' implementation. Given that the strategies are included as Executive building blocks in the draft Programme for Government, I expect ministerial colleagues to ensure that funds are in place to allow proper implementation.

Mr Campbell: When the Minister goes down the route of providing strategies for the Irish language and Ulster-Scots language and heritage, will she ensure that Ulster Scots gets proportionate funding so that we see the strategy fully developed with manifest outcomes for people in the Ulster-Scots community? The issue of disproportionate funding arose throughout direct rule, because Ulster Scots received significantly less than the Irish language for many years. It is only in recent years that that has begun to be redressed.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that, if he speaks to people from the Ulster-Scots community, he will find that I have been nothing but fair in the way that I have dealt with everyone, particularly on the issue of language, culture and heritage.

I am not going to have one section of the community receiving funding above and beyond what is proportionate and what it is entitled to, regardless of what was there in the recent or distant past. As I said in my previous answer, I anticipate that money for those strategies will come not only from my Department but from my ministerial colleagues. The money will be given out proportionally; it will be done fairly and to meet the needs of the community. That is what is important. It is about meeting people's needs rather than those of politicians.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a cuid freagraí. An dtig liom a fhiafraí den Aire cén uair a thig linn bheith ag súil le comhairliúchán a fheiceáil ar Bhille na Gaeilge?

When can we expect to see consultation on an Irish Language Bill?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will give the Member the same answer that I have given him each time he has raised that question. Scoping for the Irish Language Bill will take some time. I want to make sure that it is done properly and that it is done right. I am not rushing it through for political expediency. After the scoping exercise is finished, given that the Member is on the CAL Committee, he will know when I anticipate a Bill being brought forward. I look forward to his continued support.

Angling

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the support she is providing to local angling clubs to help them to keep rivers stocked with indigenous salmon and trout. (AQO 1170/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Through the provisions of section 14 of the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966, the Department may permit authorised persons, subject to conditions, to carry out the artificial propagation of salmon or freshwater fish for the improvement of freshwater fisheries. The Department has produced detailed guidance to enable angling clubs to plan and develop salmon and trout stock rebuilding programmes, to carry out a habitat survey and to improve habitat, which will boost the survival of indigenous wild

populations in fresh water. The guidance is informed by recent developments in the sustainable management of native wild fish, which recognises that holistic management of the habitat where the fish have evolved is often the best approach. It recognises the risk of reduced survival of wild, indigenous fish through undesirable introductions of genetically different or domesticated fish and/or more aggressive fish that compete with our indigenous habitat.

The Department has routinely made fish culture facilities at the Bushmills salmon station available to angling clubs that have developed sound salmon stock rebuilding programmes. Clubs are assisted to capture brood stock and to reintroduce fry into suitable habitat. The Department has developed a scientifically informed strategy for the development of the Erne trout fishery and reinstatement of a self-sustaining salmon population in the Erne catchment. This has involved working with angling clubs that fish on lower Lough Erne and the feeder streams. Fisheries officers seek to sustain native fish stocks through habitat improvement projects, the provision of advice to regulators of activities that can cause harm to their habitats and enforcement of fishery protection law.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister guarantee continuing support to all local angling clubs that partake in the sport?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. I repeat that my officials are happy to work with angling clubs, particularly when they are involved in bringing back or restocking rivers, so that it is done with the supervision and support of officials. They are happy to go out to angling clubs and to introduce them to the Bushmills salmon farm. They are also happy to talk to them about indigenous fish and, indeed, the waterways for those rivers because it is important that the indigenous fish survive and that any introduction of stock that is not familiar to those waters will not compromise the indigenous stock. Therefore, they are happy to work with and support angling clubs, which, for the best part, have been working with the Department for a long time.

Mr Swann: I am encouraged that the Minister said that she intends to support angling clubs. What support does she intend to give to encourage clubs to adopt voluntary catch and release, as her Department has requested, given that she does not have the legislation to enforce it or to enforce the removal of the nets off our coast? Will she ensure that DCAL waters operate catch and release?

Ms Ní Chuilín: If DCAL waters are involved in activity that does not involve catch and release, I am sure that the Member will bring it to my attention. To be honest, the Department has been overwhelmed by responses to the issue around salmon conservation and working with angling clubs. The Member has made it known through many outlets and the media that legislation is needed. I support that, but staff receive between 400 and 500 requests to answer questions and to respond to letters, and those same staff should be getting on with legislation and policy development.

I encourage angling clubs to work with the Department in a constructive, positive way so that we can bring forward the best legislation to protect the clubs that have been fishing in a very positive way throughout the years and will continue to do that and ensure that that is assisted with a strong policy position so that we can go forward with even stronger legislation. However, I make an appeal today that the staff

who are tied up answering those letters and questions need to be able to get on with the business of legislation and protecting salmon conservation targets, which, as the Member pointed out, we need to meet.

Mr Allister: If the Minister is interested in seeing a restoration of salmon stocks to our rivers, the best and most effective contribution she could make would be to decline to issue licences for nets off the Antrim coast, which her Department recognises are interrupting the return of salmon to rivers to such a grave degree. She has that discretion; why is she not exercising it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member is wrong: I do not have that discretion. If I had that discretion, I would not be seeking counsel on the issue. The Member knows well what the position is. I ask that commercial fishermen in particular do not apply for the licence. If they refuse to do anything, I will seek legal advice on my position. The Member knows that I do not have the legislation that would allow me to remove the nets. Given the interest that he has in that area, I am surprised that he is not particularly well informed.

Football: Safety Legislation

6. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of whether the existing safety of sports grounds legislation is having a negative impact on the financial position of Irish league football clubs due to unnecessary capacity restrictions and all-ticket games. (AQO 1171/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware that many clubs have been in financial difficulty for some time. Previous investigations suggest that poor safety standards at some venues, poor public image, management weaknesses and other issues have been the main contributory factors to the financial problems that clubs face. Those problems predate the safe sports grounds legislation. The safety of sports grounds legislation was introduced partly in response to those issues. It is designed to help local football clubs improve their public image by encouraging them to address basic and essential health and safety concerns at their grounds. Furthermore, available evidence indicates that the safe capacity limits set by district councils under the safe sports grounds legislation are generally well in excess of clubs' average attendance demands. In my view, increasing average attendances at Irish league games in line with safe capacity limits would help to improve the financial position of Irish league clubs.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response. I know that the Minister has been at some football matches. I am a lifelong football supporter, and, having spoken to clubs and fans, I know that there is a feeling among them that there is a sense of overkill in the legislation. Would the Minister consider carrying out a review? There is no doubt that the legislation is killing football clubs, and all that we ask for is a review to ensure the future of Irish league football.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for setting that out. I asked for and received the published average attendance figures for 2009-2010, and I will write to the Member and provide him with those. I do not have the figures for the years after that, but I anticipate receiving those. The gaps between the average attendance figures and the safety

capacity limits are quite big. There is a problem with the Irish league clubs, as the figures for average attendances are well below the safety capacity levels. I know that there is a perception that the legislation is to blame, but, on the basis of the evidence that I have in front of me, it looks like some of the clubs in the Irish league are hiding behind the legislation. I will share those figures with Members.

Local clubs and some of the matches that are attended are at the heart of the community, and it is important that they are supported. However, given what I have in front of me, I could not support your request for a review. I do not see a justification for that. However, I am happy to meet the Member, share the figures and discuss how we should proceed and find a way forward.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra. The Speaker has been very patient today, and I not will stretch his indulgence further by asking the Minister any questions about the Brandywell. In light of her response to the Member for East Belfast, when the Minister is appraising the issue, will she examine whether the legislation is an improvement or has made matters worse? Will she also provide that detail to the House?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will share the figures that I alluded to with Sammy and other Members. It is only fair that I do that. When Members receive that data, they can make up their own mind about where the gaps are. If those figures are disputed or there are other circumstances, I am more than happy to listen to the issues. However, what I have in front of me does not support some of the recent media speculation and coverage.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister will join me, the Speaker and Mr McCartney in acknowledging Derry City's qualification for European football next season. Does the Minister feel that there may be a requirement for financial assistance for clubs if they were to be victims of the legislation or subject to some sort of negative reaction as a result of it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Everyone is nodding yes, but I am not. I was supportive of Derry City. I wrote to you on its behalf, because I did not understand why it was in the position that it was in. On the issue of what funds are available to the Department and what we can do, it would be a bit silly of me to speculate about funding something that may or may not happen.

It would be silly for me to speculate about funding for something that may or may not happen. However, I am sympathetic to Derry City and the Brandywell and to the many other soccer clubs that do a brilliant job for everyone with whom they are involved.

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Marian Price

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the continuing detention of Marian Price in Maghaberry prison, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision to revoke her licence; further notes her ongoing medical and social needs; believes that reliable evidence and the necessary process should govern judicial and quasi-judicial actions; and calls on the Minister of Justice to engage with the Secretary of State on the reasons for the revocation of her licence, and for her detention, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision, to be reviewed urgently. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I recognise the concerns of the SDLP about the detention of Marian McGlinchey in Glen House at Maghaberry prison. As I understand that it is her wish, I shall refer to Marian McGlinchey by her married name.

Maghaberry prison is a male establishment, and there are drawbacks to accommodating a woman prisoner in such an environment. Therefore, I need to explain why she is there and answer some of the concerns that have been raised. Mrs McGlinchey has been classified as a category-A prisoner, as she meets the requirements set out in the Prison Service's initial security categorisation assessment.

There is currently no dedicated accommodation in the Prison Service estate for category-A, high-risk or separated women prisoners, and, for a number of reasons, Ash House, or the wider Hydebank Wood site, was not considered an appropriate environment to accommodate such a prisoner when she was returned to custody. As a result of those considerations, the decision was taken to transfer Mrs McGlinchey to Glen House at Maghaberry prison. I also understand that, at about that time, she requested separated status, although that currently does not exist for women prisoners.

Glen House is a small, self-contained block within Maghaberry prison, which has been set aside to provide a dedicated facility for female prisoners for whom Hydebank Wood is deemed unsuitable. Mrs McGlinchey is largely following the gender-specific regime for integrated female prisoners that would apply in Ash House. Staff in Maghaberry prison have gone to considerable lengths to create an appropriate environment for her, and I will give you some examples of that.

While in Glen House, Mrs McGlinchey has access to an outdoor exercise area and dining and living areas. She is not locked up during staff meal times, and she has access to all areas of Glen House except the laundry between morning unlock at 8.00 am and evening lock-up at 7.30 pm. Therefore, it is simply not correct to state that she is locked up for 24 hours a day. She can avail herself of two visits a week, one of which is at the weekend, and those visits are taken in Glen House in an environment that is separate from male prisoners. Mrs McGlinchey has been assigned a key worker to monitor her health and general well-being. She is

seen regularly by healthcare staff, including a mental health nurse. She has been given the opportunity to participate in a craft class and an art class and to enrol in an Open University course. She has access to a PC, but not to the internet.

As I have said previously to MLAs, and as was highlighted earlier by Gregory Campbell, the Prison Service has spent a modest sum of money to make Glen House more suitable for women prisoners. For that, I make no apology whatsoever. As Minister of Justice, it is my responsibility to ensure that the needs of offenders in custody are met. However, Members will appreciate that there is a limit to what I can say about any individual's health or medical needs. In fact, to provide any level of detail would be to infringe Mrs McGlinchey's rights under article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Responsibility for prisoner healthcare transferred to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), which is required to provide healthcare arrangements comparable with those that are available to people in the community. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, in partnership with the Prison Service, is committed to ensuring that the health and social care needs of prisoners in custody are met, and Mrs McGlinchey is no exception to that responsibility. She is subject to a specific care plan, which is designed to militate against the potential impact of being held in isolation; that plan is reviewed regularly.

Concerns about Mrs McGlinchey's health have been raised in recent days, and staff and management in Maghaberry prison are liaising with the trust to ensure that she receives the appropriate treatment and care. However, she has had a care plan in place since she was admitted. Medication is reviewed by the prison GP, and I understand that on only one occasion was there a delay in providing medication that she required. She also has access to other specialist staff. I was disappointed, therefore, to hear Mr Ramsey say on 'Good Morning Ulster' this morning that it was only because of pressure from me and others that she was now getting some level of medical care. I refute that suggestion. I believe that, from the day that she was admitted to Maghaberry prison, she has been provided with the care that she required and with which I would wish any prisoner to be provided.

The motion calls on me to take certain actions. As Members will be aware, under our devolution settlement, it falls to the Secretary of State to recall to custody persons who have been released on a life licence, under the terms of either the Prison Act (Northern Ireland) 1953 or the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, when the evidence on which the rationale for recall is based is determined to be of a national security nature. Therefore, the revocation of Mrs McGlinchey's licence and the case against her were led by the Secretary of State. Responsibility now lies with the Parole Commissioners.

During the debate, I was asked what the Department of Justice was doing about representations, and the answer is that it is not our role to make representations. The Department will supply reports to the commissioners if they are requested from those who provide the care and treatment, just as is the case for any other prisoner. However, the Department is not party to the quasi-judicial

process that is now under way and on which the Parole Commissioners have a duty to take action. As Minister of Justice, I have absolutely no role in determining when a licence should be revoked or otherwise. My opinion on the matter would carry no more weight than that of any other Member of the Assembly, whether here today or in the media.

Let me outline something of the background of the case and the position in which Mrs McGlinchey now finds herself. Members will be well aware that the then Marian Price was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1973 for her involvement in the bombing of the Old Bailey and Great Scotland Yard. Mrs McGlinchey was transferred to the custody of the Northern Ireland Prison Service on permanent transfer in 1975. In 1980, she received a royal prerogative of mercy and was released from prison on humanitarian grounds. She was the first life sentence prisoner convicted of an offence relating to the Troubles to be released on licence.

Marian McGlinchey was committed to Prison Service custody again on 13 May 2011, following the revocation of her life licence by the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State's decision was taken on foot of a recommendation by the Parole Commissioners, and I am satisfied that due process was followed in this case. Members will be aware that Mrs McGlinchey's legal team, however, contend that she was awarded the royal prerogative in respect of all of her sentences, was not on licence at all and, therefore, should not have been recalled to prison.

The Northern Ireland Office, however, maintains that Mrs McGlinchey was awarded the royal prerogative in respect of her determinate sentence only and that she was on licence in respect of her two life licences. Subsequently, the Parole Commissioners are considering the preliminary issue of whether they have the jurisdiction to hear the case and are expected to give their verdict later today. Members may, understandably, be confused about the respective roles of the Secretary of State and the Parole Commissioners, but this is not an issue for which the devolved Department has any responsibility whatsoever. As I mentioned, it falls to the Secretary of State to recall to custody persons released on a life licence under the terms of either the 1953 Act or the 2001 Order. I have no role to play in the issue, and it would be very unhelpful if I were to be involved.

Basil McCrea said that speeding up justice is an issue. That is a perfectly valid point, but, on this occasion, it is the Parole Commissioners who set the timetable, certainly not the Minister of Justice.

Mr P Ramsey: In light of the fact that the Minister's knowledge of the process is that the Secretary of State revoked the licence on a recommendation by the Parole Commissioners, is it the case that the Secretary of State can make a decision to revoke one's licence without any reference to the Parole Commissioners?

Mr Ford: The procedure is similar to that which would be the case if someone were being recalled on grounds other than those of national security and where responsibility lay with the Minister of Justice. A recommendation is made, generally by a single parole commissioner, as a matter of urgency, on which basis the Minister would make a recall, and I am sure that the same applies to the Secretary of State. After that, there is a full hearing by a panel of commissioners at which all of the evidence can

be considered in some detail. That normally happens some weeks to a few months after the recall and is the basis of the substantive decision. However, given the issue over whether the royal prerogative is applicable in respect of all of the sentences, the Parole Commissioners have to decide whether they have any role at all, and that is the basis of their initial decision.

The key issue with the latter part of the motion is that I have no responsibility as Minister of Justice. I have responsibilities for parole in those cases in which there is not a national security consideration. I have no responsibility whatsoever in this case, and I believe that there would be a serious danger if the House were to instruct me to do something outside my responsibilities.

I put this to Members from the SDLP and Sinn Féin who support the motion: suppose that, in the near future, a motion were to be tabled in the House of Commons by a group of Back-Bench Conservative MPs instructing the Secretary of State to engage with me on a function for which my role makes me responsible to this House but that is no part of the Secretary of State's role. I suspect that all Members of this House would probably be fairly unhappy about that, and nationalist Members would be particularly unhappy. Therefore, Members need to be extremely careful about such a call.

My duty is to provide humane conditions for all prisoners and to see that they are treated with respect for their human rights. That includes those convicted of serious and heinous crimes and those on remand suspected of serious and heinous crimes. Doing that is the mark of a civilised society.

Mr G Kelly: The Minister spoke about what is and is not his duty. As the Minister of Justice, do you accept that there is a huge difference between evidence freely given in open court, where it is tried and tested, and some secret organisation giving intelligence that puts people behind bars, particularly when that happens 32 years after that person was released from jail?

Mr Ford: I think that the Member is contrasting what happens at a trial and the role of the Parole Commissioners in dealing with a subsequent hearing of suspicion that somebody is breaching the terms of licence. There are different tests and a different procedure for that. That is the law under which we must all operate.

However, my role, as I have just said, is to provide suitable, humane conditions for all those in custody, whatever their crime or suspected crime may be. That is a mark of a civilised society, as was emphasised by Conall McDevitt when he quoted Winston Churchill, and something that we should definitely take account of. In respect of Mrs McGlinchey, I will do all that I can to ensure that, while in custody, she is treated in a way that meets her needs, while recognising that she is in a specific position as the sole category-A woman prisoner in Northern Ireland. What I will not do is interfere in due process in areas in which it lies to the Parole Commissioners and the Secretary of State to exercise their responsibilities. On that basis, I must reject the motion.

Mr A Maginness: I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. In particular, I thank Mr Ramsey, who proposed this important motion.

It is important to identify two crucial areas with which the motion is concerned. The first is the humanitarian aspect of the detention of Marian Price. The second is the human rights implications of the revocation of her licence. Mr Ramsey outlined in great detail the impact of being imprisoned on that lady. He outlined her health or lack of it. She is suffering from residual TB, arthritis, anorexia nervosa and mental health problems. Each of those conditions is very serious in its own right. Collectively, they represent a highly complex series of health issues.

All of us in the House, no matter whether we agree or disagree with the lady or whether we have some distaste for what she did in the past, must have compassion. Therefore, it is a little disappointing and distasteful when people use rather vindictive language and a rather vengeful tone in relation to Marian Price.

3.45 pm

I do not believe in or share her political opinions. I am opposed to them, as is the SDLP. However, throughout its political tenure, the SDLP has exercised a responsibility for maintaining values and standards in law and due process. We will continue to do that, whether it is popular or unpopular.

Lord Morrow: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I will not take an intervention. Whether it is popular or unpopular, we will pursue that. This place was brought to its knees by the imposition of internment without trial. The violence that preceded the introduction of internment in 1971 was nothing in comparison to the violence that happened after it. Internment without trial tore this country apart, and we should remember that. This is a form of internment without trial.

A Member: Rubbish.

Mr A Maginness: The Member said "rubbish".

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr A Maginness: Let me say to the Member: just go through the process of bringing a person back to prison. You do not see due process within those procedures; that is the problem here. She has been recalled to prison, and her licence has been revoked on the basis of information to which the Secretary of State is privy. That information is based on intelligence reports by MI5, and it is being withheld from her and her legal representatives. That, surely, is not due process. It is surely an aberration in the legal processes. If you were in that position, you would certainly not find that to be a proper way of dealing with your position. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Make your remarks through the Chair. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr A Maginness: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; I want to go through the issues.

Lord Morrow: He is insecure, so he cannot give way.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Givan said that the SDLP is being irresponsible. The SDLP is being very responsible on this issue. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr A Maginness: It is important that we maintain certain values in our society *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: If we depart from those values, we diminish the law. The law is more important than anything else in this society. That means maintaining the law, and, as a result, maintaining good governance. That is what is wrong here. The law is being bent and twisted, and, as a result, we have the present circumstances that Marian Price is undergoing.

The Minister said, quite rightly, that he is not concerned with that process. He is not. The Parole Commissioners have a central part to play. I do not diminish them in any way. I believe them to be good people, trying their best in the circumstances. However, the use of the Parole Commissioners to deal with the situation is not the right way of going about it. If this woman is guilty of crimes, let her be put on trial for those crimes. That is the way you deal with it in a civilised society. She has not been put on trial. In the two charges that she faced, she was released on bail on both of those charges. The courts released her on bail, but, by executive action, the Secretary of State put her back into prison. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: We want the law and due process to prevail.

Lord Morrow: Hear, hear.

Mr A Maginness: You say "hear, hear", but you do not; you do not support due process if you support this way of dealing with this woman. I say to you seriously: please reflect on this —

Lord Morrow: It is you that is trying to circumvent —

Mr Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr A Maginness: If you start to diminish the law any further, you will undermine democracy here in Northern Ireland. Democracy is a very precious thing, and I ask you, indeed beg you, to reflect on what you are saying.

This is a serious situation, and it is important for us as a political party to ventilate it. It is important for us to bring the issue of humanity in front of this Assembly. This lady —

Mr T Clarke: Lady?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: She is imprisoned in difficult circumstances, where she is, in fact, isolated because she is a category-A prisoner in a male prison. That is a form of solitary confinement, and I reject the argument put forward by Mr Dickson that this does not represent solitary confinement; it certainly does. A re-categorisation of her status would help, because then at least she would have some association.

Lord Morrow: She signed a compact.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr A Maginness: I understand that there are heated views in relation to Marian Price, and I understand the sort of attitude struck by some Members, but I cannot accept the tone and language used by people such as Mr Nesbitt, who was a victims' commissioner. It was deeply offensive, and I think he should reflect on that.

Lord Morrow: That was factual.

Mr Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Allister argued that this is a hybrid situation. He argued that Ms Price should produce the pardon document. The onus is surely on the Government to produce that. I do not believe that Mr Allister would go into court and meekly accept the judge's ruling that his client should prove the point. Mr Allister would be rightly professionally outraged by that.

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

Mr A Maginness: Therefore, it is up to the Government to produce that proof and to disprove or prove the fact that she was released conditionally on licence.

Mr Speaker: Order. The question is that the motion standing in the Order Paper be agreed. All those in favour, say "Aye".

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Speaker: Contrary, if any, "No".

Some Members: No.

Mr Speaker: I think the Noes have it; the Noes have it — *[Interruption.]*

I am waiting for a challenge. I am going to have to move on. I think the Noes have it — *[Interruption.]*

Order. I have called the vote. Now, I do not hear any objection to me calling the Noes. Do we have an objection?

Some Members: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Clear the Lobbies; the Question will be put in three minutes.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 37; Noes 54.

AYES

Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr McDevitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr T Clarke and Mr Nesbitt.

Motion accordingly negatived.

Mr Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease as we move to the Adjournment debate.

Motion made:

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

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

Adjournment

Tourism: South Down

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond and other Members who wish to speak will have approximately six minutes.

Ms Ritchie: It is with great pleasure that I bring the important matter of tourism in south Down to the Floor. I would like to express my gratitude to those who are here to participate in the discussion and, in particular, to Minister Foster for making herself available to respond to what is said.

It is my contention that south Down is the most beautiful among all the beautiful places we are blessed with in the North of Ireland. It is my view also that south Down, with its wealth of natural and built heritage, is the most interesting and engaging of all the many interesting and engaging places we have here. Its tourism potential is, therefore, unlimited.

Although some Members might be inclined to debate some aspects of this with me, there can be little doubt that the outstanding character and assets of south Down's tourism offering are unsurpassed. Indeed, there is official recognition of that claim in the fact that of the five signature projects officially designated by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, two, effectively, are in south Down. There is one in Derry, one in Belfast, one on the north coast and two in south Down. South Down must, therefore, be absolutely central to our tourism strategy in the North.

First, we have as a signature project the magnificent Mountains of Mourne, which run from Castlewellan in the north to Rostrevor in the south and, famously, sweep down to the sea in Newcastle. Secondly, we have the St Patrick/Christian heritage signature project with, at its heart, the home of Patrick in Downpatrick's Lecale district.

I could set out to build a case in the debate around a simple crude question: why is it that with 40% of the North's signature projects to its name, south Down gets nowhere near 40% of the North's public investment in tourism? However, I do not want to ask that question or go down that road.

There are very good reasons for the asymmetry in spending on the different signature projects. Put simply, we had the choice of making or not making a major investment in the Titanic project as its anniversary neared, and we rightly decided to go for it. Hopefully, the Titanic celebrations will crown a brilliant year for tourism in the North in 2012.

Complaining about money or trying to get a bigger share of the money is not what this debate is about for me. I could rhyme off the statistics that show how the money was shared out, and no doubt the Minister could rhyme off all

the projects supported in south Down, but I do not see any benefit in that exchange of data. What I want to achieve is more about hearts and minds. I want to secure the commitment of more people to the overall cause of tourism in south Down. I want to persuade people that south Down tourism will yield an excellent return on investment.

If we get all-round commitment to the tourism development of the Mournes, we will succeed in putting in place all the visitor facilities and amenities that we need to allow more people to visit, stay and spend money, and that will create the jobs that we all want. I know that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) is one of the partners to the Mourne destination development plan that is under way and that, if we work collaboratively on its implementation, we can achieve a great deal. Naturally, we want to develop tourism in the Mournes in a way that is sustainable and does not place unreasonable demands on the people who already live there. That is entirely achievable. In fact, the question of a national park arises in that context, and I know that the Minister of the Environment will make decisions on that matter. Of course, we must not neglect the lowland communities around that scenic area. I believe that we must all do more, and, again, see joined-up government in the development of tourism and job creation in the coastal towns at the foot of the Mournes.

The towns of Annalong, Kilkeel and Warrenpoint have a proud marine and industrial heritage. Although their traditional industries have been in decline in recent years, there is scope to build the tourism offering into something special. The Department for Social Development (DSD) is assisting in mapping out a view of the future in those coastal towns, as well as Newcastle, through a number of master-planning exercises. I hope that DETI will participate fully in the process and ensure that tourism development is given the highest priority, and I hope that the Minister will stamp her personal authority on accelerating and intensifying tourism-related work in the Mournes.

Let me turn now to the other signature project in the south Down area. This man was once described as a sinner, unlearned, and the least of the faithful, and he was hated by many. No, Mr Deputy Speaker, that was not a reference to David McNarry or, indeed, a description to be applied to any wayward Member; the words are, in fact, the humble words of St Patrick. They are the words that he used to introduce himself at the start of his 'Confessio', the oldest surviving Christian document originating in Ireland. It is the story of Patrick's life written by Patrick himself.

I recommend that every Member and, indeed, the wider community read that short document, because, in a few short pages, it portrays vividly the personality of Patrick — a compelling mixture of humility and fearlessness in a driven individual who was dedicated to his mission and certain of his righteousness. Although there is tremendous awareness of the existence of Patrick all over the world, when you think about it, you realise that very few of those who wear the green or celebrate his unique national and international story know much about him. The 70 million people worldwide who claim an affinity with Ireland's saint actually know very little about him. Despite that, 17 March is a major day of celebration throughout the developed world. Nearly a million people take to the streets of Dublin on that day, and even more in New York.

Every July on Reek Sunday, some 30,000 Irish people climb a steep mountain in Mayo in his name. Centuries before, pilgrims from all over Europe as well as Ireland travelled in their thousands to Saul and Struell Wells in south Down in his honour. What is brilliant about Patrick is that although he travelled widely in Ireland, he belongs to the North, and within the North, to south Down, which was his home. Because he brought Christianity here, he predates all the arguments that we had 1,000 years later and, therefore, still belongs to all of us. He is a unifying figure who transcends our divisions.

4.15 pm

The global epicentre of St Patrick tourism should not be New York or Dublin but the North, and especially south Down. Nowhere else can claim authenticity and, at the same time, a multiplicity of beautiful, atmospheric Patrician sites, each worthy of a visit in its own right.

Patrick landed at the River Slaney and began his work in Ireland in 432 AD and set up his first missionary base camp in Ireland at Saul; he established his first church there and converted his followers. He developed his first training monastery in Ireland and had his main home in Saul during his mission to Ireland. He wrote his famous 'Confessio' and 'Epistle to Coroticus'. He bathed, rested and prayed at Struell Wells; he died in 461 AD and is buried on Cathedral Hill, alongside St Brigid and St Colmcille in Downpatrick.

Mr Deputy Speaker and Minister, we have a plan to develop the Patrick tourism product in the Downpatrick/Lecale district that will be driven by the council. We also need to advance Patrick tourism on a Northern Ireland level with special reference to Armagh, and on an all-island level to bring in important sites such as Lough Derg, Croagh Patrick and the hills of Slane and Tara. Over time, we will need money for signage, car parking and interpretation and the occasional restroom and coffee bar; it is not big money, and I am confident that we will find it in any case. What I really want is for the tourism Minister, her senior team in DETI, Invest NI and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to buy into the vision and the potential. You simply cannot do that unless you come to look at the raw product for yourself.

I know that, in the past, St Patrick has been designated a low priority in DETI. Indeed, he was specifically identified as such in an exercise carried out by the Department of Finance a year or so ago. I want that to change. I want to convince you, Minister, and your colleagues that Patrick should be a top priority.

I invite the Minister to visit the Downpatrick/Lecale district before the middle of March, and I will personally give you a guided tour of the key sites, from the landing site at the River Slaney to the burial site at Down Cathedral. In the words of the Tourist Board, I invite the Minister to "uncover our story".

Of course, St Patrick's Day should be a public holiday.

I have referred to the social and cultural benefits that can be derived from our shared cross-community ownership of Patrick. A great deal of good can come from that, but it is the unvarnished, hard-headed tourism and commercial development potential of our Patrician heritage that I focus on because it can transform the economic fortunes of south

Down. In purely tourism terms, Patrick is a sleeping giant, and Downpatrick is where he rests.

Mr Wells: I apologise to the Member for South Down, Ms Ritchie, and to the Minister; although I can speak in this debate, I will not be able to stay too long because I must meet an important delegation of pharmacists.

I congratulate Margaret Ritchie for getting this topic to the Floor of the Assembly for debate; it is self-evident that this is an important issue that should be aired. A lot of myths are going around that St Patrick had some connections with other parts of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, but we all know that, in fact, nearly all his time on the island of Ireland was spent in County Down. There may be imposters in places such as Armagh who claim some relationship with Patrick, but, as the Member said, there is absolutely no doubt that St Patrick was County Down through and through. Therefore, I congratulate the Tourist Board and the Department for supporting the concept of St Patrick's country as a signature project. It is an indication that the Department is committed to the venture.

We are going into a very exciting and unusual period in Northern Ireland's history in terms of tourism. We have the wonderful news of the UK City of Culture going to Londonderry, as well as all the Titanic commemorations. I suppose that it would be churlish not to say that we are also delighted that what I think is called the All-Ireland Fleadh — I hope that that is right — will be brought to Londonderry in 2013. That is tremendous news for all concerned. Those are exciting projects that will bring much-needed tourism revenue into Northern Ireland. It is great news, and the Department is absolutely right to push the boat out, as it were, in supporting those initiatives.

My question is: what then? There will be only one centenary of the Titanic, and Londonderry will have only one year as UK City of Culture. However, the traditional history of St Patrick will be there for centuries to come. Therefore, it offers an opportunity for sustainable, long-term tourism growth in Northern Ireland. Significant investment has been made in that already. We have the Saint Patrick's Centre in Downpatrick. I declare an interest in that I served on the board of the Saint Patrick's Centre for two years, so I know a fair bit about what goes into running that tourist attraction, including the pains and sorrows, as well as the delights. I urge the Department and the Tourist Board to see whether they can use the Saint Patrick's Centre and St Patrick's country as a model to try to expand the tourism season in Northern Ireland.

I worked for the National Trust for 10 very happy years. In those days, we found that, for some of our properties, it would have been cheaper to stand at the door, hand every visitor £5 and tell them to go somewhere else than it was to open up. That was the economics of tourism in Northern Ireland outside the main peak seasons of July, August and Easter. As a society, we have to try to make the tourism season in Northern Ireland much, much longer. When some of our visitor centres are putting half their visitors through in 15 days of the year, we worry about what will happen for the rest of the year. If you go to any of our attractions today, at the end of January, you will find next to nobody at them. That is a fundamental problem facing the development of tourism in St Patrick's country and throughout Northern Ireland. How do you stimulate visitors to come outside the main peak

months so that you can spread not only your costs but your income throughout 12 months?

I see wonderful opportunities. The Saint Patrick's Centre is up and running. It is a fine building that acts as a focus for tourism. A local farmer has some very interesting ideas on how a project could be developed on the Slaney river. We have the landing and staging point where St Patrick came on to the island of Ireland, but at the moment, there is very little there to tell anyone that that happened. We have the church at Saul, where there is an interesting development in the planning of a new church hall. We also have Struell Wells, of course. There are plenty of tangible assets to show the real link between Down district and St Patrick and, of course, his burial place up at the Mound of Down and Down Cathedral.

There are wonderful opportunities, but it will require a bit of thought and co-ordination. I must say that I found it very worrying that, even with the Saint Patrick's Centre in Downpatrick, which is a wonderful building that cost almost £6 million, it was extremely difficult to attract visitors. Indeed, apart from 17 March and the peak periods, the centre was effectively empty. I think that the Department and the Tourist Board need to address the issue. There is plenty of money available to build the attractions and put signage and interpretation panels at them, but there seems to be a lack of funding available to enable us to continue to provide revenue funding to keep them open.

Up to now, all the funding has been aimed at capital investment rather than at running costs. We had exactly the same problem with the arboretum at Castlewellsan, which is an issue that Mr Clarke raised. I am confident that the money can be found to bring that up to an acceptable standard, but I do not have a clue where we will get the money to keep it running. Castle Ward in Strangford, just down the road from St Patrick's country, is another unique property with a fantastic range of facilities that could be incorporated in any overall plan. However, it, too, is desperately expensive to keep going, particularly in the winter months.

I hope that Ms Ritchie will not use this against me in the 'Down Recorder' but I congratulate her on having the initiative to launch her tourist plan. That was quite poignant for me because, on the way to that launch, I met, for the last time, the late Peter Craig, who was one of Down District Council's most wonderful councillors ever.

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

Mr Wells: I congratulate her on having the initiative to launch her plan. I wish her all the best and hope that the Department can facilitate it.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht. I welcome the opportunity to speak on this issue.

Unlike Jim Wells, I do not believe that St Patrick belongs to any one county in Ireland. I would say that, coming from Mayo, whose people may have something to say about that. He definitely spent 40 days and 40 nights on the beautiful mountain of Croagh Patrick on the west coast. I take the view that St Patrick belongs to all of us in Ireland, regardless of what tradition or county we come from or live in.

Is áiméar iontach é an tionscadal aitheantais Tír Naomh Pádraig agus an Luath-Oidhreacht leis an turasóireacht a fhás i ndeisceart an Dúin — ach iarraim ar an Aire straitéis margaíochta turasóireachta aonair a fhorbairt le deisceart an Dúin a chur chun tosaigh. Is réigiún álainn d'Éirinn é deisceart an Dúin le stair shaihbhir agus cúlchríoch nádúrtha a chuimsíonn na Beanna Boirche; mar sin de, is féidir leis a chumas turasóireachta a bhaint amach má chuirtear an straitéis margaíocht cheart i bhfeidhm.

The St Patrick/Christian heritage signature project is an opportunity to increase tourism in south Down, and I ask the Minister to develop a single tourism marketing strategy for the promotion of the area. As we know, south Down is one of the beautiful regions of Ireland. It has a rich history, a natural hinterland and the Mournes, as mentioned by Margaret Ritchie. So we are in a prime position to maximise the tourist potential if the correct marketing strategy and tourism infrastructure are put in place.

To date, I have been disappointed with the level of investment in tourism in south Down. If the Minister audited its accommodation infrastructure, she would find that it lags behind many other counties in the North of Ireland. We all know that the biggest spend of any tourist is on accommodation, so she and her Department need to address that.

We should not be looking just at south Down. We know that the vast majority of visitors to this island do not come in through the North. They come in through Dublin and go to Kerry, Mayo, Galway and Donegal. We have to make sure that we get them to County Down. There are lots of different ways to do that, one of which is to construct a bridge at Narrow Water. That would make the trip from Newgrange to the Mournes easier. Newgrange attracts a huge amount of visitors, and we have to keep them moving up until they reach us. So we need a joint strategy with Down, Armagh and Louth. We need a single marketing strategy to piggyback on packages throughout the rest of Ireland, and we must work with people from the Mournes, Slieve Gullion and Cooley peninsula. That is common sense, because marketing and promoting those three counties in one region would enable us to develop a quality package for customers, which would include hillwalking, fishing, golfing, sailing, cultural heritage and language heritage.

One good example of co-operation between counties is the St Patrick signature project, which partners Armagh and Down. We should expand that project to include Croagh Patrick in County Mayo. That is already a major, all-year-round attraction, and St Patrick's connection with those counties should be packaged as part of a historical tour. We would not mind if a couple of other counties were added in as appropriate.

I agree with Jim Wells about the importance of creating off-peak and throughout-the-year tourism. That is how to create income and revenue, grow our tourism product and build consistency, all of which help restaurants, shops and hotels.

I am a former chair of the St Patrick's Day carnival in Belfast. We worked hard to ensure that we brought visitors to the city. At the first festival, 90,000 people turned up for the cultural celebrations. That was just for one event, and the same happened the next year. We need to build on that. Anyone who has been to the St Patrick's Day parades

in New York or Washington or any of the other ones in the United States will have seen the economic potential. We need to build on that in Ireland. I welcome the fact that there has been a growth in the number of parades and celebrations throughout the North and South of Ireland. The Dublin St Patrick's Day festival is very popular and brings hundreds and hundreds of visitors into Dublin. Again, we need to piggyback on some of the acts and events that they are doing. They do a four-day event that we can link in with and build on.

The Mourne area is the jewel in the south Down crown, with its natural beauty and unspoilt landscapes. It has enormous potential, so it is important that we work to bring the area back to life. There are also enormous opportunities to be gained from developing political and cultural tourism and indeed, Irish language tourism.

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

Ms Ruane: I welcome the fact that Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is coming to Derry. You can see the economic potential from that.

4.30 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I am pleased to be able to say a few short words on this subject. I congratulate Ms Ritchie on bringing this topic forward. I have an interest as a Member for Strangford, but in truth I am only speaking because my colleague John McCallister, the Ulster Unionist Member for South Down, is en route to Washington for a prayer breakfast.

I contest Mr Wells's assertion that St Patrick belongs to County Down only. St Patrick is not the property of any county or constituency and should not be seen as the property of any political party or tradition. He belongs to all of us. I was pleased to note that, if you follow the tourism trail to its conclusion, you will leave south Down by ferry, make your way across from Strangford to Portaferry and up through the Strangford constituency to visit Greyabbey before moving on to the Movilla Abbey site in Newtownards. I also acknowledge another colleague, Danny Kennedy, the Regional Development Minister, for the work that he is doing to relay sewerage pipes in Greyabbey, which will lead to resurfacing and will make the village that much more attractive to tourists in the future.

Ms Ritchie talked about the 70 million people worldwide who show some allegiance and interest in St Patrick, and I hope that we are looking at imaginative ways to attract them and make them come and visit and find out more. It seems to me that a tourism strategy should be a three-legged stool: the first leg should be our natural resources, of which we have plenty in south Down; the second should be our people and their achievements; and the third should be what Harold Macmillan called "events" and exploiting the unexpected. We have signature projects that cover the first two points: our natural resources, such as the Giant's Causeway, our people, such as St Patrick with the trail, and our achievements, such as the Titanic, the maiden voyage of which we commemorate the centenary of later this year. However, have we covered what Harold Macmillan called "events"? Do we see and seize the opportunities in the unexpected?

I refer to something that a lot of us will have seen on our television screens yesterday: a golf leader board in Abu

Dhabi on which three of the top 15 names had the words Northern Ireland beside them. Three times the flag and the red hand of Ulster were seen flying proudly at that golf tournament. People will wonder how Northern Ireland, which is the size of Connecticut, one of the smallest American states, and has a population similar to that of West Virginia, one of the least populated American states, can achieve so many successes. It must make people wonder, "How do they do it? What is it about Northern Ireland?". There is the opportunity to say, "Come and find out". In Rory McIlroy, Graeme McDowell, Darren Clarke, Gareth Maybin and Michael Hoey — five of our professional golfers on the European Tour — we have admirable ambassadors for Northern Ireland. They can attract tourists into the whole of the country and particularly to south Down, which hosts one of the finest golf courses on the planet: Royal County Down in Newcastle.

I close with a plea to the Minister that she consider commissioning a business case to see whether it would make sense to send a Northern Ireland advocate to the European Tour to follow around with promotional brochures to see whether she can maximise the interest in our golfers, how they do it and why people should come to Northern Ireland to find out what we have. I am sure that the five would be more than happy to support such an initiative, even if it were for only half an hour once a week on tour to sign autographs at a Tourism Ireland event at which we could maximise the potential for Northern Ireland, including south Down.

Mr McCarthy: I thank Margaret Ritchie for bringing this important subject to the House this evening. As a proud County Down man, I support the Adjournment topic on behalf of the Alliance Party. I fully support tourism development right across Northern Ireland and, indeed, across the whole of the island, because St Patrick is acknowledged as the patron saint of our entire island.

I pay tribute to the neighbouring Down District Council, under the fantastic leadership of its chief executive, Mr John Dumigan. He is a Portaferry man. Of course, you would expect nothing less from a man from Portaferry. I praise the council for its excellent provision and support of the Saint Patrick Centre in Downpatrick. It is a wonderful facility, and it depicts the life and times of our patron saint. I also pay tribute to our Tourist Board for its provision of Saint Patrick's Trail. It takes people right across County Down — namely, the Ards peninsula — where visitors can also visit Exploris in Portaferry, which I mention to the Minister on many occasions. They can spend some money in Portaferry and then cross Strangford lough on the ferry into the south of County Down.

Northern Ireland — indeed, the whole of Ireland — is a truly beautiful part of the world. Every effort should be made to develop, in a very sensitive way, what we have to offer, particularly in County Down. I pay tribute to our tourism Minister for her work so far in promoting Northern Ireland as a fantastic tourist destination. Last week, we all spoke of our passion for Strangford lough in the Chamber. There is much potential to further our economy through tourism in County Down. St Patrick can be the focal point in furthering what we all want to see and promote, which is all that is good in County Down.

I remind Members that, on two occasions, I had the privilege of proposing motions to previous Assemblies that St Patrick's Day ought to be a public holiday for everybody. We all agreed; it was unanimous. Unfortunately, however, it had to go across the water for sanction from Her Majesty or someone else in high authority, and that is where it sticks. If the Minister has any sway with people over there, perhaps we can eventually, through the Assembly, ensure that everyone has a day off to celebrate our patron saint.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Margaret Ritchie for bringing the Adjournment topic to the House. It has been listed for a long time, and she has waited for it to be selected. However, she persevered and got it to the Chamber.

The main focus has been on the St Patrick story in south Down. It is based around Downpatrick. There are some fine examples of links to St Patrick, such as Inch Abbey, Struell Wells, St Patrick's grave and Saul church. As Members have outlined, a lot of work has been undertaken on the St Patrick signature project. However, the discussion and brand need to be widened. We need to look at other areas of interest throughout south Down. Down through the years, historians have called Dundrum Bay the holy bay. Some maintain that St Patrick first landed in Ireland at Dundrum Bay in County Down. A number of churches were built around the bay during that period. A trail could be developed to the area's very old churches, such as St Mary's Church at the Ballagh outside Newcastle; Maghera church; churches at Clough, Ballykinler, Tyrella, Rathmullan and Rossglass; and St John's Church.

The new tourism planning policy offers people the opportunity to set up businesses in those small villages and to take them out of the main town centres. Everybody must have an economic opportunity. I see that as one way to provide it. It would also develop a unique brand. Talking of unique brands, I have not heard any mention of the opportunity to develop the St Donard story. Very few people talk about St Donard. However, the highest mountain in the North is named after the saint who lived there. He set up a chapel on top of the mountain. A number of people and followers of his are buried at the top of Slieve Donard. There is an opportunity to look at that story. St Donard was a disciple of St Patrick, and he carried on St Patrick's message. There is a good opportunity to link St Patrick to St Donard and to broaden that appeal. There should at least be interpretative signage to articulate that message. There is also a link to Maghera church, where St Donard's followers set up a church and there are remnants of a round tower. Work in that area would also be useful.

Another tourism product that could be expanded is the story of 1798 and the United Irishmen. That story includes other constituencies. It goes into Strangford and up into Antrim. It offers a great opportunity to build another signature project and develop that tourism product. There is great need for a tourism product in Ballynahinch. We just have to look at what happened in Wexford with regard to the 1798 rebellion. That is its main tourism product. There is nothing to stop linkages being developed to include the battle of Ballynahinch, Saintfield, Betsy Gray and Downpatrick, where Thomas Russell was hanged. We need to look at expanding another link with that story. The two communities can work together on that. It is a common story. It needs to be told from all sides. There is a good opportunity to do that.

Another subject that I studied as part of school projects is the American GIs who were based in south Down. A number of bases and remnants of bases still exist. There is an opportunity to tell that story. GIs were there to train for Normandy and north Africa. Many of them never got home to their loved ones. When people look at their ancestors' involvement in the war, they could see clear linkages with where they trained and could visit buildings where they were stationed. Again, there is an opportunity to tell that story. It is a new product. It is something different in south Down. We should look at that.

There is great scope for food tourism. Members mentioned Strangford, the fine produce of the area and the development of food trails throughout the district. The arboretum in Castlewells is a good example of how the Minister and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development have worked together to develop that product. It offers a good opportunity. We talked about all-year-round tourism. If there is an all-year-round tourism product, it does not matter if it rains. As regards activity tourism, if you go out mountain biking, for example, you do not care if it rains. I must have met 200 people outside Tollymore yesterday. It was lashing rain, but that did not make a difference to them; they still turned up to whatever event they were attending. So, there are great opportunities in that regard as well.

4.45 pm

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

Mr W Clarke: I thank the Member for bringing the issue to the Floor.

Mrs McKeivitt: I am delighted to add my voice to the call for further tourism development in my constituency of South Down. I also extend my thanks to my esteemed colleague Margaret Ritchie for calling for this Adjournment debate.

South Down has much to offer in the way of tourism. Whether visitors seek a holiday centred on relaxing on our beaches, climbing up mountains, fishing, surfing in the sea or cycling along our promenades etc, while enjoying a friendly atmosphere, fantastic restaurants and fabulous accommodation, south Down offers it all. However, one of the most promising tourism incentives that the area has to offer is its captivating history, which the St Patrick and early Christian heritage signature project explores.

St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, has long-established links to the county of Down. It is known that he first landed in the Downpatrick area, his main home in Ireland was in Saul, he prayed at Struell Wells and he is buried on Cathedral Hill in Downpatrick, alongside St Brigid and St Colmcille. Tourists have the opportunity to visit those places and more by participating in the Saint Patrick's trail. They also have the opportunity to learn about his life and legacy by visiting the Saint Patrick Centre, the only place in the world with a permanent exhibit dedicated to St Patrick.

It is obvious that the life and legacy of St Patrick is celebrated not only by the people of Ireland but by millions of people across the world. For proof, you need only turn on the television on 17 March to see clips of thousands of people turning out on the streets of Dublin, New York, Washington and many other cities worldwide to watch the St Patrick's Day parades. I, therefore, view the St Patrick's country and early Christian heritage project as a tourism

theme that has real potential to successfully grow tourism not only in south Down but in the whole of Ireland. That view appears to be shared by the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, given that it has recognised Saint Patrick's Trail in one of the five signature projects, as my colleague Margaret Ritchie said.

It is crucial that we make the most of the tourism opportunity and develop it carefully, especially during this time of economic deprivation. The benefits that can come from an increase in tourism would give a much-needed boost to the economy. Bringing more tourists into the area brings with it the opportunity to create new jobs and benefits for those who provide hotel or B&B accommodation, local retailers, restaurants, pubs and bars etc.

I am delighted that this discussion has taken place today, and I hope that it encourages further talks, plans and strategies to maximise the potential of this marvellous tourism theme. I, therefore, call on the Minister to meet Down District Council, Newry and Mourne District Council and local stakeholders in order to devise a strategy to maximise the number of tourists in the area. We should all do what we can to encourage more people to escape into St Patrick's country for their holidays.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):

I also congratulate the Member, who we all know is passionate about the issue, on securing today's Adjournment debate, particularly at such an important and exciting time for tourism in Northern Ireland. As we heard from all Members who spoke, the south Down area is home to some of Northern Ireland's most beautiful and diverse landscapes. It is unique in so far as it is home to two signature projects. I could make the remark, "Are you not very fortunate? Some of us do not have one", but, of course, that would be harping back to an old argument of mine, before I was tourism Minister, with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Mr Clarke said that he feels that 1798 has the potential to be a signature project. I will say this to Mr Clarke: I have been there on many, many occasions, and I do not think that we will change the number of signature projects at this stage. However, we have moved on and are now looking at nine destinations across Northern Ireland in the new draft tourism plan, and I hope that we can take in many of the items that have been mentioned here today. The debate has been very informative, and I thank Members for all the points they made.

The Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland have made extensive use of the Mournes and St Patrick signature projects in their marketing campaigns. Therefore, all that south Down tourism has to offer is displayed on that global platform, and it is right that that should be the case. As the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic readily acknowledged, there has been capital investment in south Down in support of the Mournes and St Patrick signature projects. I will not go through all the letters of offer and all the things that have happened. Suffice it to say that there has been significant capital expenditure. However, I take Mr Wells's point that it is not just about capital expenditure but about sustainability in the longer term. That is the issue that needs to be looked at in all our signature projects right across the tourism agenda from 2012 into 2013.

Work is under way to implement the white-on-brown tourist signage for the Mourne coastal route, and work continues in parallel to develop and improve various amenity sites and viewpoints along the route. The Mourne have been the subject of a number of investments, but it is not just for my Department to encourage more tourists to visit the Mourne in particular. When I was in the Department of the Environment, we launched a scheme to work with local highland farmers there to improve paths and gates, and the current Minister of the Environment is very pleased at the progress that has been made. Therefore, we are working across government. I as tourism Minister, DARD with the arboretum and DOE with the Mourne must work together to get the maximum out of our tourism potential.

Work continues on developing and upgrading the various St Patrick and Christian heritage sites along the Saint Patrick's Trail, which Mr Nesbitt rightly pointed out runs from Bangor to Armagh. Therefore, it is quite a long trail. I am delighted to report that the white-on-brown tourist signage for the trail is complete and in place, and that will assist people who are motoring around the area to follow the trail in its totality. Saint Patrick's Trail offers visitors a tremendous opportunity to see what south Down and neighbouring areas have to offer. To encourage visitors to get out and explore more, the Tourist Board is funding the installation of a bespoke interpretation panel at 15 key sites along Saint Patrick's Trail. It will provide that local information, as well as encouraging visitors to explore further along the trail. I found it interesting that Mr Clarke referred to St Donard, because that links the two signature projects very nicely in the south Down area, the Mourne and Saint Patrick's Trail.

With each project coming to fruition — not just the Mourne and St Patrick signature projects but the Titanic, Giant's Causeway and Walled City signature projects — I want to see all destinations across Northern Ireland achieve their potential, especially as we commence 2012, which is a year of commemorations and celebrations. In another place, the Minister of State, Hugo Swire, got it right last week when he said:

"if you are not in Northern Ireland this year, frankly, you are no one."

I thought that that was very well put by the Minister of State. Therefore, we are hoping that all the tourists who come to Northern Ireland will be greeted by the co-operative approach that Ms Ritchie referred to, in so far as we work together to promote the different areas, whether that be done at MP level, council level, government level, Tourist Board level or Tourism Ireland level. Everybody has to work in partnership to get the most out of each area.

As I said, from the point of view of the Executive, I do not act alone. There have been many important contributions by other Departments and their agencies, whether that be opening forest parks to visitors through DARD, providing our workforce with suitable tourism skills through DEL or renewing our towns and villages through DSD. Ms Ritchie also mentioned that.

Mr Wells, who, I understand, had to leave, made the point that, when he worked for it, the National Trust found it difficult to keep its properties sustainable during the winter months. I declare an interest as a member of the National Trust, and I think that it has worked well to try to keep its

houses and properties sustainable throughout the year. I have seen the way in which it has done that with its Halloween celebrations at Castle Ward and its Christmas celebrations at many of its properties. The key is that we have revenue-raising ideas throughout the year. We will work with each of the providers to assist them in providing a tourism offering throughout the year and not just in the peak seasons.

As we heard, Down District Council has been proactive in south Down and has worked with Newry and Mourne District Council and Ards Borough Council to develop destination area plans for the Mourne and Strangford respectively. All the councils have in place a draft destination management action plan to support the delivery of the area plans. Each council has also established a destination forum, comprising a mix of public and private sector tourism bodies and businesses. I want to commend them for the work that they are doing in their areas. I hope that we will be able to continue to work with them through the Tourist Board.

While we have invested significant capital and time in the development of south Down through the St Patrick's and Mourne projects, there is much more that we can all do. We can all be advocates for tourism in our own area. The Members who have contributed to the debate have provided many good reasons why people would want to visit the south Down area.

Ms Ruane made a point about accommodation in the south Down area. An accommodation needs study is ongoing and will hopefully be finalised next month. That will help to identify accommodation needs not only in south Down but across Northern Ireland. I am sure that we all look forward to seeing what that brings forward.

I think that the tenuous-link-of-the-day prize should go to Mr Nesbitt for mentioning sewerage pipes and tourism in the same breath. Well done, Mike. We listened with interest to his proposal about having a Northern Ireland advocate. All the golfers are the most tremendous advocates and ambassadors for the Northern Ireland tourism offering, and we will continue to work with and support them in doing that for us. We will, of course, look at any ideas that Mr Nesbitt brings forward.

I say again that this has been a good and positive debate. I continue to urge everyone with an interest in tourism in south Down to help us, along with the private sector, to improve the visitor experience and to develop the unique stories that we have heard so much about this afternoon. Thank you very much.

Adjourned at 4.57 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 January 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I have been notified by the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Tom Elliott, that Mr David McNarry has been replaced as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. Mr Elliott has nominated Mr Mike Nesbitt to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education, and Mr Nesbitt has accepted the appointment. I am satisfied that the correspondence that I received meets the requirements of Standing Orders, and, therefore, I confirm Mr Mike Nesbitt as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education with effect from 31 January 2012.

Ministerial Statement

Royal Jubilee Maternity Service, Belfast: Neonatal Unit

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I apologise to you, Mr Speaker, and the House, that the statement was not in Members' pigeonholes one hour beforehand. We were still working on it, to be honest, because things continue to move on this subject.

I welcome the opportunity to update the Assembly on pseudomonas in neonatal units and the actions that are being taken to protect babies and to address the problem. No one could fail to be distressed by the deaths of the three babies in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service in Belfast and the death of the baby in Altnagelvin Area Hospital. I cannot even begin to imagine, let alone put into words, the heartache that the parents of those babies have suffered and will continue to suffer. I have written to the parents of each of the babies who died to express my deepest condolences. I have also spoken to those parents whom it has been possible to contact. The trusts have facilitated me in sending those letters, and I will respect each family's choice as to whether they wish to meet me. I know that all Members will wish to be respectful and mindful of the families at this time of loss.

The safety of babies is my first priority, so that is where I will begin. Last week, I reported that there were a total of seven babies associated with the outbreak in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service in Belfast. This week, I can report that that number is unchanged. Sadly, three of the babies died in the Royal's neonatal unit. One baby recovered from pseudomonas but died later from unrelated causes. The remaining three babies are progressing well.

There have been no new cases of pseudomonas infection in the Royal or, indeed, in any of our other neonatal units in the past week. Last week, I reported that six babies who had been associated with the Royal had been colonised but had no signs of infection. A further baby tested positive a few days later, but the number has remained at seven since then. Six babies who have no association with the Royal have been colonised with pseudomonas: two in Altnagelvin, three in Craigavon and one in Antrim.

It is too early to say that the outbreak in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service is over. However, I can assure you that every possible action is being taken to protect those vulnerable babies. I want to emphasise again that the pseudomonas infections in the Royal and Altnagelvin were

different strains. Those are two separate incidents, and there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that a baby from Altnagelvin could have introduced pseudomonas infection to the Royal.

Members will also be aware that pseudomonas has been found in a small number of water outlets in the neonatal intensive care unit of the Ulster Hospital. It is important to stress that all babies in the unit have been tested, indeed twice. The results indicate that no baby has tested positive for pseudomonas; no babies have been colonised or have active pseudomonas infection in the Ulster Hospital. Last week, I explained to Members that pseudomonas is a micro-organism that is found in many natural environments, including soil and water. There are many different types and strains of pseudomonas, and specialist tests are required to distinguish those. Pseudomonas can be found in sinks, taps and water systems, and it is difficult to eradicate it completely and permanently. Because pseudomonas is in the environment, if we start to look for it, we will find it. That is what is happening at present. As each of the units has tested water coming from taps, a small number of those samples has returned positive results. This is not a simple, straightforward situation, and there is no quick fix.

My first priority is to ensure the safety of all babies in our neonatal units, and I must be absolutely certain that whatever we do is the right thing to do; it must be based on the best available science. Yes, we can test babies for pseudomonas, and we can test water and replace taps, but we are in relatively unknown territory with pseudomonas. There is no national guidance sitting on a shelf waiting to be used. For that reason, right from the start, we have been learning from the experience in Altnagelvin. We have been learning from the Royal, and we have been in constant dialogue with the national experts in the Health Protection Agency to ensure that whatever steps we take are the right steps and that we do not create greater risks for the babies by doing the wrong thing.

You will see that Northern Ireland is breaking new ground in the context of the UK, and Ireland, in responding systematically to the situation. We are providing ongoing care for the babies and support for the parents. At the same time, we are investigating the outbreaks and developing and implementing control measures while ensuring that babies continue to have access to the full range of highly specialist medical and nursing care that they require. All that work has resulted in the publication of interim guidance for trusts in Northern Ireland, drawing on the best scientific evidence and expert advice that is available to us at this time.

Let me remind the Assembly what we are doing. As a precautionary measure, there will be no contact between tap water and babies while the taps and water systems are being checked; only sterile water will come into contact with babies. That means that even if pseudomonas bacteria are in the tap water, they cannot reach the babies. As a further protection, staff will use a special hand rub after they have washed and dried their hands, before they touch the babies. Parents who visit the babies will also need to take those steps. That approach has already been adopted in Altnagelvin and implemented in the unit in the Royal, and it has now been extended to all other units caring for those very vulnerable babies.

Those crucial steps are protecting the babies in those units, and that gives time for estate staff, infection control experts, microbiologists and public health experts to continue the painstaking task of piecing together all the evidence and information to track down the pseudomonas bacteria, wherever it is, and seek to eradicate it. Obviously, units must remain open to care for babies, so that approach protects the babies while ensuring that they continue to have access to all the specialist care that they need.

As I informed you last week, pseudomonas has been found in samples from taps. As a precautionary measure, we are changing every tap on every clinical hand washing basin in every neonatal unit in Northern Ireland. Water samples from those taps will also be tested as part of the investigation. Once the new taps are in place, water from them will be tested for seven days and then at regular intervals. Advice has also been issued on the correct process for cleaning taps to avoid contamination, based on the advice of the Health Protection Agency (HPA).

There is no single, simple, quick fix for this situation. Although we need to move swiftly and decisively, we must be sure to do the right things. I am leaving no stone unturned in my quest to reduce the risk of pseudomonas infection in neonatal units. That is what parents and the public expect, and I have directed that that will continue to be our approach.

I want to elaborate on the interim guidance that has been developed in Northern Ireland. My Chief Medical Officer (CMO) has already shared that guidance with all Chief Medical Officers across the UK and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland. They are showing considerable interest in learning from our recent experience in Northern Ireland, as it may have implications for their health services. Outbreaks of pseudomonas have occurred in some intensive care facilities around the world, as patients in such facilities are frequently immunocompromised. The causes of those outbreaks have not all been the same. They have included various medical devices and environmental reservoirs, such as antiseptic solutions, ventilator apparatus, artificial fingernails and water.

There were a number of outbreaks in English and Welsh hospitals in the summer of 2010. In response, all Departments of Health in the UK issued guidance on best practice on the management of infection risks associated with water sources in general. At that time, an expert group was tasked with developing detailed national guidance specifically on pseudomonas. That work is nearing completion, and I have asked my Chief Medical Officer to take action on this. He has already written to the CMO in England to stress the need to expedite the publication of the national guidance, and I am told that that is expected in the near future. All four CMOs will hold a teleconference later today to discuss the issue.

In addition, the chair of the advisory group on antimicrobial resistance and healthcare-acquired infection has been asked to take this forward at UK level. The question of pseudomonas is on the agenda for the next meeting of the group, which will take place on Thursday of this week. My Department will be represented at that meeting to contribute to the discussion, share our experience and bring back the expert views. There is significant scientific interest in what has happened in our neonatal units and in the solutions that

we are developing to deal with the problem. We also have a responsibility to inform approaches elsewhere.

I make it absolutely clear that there was no delay on the part of my Department and the wider service in responding and managing the situation appropriately. The Department of Health received notification from the Western Health and Social Care Trust of a suspected incident of pseudomonas infection on 13 December 2011. A tap was also identified as positive for pseudomonas the following day. At that stage, no information was available to establish definitively whether any of the strains were the same. Despite that, the Department decided to proactively issue a further letter as a precautionary step, rather than await any results confirming a link. Additional specialised test results, which identified that the samples from the taps and from some of the babies were of the same strain, were not available until after that letter was issued. Given the possible implications, the Department judged it to be important to reinforce and reiterate previous advice, which it did.

Although it is important to act quickly, the Department must ensure that it has sufficient and accurate information to give the correct advice on the appropriate actions to take. It is not always apparent what has caused the problem in infectious disease incidents such as these. Detailed investigative work is required to piece together all the information about the incident. We cannot assume. We cannot afford to jump to the wrong conclusion, leaving the underlying cause unaddressed and babies still exposed to risk. Our responsibility is to strike the correct balance by acting quickly yet doing the right thing. The incident was an evolving situation, with the Department working closely with the trust, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB).

The important message from the guidance for all the trusts was to highlight the risk of pseudomonas infection and the consequences for any clinical area in which there are immunocompromised or debilitated patients. Professional medical and environmental health advice and guidance is regularly issued to the health service for its awareness and action. I expect such guidance issued from my Department to be treated with the utmost seriousness. Such guidance must be authoritative, because we need the HSCB to respond to it properly. I believe that the Assembly can rely on the professional team in the Department to make expert judgements on the guidance that it issues, because, as with this case, it is often managing a number of complex risks where any action can have unintended and undesired consequences. However, I am not content to just assume that action was taken. I have asked each of the trusts to give an account of the action taken in response to the CMO's guidance.

10.45 am

In summary, all five trusts took a range of actions following the initial letter issued in September 2010 and the subsequent letter from health estates in July 2011. The letter issued by the CMO on 22 December reinforced the advice and guidance in the previous letters. I will return to that matter later in my statement. Let me assure Members that although my immediate priority is to keep the current outbreak under control and to take all necessary precautionary steps to keep those babies safe, a second vital strand of work must now begin.

I am very conscious of the grief of parents who have lost babies but I also know that they want answers. I know that Members of the Assembly are also seeking answers and that everyone who works in the health service needs answers. I am also only too aware of the distress of staff and the sense of responsibility that they must be feeling when tragic events such as this happen. So, although I recognise that it is a complex situation, I need to know what happened, why it happened and what we need to do to minimise the risk of it happening again.

We have a responsibility to learn from this tragedy and to share that learning across the UK and beyond. We owe it to the parents and to the memory of the babies who died. I have given that undertaking to the parents. Members, I give this undertaking to you: be in no doubt that I am absolutely determined to inquire into all the circumstances of the tragedy. I resolve to investigate and understand what happened and I will not be deflected from achieving that, because it is only by doing so that we can prevent it happening again.

I have also written to the chief executive of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) requesting that the organisation assists me to develop and facilitate a full, rigorous and independent investigation and review into those incidents and their tragic consequences. The investigation will be chaired by Professor Patricia Ann Troop CBE, former chief executive of the Health Protection Agency. Professor Troop has a breadth of experience across the health service, including health protection, at both national and international levels. Professor Troop will be assisted by a team to include the full range of relevant expertise required. The terms of reference, which I will determine, will include a thorough investigation into the role of my Department and each of the HSC organisations. Given the gravity of what happened, my priority is to ensure that the review is thorough and rigorous but also makes recommendations on any immediate actions that we need to take. I want an interim report by the end of March so that urgent actions can be taken.

However, I am not content to leave it there. I have asked that the RQIA also investigates the experiences of the families of the babies who died and those who have been affected in other ways. That is, understandably, a difficult and sensitive undertaking, which cannot be rushed. That is why I have separated the investigation into two parts. It must not only provide me with urgent answers but be extensive and encompass all relevant aspects of the incident. I assure Members that we are determined to be thorough, challenging and robust. I have asked for the final report no more than eight weeks after the interim report.

We know that pseudomonas is a very difficult organism to eradicate completely and permanently. We know that it is not the only potential threat to those vulnerable babies in neonatal units. Therefore, I have directed the RQIA to develop, with expert public health input from the PHA, a range of specialised audit tools. Those will provide independent assurance to the public and to me, as Minister, of the standards of infection prevention control within neonatal units and other augmented care settings. That audit tool will provide self-assessment standards for trusts. The RQIA will provide the necessary independent assurance that those are being fully followed and implemented.

I must be assured that all our neonatal units are operating to the very highest standards. I want to acknowledge the excellent work that saves the lives of hundreds of babies each year. Thankfully, incidents such as the pseudomonas outbreaks are uncommon. Nevertheless, I need the assurance that everything that can be done is being done to ensure that those units are functioning to the highest possible standard. The RQIA will provide that independent assurance.

That leads me to my next point, and it is an important one. Many pregnant women and their families are understandably concerned and anxious at this time, and I want to assure them that our maternity hospitals and neonatal units continue to provide a safe and effective service, despite the practical challenges that they face. The quality and safety of the care that women and their babies will receive remain the overriding priority.

The neonatal network continues to provide safe high-quality neonatal services for all babies who require it, with additional precautions in place at the moment to deal with any risks from pseudomonas. All trusts continue to work together to ensure that the neonatal unit capacity in Northern Ireland is maintained.

Well-established arrangements are in place to ensure that babies have access to the level of neonatal care that they require. As would be routine in Northern Ireland and across the UK, babies may have to be transferred between units from time to time. Indications are that we have sufficient cots in Northern Ireland to cope with demand. Last week in the Assembly, I stated that we have 105 cots. However, on the basis of more up-to-date information, I can confirm that the number is actually 106. Very occasionally, babies may have to be transferred to units outside Northern Ireland. No babies requiring neonatal care have had to leave the Province over the past two weeks since the outbreak in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service.

I also want to reassure women that the delivery wards and all other services at the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service are operating as normal. Expectant mothers should attend their appointments as scheduled, and that applies to all our maternity hospitals in Northern Ireland.

I acknowledge that this is also a difficult time for staff in the health sector. I pay tribute to all staff, not just medical and nursing staff, but estates staff, laboratory staff, cleaners and others for their continued dedication and commitment in caring for babies and for working tirelessly to investigate the problem and to take the proper action. In addition, I recognise the work of the Public Health Agency to date in providing expert health protection advice and professional service delivery advice working closely with the Health and Social Care Board as they ensure that neonatal services remain available for babies.

I thank the chief executive of the Health Protection Agency in England for establishing an incident team and for providing us with access to all the necessary expert advice required in this difficult situation. This is highly specialised expertise that we could not hope to replicate in Northern Ireland, and my Department and Public Health Agency colleagues are indebted to them for their support.

Continuation of this response is essential, and my Department, the Public Health Agency, the trusts, the HSC Board and the Ambulance Service have been working and

continue to work very closely to ensure safe continuity of care for babies, support for their parents and families, ongoing management of this outbreak and that the public are kept fully informed.

This remains a complex and dynamic situation. I can assure you that everything that needs to be done is being done, and I am determined to make sure that our neonatal units are the safest they can be and that the babies are protected. I reiterate that safeguards are in place to protect babies. As a precautionary step, any potential risk as a result of contamination of taps and water outlets is being addressed.

Mr Speaker, I commend the statement to you. It reflects the situation as it is today, and further updates will be issued as and when there is any change.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank the Minister for his statement and note that this is the third time within a week that he has come before the Assembly to keep Members up to date with developments on this very serious issue. I also note that he has been invited to come before the Health Committee to give a more detailed update to members on the issue.

I welcome the Minister's confirmation that the precautionary steps that are being taken at the Royal will extend to all neonatal units in Northern Ireland so there will be equality of treatment and precautions will be equally strenuous throughout the Province. However, he will be aware that there have been calls for a public inquiry, particularly from the parents of one of the babies who very sadly died. The Minister has opted for an independent investigation. Will he tell the House why he has opted for that rather than a full-blown public inquiry?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. There have been calls for a public inquiry from at least one of the families, some Members and some people in the press. I realise that there is huge public concern at this time and that people want answers. I believe that an independent investigation and review will provide me with the urgent answers that I require. As I stated, I have asked the chief executive of the RQIA to assist me in developing and facilitating a full, rigorous and independent investigation of and review into the incidents. However, a public inquiry in and of itself under the Inquiries Act 2005 would not be the quickest or most effective way of getting the answers.

We are engaged in a public inquiry into hyponatraemia, which was requested in 2005. The hearings will start this year, and the report will come back next year. We will get the answers eight years after the inquiry was first requested and 18 years after the first child died as a result of hyponatraemia. I believe that we will get the answers, and I do not believe that it will be a whitewash in any shape or form.

I cannot afford to wait for years to get answers in this instance: I need to get answers in months, at the most. Therefore, bringing forward people who are truly independent of the process here and who have absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the trusts, HSC or anything else and who also have the specialist expertise is the best way of drilling down to get to those answers. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating. This is not about covering up anything: it is about getting quick answers and solutions to the problems that we face.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I pass on the apologies of the Chair of the Health Committee, who has broken her leg and is getting tests. I know that she has a keen interest in the matter.

Along with the Deputy Chair, I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important that we are kept up to date with the ongoing incidents and changes in this very important and emotional issue and that we get the timeline. There was the incident in Altnagelvin, which was followed by the Department's letter. How does the Minister believe that, collectively, the trusts were proactive following the letter from the Department, given some of the statements that were made yesterday about the Ulster Hospital? I agree with the Minister that it is important to find out what happened and to learn from the tragic deaths that we witnessed. The Minister said in his statement that he is not content to just assume that action was taken.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to her question.

Ms S Ramsey: Does he understand that parents feel, rightly or wrongly, that there is a need for a public inquiry, given the recent incidents we had with the Western Trust and the Belfast Trust?

Mr Poots: To be perfectly honest, Mr Speaker, at this stage, I am not convinced that the trusts responded quickly enough. That is why I am going down this route and why I will have an independent investigation. It will be an independent investigation. Irrespective of how we get them, we will get the answers, and we will make them public.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his ongoing statements. Will he clarify how the neonatal units across Northern Ireland are coping with the demand placed upon them? Importantly, will he detail his relationships with the Departments of Health in other parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland in helping to meet those demands? It has been brought to my attention that one of a set of twins was sent to Dublin recently. Perhaps he could detail whether the crucial steps that he has outlined in his statement will be taken for all babies from Northern Ireland across all the units in the UK and the Republic of Ireland?

11.00 am

Mr Poots: Neonatal units in Northern Ireland operate as a network; therefore, transfers within it take place regularly. When it comes to the use of facilities outside Northern Ireland, we have protocols and relationships that allow that to happen and which allow us to receive babies when other people are in crisis or difficulties. At this stage, the system is coping well with the demands on it. However, some of the things that some people suggest we do would lead inevitably to neonatal units being closed; that would put babies lives at risk in a way that we have not seen heretofore. It is important that our response provides the widest possible care to those vulnerable babies who are in very difficult situations.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. There have been very public calls for a public inquiry, although the Minister has chosen not to go down that road. I fully accept the explanation that he gave to Mr Wells. Can he assure the House that Professor Troop, who is chairing the independent inquiry, will have the same authority, access and powers of investigation that somebody carrying out a full public inquiry would have?

Mr Poots: Professor Troop will report directly to me; she will be supported by the independent team, and I will determine her terms of reference. She will have full access to all trust records, and if there is any indication that anything is being held back, I will personally intervene. Nothing can be withheld from Professor Troop that would allow her to collect and analyse the relevant information and draw her conclusions about what happened, whether the response was quick enough and whether it was the right response. If we identify flaws, failings or problems, let us get them out on the table and make them public at the earliest possible date: I am not interested in hiding the truth from the public.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. I am very grateful for his last comment, because I had hoped that the inquiry would be a searching, in-depth investigation with no stone left unturned to get to the truth. That is what we are after: the truth.

The Minister said that the Department of Health received notification from the Western Health and Social Care Trust of a suspected incident of pseudomonas infection on 13 December 2011 and that:

"A tap was also identified as positive".

Why on earth, when the tap had been identified as positive, was there such a delay? Why could the taps not have been changed in all the neonatal units from that very date? I would have thought that that would have prevented the tragedy that has unfolded in the hospitals.

Mr Poots: You mention the timing of the testing of taps. There are challenges. Members are asking, as am I, why the taps were not tested or changed. I understand that the Ulster Hospital tested recently, and, fortunately, no babies in that unit have pseudomonas or are carrying it on their skin. Nonetheless, the taps were not tested as early as possible. We are now on top of the situation, but that is a question that will be investigated very closely by the investigative team. That is one issue on which we want very clear answers.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his update today. In your statement you said that:

"The neonatal network continues to provide safe ... quality ... services ... with additional precautions in place".

Can the Minister tell me what is being done by the trust to alleviate the fears of expectant mothers?

Mr Poots: The trusts have been talking to the parents throughout the process. What has been done in the facilities themselves? The taps have been changed in all the facilities. No tap water is being used in direct contact with the babies, only sterile water. Different sanitising equipment has been introduced for hand-washing by staff that is, apparently, even more effective in reducing the possibility of cross-infection. All those steps have been taken in conjunction with talking to parents and explaining to them what the best outcomes might be in their babies' care.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. In it, you state:

"we are changing every tap on every clinical hand washing basin in every neonatal unit"

here in the North. In a question on the statement that you made last week, I asked whether you would consider checking and changing the taps in high-dependency intensive care units where patients may be immunocompromised. Has that still to be considered?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question.

The guidance, released by the Department in September 2010 and reinforced in July and December 2011, applies to all such units. Any further steps will be taken on an individual risk-based approach, as advised by the PHA, based on expert advice from the Health Protection Agency in England. A trust would be very foolish not to take that advice and not to respond to a risk that it identifies in association with people who are immunocompromised. It must ensure that such people are not put at further risk.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement, and we commend him for his actions to date on this critical issue. What evidence is there that the Department's estates management has an effective quality-management system in place to show ongoing monitoring and replenishment of internal water systems?

Mr Poots: We have asked the RQIA to do a specific piece of work on the audit tool that has been developed for the purposes of hygiene inspection. It was not designed for units that provide augmented care. I have asked the RQIA to develop a range of specialist audit tools to assess standards of hygiene and infection control in augmented care settings. The original infection-prevention hygiene inspections of the Royal Jubilee Maternity Services were conducted as part of the RQIA of intra-partem care in 2009, which examined care and delivery units across all five trusts and the 10 maternity delivery units in Northern Ireland. In areas where we identified specific concerns in relation to infection-prevention hygiene, we carried out a re-audit in 2010. The RQIA considers that clinical areas such as neonatal units and theatres require a specialist, specific audit tool and approach to inspection.

At present, the RQIA is considering how best to develop a specific audit tool for use in intensive care settings, such as neonatal units. The audit tool will be used by trusts for self-assessment against the standard sets. The RQIA will provide the necessary independent assurance that those are being fully followed and implemented. The trusts' estates departments also monitor their water distribution systems on a regular basis, in accordance with water quality-control protocols, and that is based on current legislative requirements.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his thorough statement. I am slightly concerned by what seems to be a lack of urgency in this, if I follow Mr Brady's question. Are we really looking properly at all the areas outside neonatal care where the same risks may appear to those who have weak immune systems? We should be dealing with them on a much quicker basis.

Mr Poots: It is important that action is taken quickly. It is also important that we have sufficient and accurate information in order that we can give correct advice on appropriate actions. In infectious disease incidents, what has caused the problem is not always immediately apparent. Investigations into pseudomonas outbreaks in intensive care facilities across the world have revealed a range of causes,

including various medical devices and environmental reservoirs, in addition to water. In any outbreak, detailed investigative work is required to piece together information about the circumstances and nature of the incident.

We must not jump to the wrong conclusion. However, given the receipt of three notifications and a letter from the Chief Medical Officer advising the trusts of a particular area of concern and that responses and actions need to be taken on that, it is not to be taken lightly. It is very serious. The trusts know full well the situation that we are encountering as a result of the pseudomonas outbreak in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Service. It would be very foolish to ignore that in relation to other units where people are immunocompromised.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin agus as na freagraí a thug sé dúinn go dtí seo. I acknowledge the Minister's statement and his subsequent answers. Last Tuesday, I acknowledged the Minister's role in what he has described as a very complex and dynamic situation. I welcome his stance this morning in acting as a guarantor that this will be a proper and thorough investigation and that all the flaws and everything else that have to be brought to the surface will be.

It is difficult to make any observation about the clinical aspect; you have to allow experts to review that. However, I hope that, at the end of this review, the Minister will be in a position to inform the House and the wider public of what administrative steps that should have been taken were not taken. I have in mind the gap between pseudomonas being found responsible for the death of the child in Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the issuing of the letter on 22 December and the contents of that letter. Are those the types of issues that the Minister would like to see coming to the surface?

Mr Poots: All the issues need to be dealt with, including the issue that the Member raised. I should say that, while the letter itself did not mention that a baby had died in Altnagelvin, it was well known within the trusts that that was the case. The other trusts were not acting in the dark. When they received the letter from the Chief Medical Officer, they were well aware that a baby had died from pseudomonas in Altnagelvin Area Hospital. It should not have been the case that trusts did not respond or made a slack response on the basis of the letter from the Chief Medical Officer. It was the third letter on the issue in less than two years. Clearly, there should have been a degree of urgency in how trusts responded to such a letter.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for his statement. There is absolutely no doubt that the families who have been so sadly bereaved as a result of the deaths of the little babies have the support and solidarity of the entire Chamber and the wider community.

In your statement, Minister, you said that you have asked each of the trusts to give an account of the action taken in response to the Chief Medical Officer's guidance. In summary, all trusts took a range of actions following the initial letter issued in September 2010 and the subsequent letter from the health estates in July 2011. Minister, can you confirm to the House that you or the Department have in your possession any reports from each of the five trusts

in relation to the actions that they took as far back as 2010 and the middle of last year?

Mr Poots: Key advice was given to the trusts at the time, and we have asked the trusts for their response to that. They have been liaising with the Chief Medical Officer and his team on the actions that have been taken. That will all be part of the report. Identifying what exactly the trusts' responses were and whether those actions were appropriate, prompt, timely and went as far as they should have are all things that will be tested. How quickly did the trusts test the water? How quickly, for example, were taps replaced where a problem was identified? Did tap water continue to be used on babies after it was identified that there was a problem with it, and so forth?

11.15 am

The trusts will be questioned about all those matters, which will be fully investigated in our efforts to ensure that we get to and identify the truth, because the parents of the children in particular deserve the truth. If we do not get to the point where we know, as far as possible, what happened that led to the pseudomonas outbreak, we are failing babies and other immunocompromised people in the future.

Mr Givan: The Minister will be well aware that a significant number of mothers from my constituency use the Ulster Hospital because of the removal of the obstetrics unit from Lagan Valley Hospital. I welcome the all-clear that has been given to the neonatal unit there. Can the Minister assure those mothers who are expecting children that the Ulster Hospital is able to provide full services and that there is sufficient capacity there? Can he further elaborate on how challenging dealing with this issue has been, given the absence of UK guidelines?

Mr Poots: In response to the latter part of the question, dealing with the issue has been very difficult. Obviously, the UK has been working on developing guidelines for just over a year. Experts tend to take their time, because whenever they give advice, they want it to be absolutely bulletproof. That is understandable. I expect that advice to come forward shortly. Nonetheless, its absence has made it more difficult for us, but I acknowledged in my statement the support that was received from the Health Protection Agency, which has a pool of expertise that we do not have, or could not expect to have, in Northern Ireland. The agency has been particularly helpful in assisting us with this difficult issue.

Pseudomonas microorganisms were identified in some taps in the Ulster Hospital more recently. The children in that unit have been swabbed not once but twice, and no babies have either the infection or any *pseudomonas* on their skin. So, no babies in that unit are colonised. As a precaution, only sterile water will be used in the unit until the report is concluded and makes recommendations. There will also be extra hand sanitisation to ensure that any potential for infection to be passed is eliminated.

Mr Allister: We now know that, on 13 December, the Department knew about the suspected outbreak in Londonderry and about the infected tap the next day. However, it took until 22 December for a letter to issue. Why was there that eight- or nine-day delay? When that letter got to the Royal, when was it first acted upon in any respect? When was the Minister himself first acquainted with the issues touching on this evolving situation?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. With regard to the incident in Londonderry and what was done to alert others to the risk, the Department of Health received a notification from the Western Health and Social Care Trust of a suspected incident of *pseudomonas* infection on 13 November. A tap was also identified as positive for *pseudomonas* the following day. No information was available at that stage to establish definitively whether any of the strains were the same. So, some time was taken in between to identify that.

On 22 November, the Chief Medical Officer and the chief estates officer wrote a further joint letter to all the trusts' chief executives, medical directors and directors of nursing, infection, prevention and control, as well as to chief executives of the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency, to highlight water sources and potential infection risk to parents and to reinforce earlier important messages about infection control.

The additional specialised tests, which identified that the strain in the samples taken from the tap in Altnagelvin was the same as the one in the samples taken from some of the babies, were not available until after the letter was issued. Given the possible implications, the Departments and the Chief Medical Officer judged that it was important to reinforce and reiterate the previous advice in advance of receiving the definitive results from the laboratory. So, a clear and specific letter could not be issued until the Department was clear about what had happened. It is important to act correctly, with the appropriate accurate information, rather than act hastily.

Again, those things will be tested in the investigation. However, the Chief Medical Officer was in a difficult situation. He had to inform other trusts without the full and adequate information, because on 14 December the contamination was only suspected and had not been proven. The Member comes from a background in which things need to be proven and people need to have their doubts removed before they arrive at conclusions.

Ms Lewis: I welcome the Minister's statement, which updated the House on the issue. Is the outbreak a result of cuts in health spending?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question.

All trusts are aware that their first statutory duty is to provide a high-quality and safe service. No financial challenge would excuse a lapse in good practice on health protection. Clear standards of cleaning are required in units, such as neonatal units. Those standards have not been compromised. The cause of the outbreak will be investigated further, but our understanding is as I set out in my statement.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he dealt with a very difficult subject very sensitively. I send my condolences to the bereaved families. I congratulate the Minister for referring to the staff, who I am sure have been very distressed by the whole incident; it was the right and proper thing to do.

Is there any research or evidence that other groups that are at risk from such outbreaks? Will he reassure us that each of the affected hospitals will be conducting an infection control audit as a matter of course?

Mr Poots: I informed the House last week that pseudomonas is something that is carried quite widely; as many as 10% of us could be carrying it on our skin. Therefore, it is very common in our environment and atmosphere.

There is a whole series of at-risk groups made up of people who are immunocompromised, which can include people in burns units, intensive care units, paediatric intensive care units and those who have received substantial amounts of treatment for cancer. All those whose immune systems have been compromised are much more likely to be subject to infection from pseudomonas. Between 80 and 90 people per annum are infected by pseudomonas each year.

It is quite unusual for the infection to happen in our younger children; in most previous years, the number of cases has been in single figures. However, there are many other areas in which pseudomonas can infect people.

The letters have been sent out, and all of the trusts are aware of the risks posed by the infection to many people in the community.

Mr Speaker: That ends the questions on the Health Minister's statement. I ask the House to take its ease before we move on to the next item of business.

Executive Committee Business

Pensions Bill: Second Stage

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 3/11-15] be agreed.

Members are aware that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and I are required under section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to seek to secure single systems of social security across the United Kingdom. Members are also aware that sound economic imperatives underpin the policy of parity, not least the special funding arrangements that allow us to run our social security system in Northern Ireland. Those are predicated on the maintenance of parity. The Pensions Bill is, therefore, a parity measure.

The Pensions Act 2011 introduced a number of changes to state and private pension provision in Great Britain. This Bill makes corresponding provision for Northern Ireland. A number of provisions in the 2011 Act will not be replicated, as they extend directly to Northern Ireland. They relate to the financial assistance scheme and judicial pensions. The Executive and the Committee endorsed a proposal for a legislative consent motion on those measures at meetings on 10 March 2011, and the Assembly approved the motion on 21 March 2011. The Northern Ireland Bill contains measures relating to the state pension, automatic enrolment into workplace pensions, indexation and revaluation of occupational pension schemes, pension compensation and the operation of the pension protection fund.

Under existing legislation, the state pension age for women is to equalise with men's at 65 by April 2020 and then increase for men and women to 66 by April 2026. Official projections of average life expectancy have been revised upwards since those changes were legislated for. Projections that were made in 2008 by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicate that men and women who reach the age of 66 in 2026 are expected to live, on average, one and a half years longer than was projected when the current timetable was set. The Westminster Government announced a review and, in June 2010, issued in Britain the paper, 'When should the pension age increase to 66?: A Call for Evidence'. My Department issued it here, and we received two responses, including one from the previous Committee.

The Government's response was published in November 2010 in the command paper, 'A sustainable State Pension: when the State Pension age will increase to 66'. In the light of increasing life expectancies and an ageing population, the Government concluded that the current timetable is unsustainable. The Pensions Bill implements a revised timetable that provides for the increase to 66 to be brought forward to October 2020. As a consequence, the pace of equalising pension ages for women and men at 65 will accelerate from 2016 so that women will have the same state pension age as men by November 2018 instead of April 2020. From December 2018, the pension age for men and women will start to increase so that pension age will be 66 by October 2020. To ensure compatibility with directive 79/7/EEC, which concerns equal treatment for men and women in social security, the increase in state pension age to 66 must be applied to men and women at the same time.

The increase in state pension age will mean corresponding increases in the qualifying age for state pension credit and the winter fuel payment. The upper age limit for receipt of working-age benefits, such as jobseeker's allowance (JSA) and employment and support allowance (ESA), will also increase. The effects of those proposals were addressed in the equality impact assessment, which was issued for consultation between 3 August 2011 and 30 September 2011.

The Bill will abolish the requirement to award payable uprated contracted-out deduction increments for those who have not started to receive their deferred contracted-out pension and their state pension before the specified date.

Those are small top-up additions to the state pension, payable in certain circumstances in which a person has deferred taking their occupational pension. In Northern Ireland, just over 1% of state pension recipients receive the payments. The average payment is £1.17 a week. Existing awards will not be affected. Removing that intricate payment in respect of new awards will assist the state pension simplification process. Existing legislation provides for the consolidation of the various elements of additional state pension to provide a single value, enabling easier prediction of entitlement in retirement. The Bill provides a power to set the start date for consolidation by order.

11.30 am

An independent review set out to examine the scope of automatic enrolment in workplace pensions, which are being introduced in Northern Ireland by the Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. The review team made a number of recommendations which included the introduction of an earnings trigger; the introduction of an optional waiting period of up to three months before the automatic enrolment duty commences; and changes to the way that employers can certify that their pension schemes meet the necessary quality test. The proposed Bill will implement those changes in line with corresponding changes in Great Britain.

A number of changes to existing legislation are needed as a result of the Westminster Government's decision to use the consumer price index, rather than the retail price index, as the general measure of inflation for uprating social security benefits and pensions. The Bill also contains measures to amend the definition of money purchase benefits following a Supreme Court judgement. That is primarily to ensure that members of schemes affected by the judgement do not lose access to various safeguards, such as access to the pension protection fund. Technical amendments are being made to legislation governing the operation of the pension protection fund to reflect experience gained in operating the fund since April 2005.

Members will realise that many of the Bill's proposals are minor and technical. I believe that the most contentious matter is the increase to the state pension age and the implications for the state pension and other benefits. The Committee for Social Development and other groups that responded to the consultation on the equality impact assessment expressed concerns about that measure. I share those concerns. Indeed, I raised them with Iain Duncan Smith. I believe that there is general acceptance that changes to the pension age are inevitable. Members are aware that the Westminster Government firmly believe that the current timetable for changes to the pension age

is unsustainable in light of increasing life expectancy and an ageing population. In stark terms, the issue is about ensuring the financial sustainability of the state pension system. Expenditure on state retirement pensions in Northern Ireland in 2010-11 was more than £1.6 billion, which is more than £32 million a week. The Westminster Government estimate that bringing forward the increase in the state pension age to 66 years in October 2020 will result in a net reduced expenditure of around £30.6 billion between 2016-17 and 2025-26. In Northern Ireland, the net reduction is estimated to be around £700 million for the same period.

In an ideal world, no one would want to increase the state pension age. However — in many ways, it is a good news story — people are living longer and healthier lives than ever before. The number of people of pensionable age to be supported by people of working age will continue to rise. The proposed changes will keep the state pension sustainable by ensuring that those who benefit from increased life expectancy share in the additional costs. Although the changes to the state pension age are very important, they are but one clause in a wide-ranging Bill. I trust that Members are content with the broad thrust of the Bill.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his comments and for his introduction to the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill.

First, the Committee for Social Development does not yet have a formal position on the legislation. We have taken briefings from departmental officials, and we commend and thank them for giving of their time and expertise in presenting their case to the Committee.

In anticipation of the Bill's progress through the House, subject to what happens today, the Committee has made preparations to increase the number of meetings that it will conduct over the next number of weeks to facilitate the 30-day Committee Stage. We have also started the work of approaching people and organisations who may wish to contribute to the Committee's consideration of the Bill. As I say, departmental officials are on standby to service the Bill's Committee Stage over the next number of weeks, and again I thank them for that.

The Minister has made some of these points already. However, I want to point out that, at an earlier stage, the Committee's primary consideration was the equalisation of the age at which men and women retire. The primary concern of most Committee members was that a number of women would be adversely affected by that, a point to which the Minister referred. I know that some different transition arrangements have been brought to bear that have reduced what appeared to be an anomaly. The figures presented to us suggest that the number of women adversely affected would be considerably reduced, and that, of course, is to be welcomed. I do not think that the Committee really took issue at any stage with the principle of equalisation and, therefore, with the requirement that men and women retire at the same age.

During our deliberations, a variety of questions and concerns were raised about the subjectivity of the age and health profile of people as the population ages. The Committee obviously has not taken a position on that

yet, so I am not able to say on behalf of members what our definitive position is. It is even difficult to gauge what parties' views on it might be because they have not formally expressed those views. I again beg the House's indulgence because I cannot give a definitive position on behalf of the Committee. Suffice it to say that the Committee raised a number of issues, not least that raising the retirement age would obviously impact on winter fuel allowances and other passport-related benefits. Therefore, a number of concerns have been expressed.

I want to put it on record that the Committee has not dealt with a number of the technical matters referred to in the Bill. There are five parts to the Bill, and the Committee has not discussed a number of those. I also wish to put it on record that the Committee will deal with other matters, such as the earnings threshold at which individuals have to contribute to pensions. As I said, I assure the House that, if the Bill's Second Stage is agreed, the Committee is well prepared to carry out the 30-day Committee Stage with due diligence. We have already put plans in place to facilitate that.

With your indulgence, a Cheann Comhairle, I will move from speaking on behalf of the Committee to speaking on behalf of my party for a moment or two. I want to point out that our party is not convinced by the arguments around, for example, the age profile. We do not take issue with the principle of the equalisation of the age at which men and women retire, but we take issue with the notion of arbitrarily picking an age by which all people have to retire. We think that people should be able to retire voluntarily at an older age. We do not think that, on the basis of parity or the subjective notion around the age profile of the population, it is necessary for people to retire at an earlier age. There would be considerable distrust in my party and, I presume, a wide range of society and a feeling that, once the principle was agreed, the current British Government would have no hesitation in bringing forward even sooner the higher age at which people would have to retire. They say that by 2046 people will have to work until they are 68. I do not think that anyone believes that that would be held to, so we could be forcing people to retire at an older age much sooner than the Bill says. That is in no way a slight on the integrity of the Minister. As far as we are concerned, it would be down to the British Government alone. Our party has concerns around the notion that people would be forced to retire at an older age, so we are not satisfied that that is the right way to go.

We also have concerns about the age threshold at which people would have to make a contribution. The lower that threshold might be, the greater the chance that you might force very low earners to contribute to pension schemes. There would be an economic cost to that. However, I imagine that that concern could be dealt with by way of an amendment.

If the Bill passes its Second Stage, the Committee will look forward to consulting and deliberating on it, with due diligence, within the 30-day period that would be due to it. My party colleagues will address in more detail some of the more technical elements. Sinn Féin will oppose the Bill on the narrower basis that I have referred to.

Mr Easton: The Pensions Bill has been necessary because of decisions made at Westminster by the coalition Government. The Assembly is charged with ensuring that

there is parity in the social security system across the UK. We are forced, at times, to accept and to work with that. The Bill will mean that the equalisation of pension age for men and women will occur as demanded by a European directive that requires the implementation of equality of treatment for men and women.

The revised proposal has meant that equalisation will occur earlier than expected in the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. The phasing in of equalisation to 66 will be brought in by December 2018 and 2020 instead of 2024 and 2026. That acceleration of changes has been necessary to ensure that the Assembly complies with the European directive. Furthermore, a review in Westminster examined the existing timetable for equalisation and found it to be unsustainable when faced with the increasing life expectancies and ageing of our population. I believe that the Minister has worked hard to ensure that the Bill is the best situation that we can get for Northern Ireland.

The Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 initiated changes to the state pension age for men and women. I am sure that Members are fully aware of the details, so I will not go into them. Suffice it to say that this Bill will mean that those changes will come into being a lot sooner. The early change in the state pension age will mean that working benefits, such as jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance, will have to be increased alongside those changes, and there will have to be other benefits to ensure that the most vulnerable people are not burdened by financial hardship caused by the change.

We as an Assembly must do everything in our power to ensure that financial hardship caused by the proposal is kept to a minimum. The Bill will end the requirement to award payable uprated contracted-out deduction increments. However, as those are paid to just over 1% of state pension recipients at an average rate of £1.17 a week and as it applies only to new awards, the effect on state pension recipients will be kept to a minimum, and that will assist our work in simplifying the process for claimants.

The Bill will impact on women born between 6 April 1953 and 5 April 1960 and men born between 6 December 1953 and 5 April 1960. In real terms, that means that equalising the state pension age by November 2018 will have an overall effect on approximately 70,000 women and 69,000 men who were born between 6 December 1953 and 5 April 1960. An additional 7,000 women who were born between 6 April 1953 and 5 December 1953 will be affected. Although that significant number of people will be affected, it does not change the fact that we have little control over who is affected and have to abide by the decision made in Westminster that made the change necessary.

11.45 am

Through the changes to the original proposal, the Assembly can be slightly happier that the new proposal will mean that approximately 1,600 people born between 6 February 1954 and 5 April 1954 are expected to qualify for the winter fuel payment one year earlier. However, for households where one part of a couple has reached their qualifying age, the households will receive a full reward. That is because of how winter fuel payments are paid.

In an attempt to ease the financial impact that the changes will have on people in that age range, the Minister has been

proactive. Over recent months, Members will have been aware of the campaigns in the media encouraging older people to come forward to ensure that they are in receipt of all benefits entitled to them. Over the coming months, there will be more work to ensure that each person is helped to access the financial help that is in place and that people are aware of the upcoming changes that will affect them and their family. Added to that information sharing are schemes through other Departments to aid people aged over 50 or people who have medical issues to return to the workforce or to carry on working. I hope that programmes like those and the media campaign will keep the impact of the demographic changes to a minimum.

Mr Copeland: I begin by echoing the remarks of the Chair of the Committee for Social Development. I fully believe, understand and accept that the matter will receive due and proper consideration. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. It is the first piece of substantive legislation to go through the Social Development Committee, and, unfortunately, it is only the second piece of legislation to go through the House since we were returned eight months ago. That is a slightly different matter.

Before I start discussing the detail of the Bill, I would like to make a few comments regarding the timing of it because it is important for me, as a relative newcomer to this non-transitional Assembly. The UK Pensions Bill received Royal Assent on 3 November 2011. We heard from the Minister that the Bill that we are discussing today is a parity measure. He also previously stated that it was desirable for provisions in Westminster and Northern Ireland legislation to come into effect concurrently. To a degree, that is self-explanatory. However, that will not be the case in this situation. There will be a lag in enacting our equivalent legislation, and, therefore, a breach of parity has been inevitable. We did not need to pay close attention to the 3 November deadline. In my view, it was the fact that it was two months after gaining Royal Assent before the biggest issues, such as changes to state pension age, actually came into effect. Therefore, on this Bill, which is one of the biggest tests of maintaining parity with the United Kingdom, the Department has failed thus far to live up to expectations. I know that there will be an explanation for that, and I look forward to hearing it.

I appreciate that it is normal practice for a Northern Ireland parity Bill to be introduced after the corresponding Westminster Bill receives Royal Assent. Despite that delay, we still feel that it was not enough to merit the passage of the Bill via accelerated passage, which is something that we were asked to consider and declined on that occasion. We fully recognise that the changes will start to affect women within years, which, when talking about pensions, is not a long time, but we still wanted to see the Bill brought to the Floor for debate, and, subsequently, going through all the proper channels in Committee. I hope that it will be a swift process, but, given its nature and my experience thus far in the Social Development Committee, which can be approaching forensic on occasions, I hope that that will be the case.

We wish only to approach the Bill with broad brushstrokes at this stage. Unsurprisingly, its provisions correspond largely to those of the Westminster Pensions Act 2011, which was mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, its proposals will be as important here in Northern Ireland as they are anywhere else in the United Kingdom.

As we heard, the timeline for increasing the pension age to 66 will be brought forward from April 2024-26 to December 2018 to October 2020. While that will be slightly unexpected for some, the rationale is considered, and we believe that it could be considered justified. We also believe that the Westminster Government were wise to amend the original Bill in order to minimise the effects and cap the extra time that anyone will have to wait for their state pension, which they have contributed to.

Northern Ireland has one of the youngest populations in the UK. We also have the fastest growing population of any region of the United Kingdom. However, that population growth has not been evenly spread, and, when combined with the decline in mortality rates, our population has actually got older. The sharp increase in the number of older people in Northern Ireland will, whether we like it or not, place increased pressure on pension provision. Therefore, the logic behind the changes is self-evident, particularly when we consider that many 66-year-olds — I am closer to that age than I care to be — still want to work. It also means that the state is adjusting its expenditure on pensions.

It is estimated that the changes to the state pension age will affect 77,000 women and 69,000 men in Northern Ireland. Approximately £1.6 billion was spent on state pensions in Northern Ireland last year. Like many welfare payments — pensions cannot be seen as welfare payments as people put money into them — the money is usually spent directly in the local economy. Therefore, any changes that we make will have big consequences, potentially, for Northern Ireland. We need to accept that we need to look 10 to 20 years down the pipeline and ensure that the United Kingdom's spending in that area becomes sustainable, notwithstanding the fact that it will cost the United Kingdom nearly £50 billion this year to service the Budget deficit. The Westminster Government have stated that bringing forward the increase in the pension age between 2016 and 2026 will save British taxpayers — we all are British taxpayers — in the region of £700 million. Those are the expected savings in Northern Ireland, so we can imagine the potential savings that are possible across the entire United Kingdom.

Another important aspect of the Bill is the change to the timetable for equalising the pension ages of men and women. This will mean that women will have the same state pension age as men by November 2018 rather than by April 2020. In the long run, that may prove to be more controversial than the increase to the state pension age. The speeding up of equalisation gives women less than the 15 years of preparation time that was recommended by the Turner commission before the changes are due to be made. If we are to be completely honest, we must all accept that the previous schedule for raising the state pension age was incredibly slow, given the improvements in life expectancy. The Department estimates that the equalising of the state pension age by 2018 could affect 7,000 women in Northern Ireland.

I know that I speak for my party and others in the House when I say that what we are faced with is inevitable. The status quo of a growing pension-age population that is dependent on money from a retracting public purse cannot continue fiscally. For the sake of the long-term sustainability of the state pension, something needed to be done, and the logic behind proposals that were always going to happen is,

to a degree, self-evident. I look forward to the Bill being fully discussed in Committee before it comes back to the House.

Mr Durkan: Mr Copeland used broad brushstrokes to go over the Bill, but I will use a roller.

The logic behind the Bill is clear and understandable: the qualifying age for pension should be raised because life expectancy is increasing. People are living longer, and it is assumed that they will be willing and able to work longer. It is also assumed that there will be jobs for people to stay in for longer. The Bill is being pushed as reformist and progressive legislation that is based on the developing and changing needs of society. Therefore, it is remarkable that it contains such blatant inequalities.

The SDLP, as a party that has a core and fundamental principle of equality, sees merit in the equalisation of the pension age for men and women. However, forcing an expectant group of women of a certain age to change their lives, plans and futures at the drop of a hat and without giving consideration to the challenges that that will pose for them is a far cry from equality. The time frame within which the pension expectations of those 7,000-odd women will be disrupted is purely a money-saving exercise by the Westminster Government. It is designed to get more money in from people while putting less out, and it is certainly not based on the needs of the individual. It is also particularly unfair to force women to face two accelerations when men will face only one. The Bill will throw the retirement plans of many into disarray. Previously stated timescales had indicated that there would be no changes until 2020. Therefore, women who have left their job in the belief that they could rely on receiving their pension on their sixty-fifth birthday may not, for a period of a year to 16 months, have enough savings or resources to live on. Mr Maskey made the point that we have no guarantees that the goalposts will not move again and move often. We have serious concerns about that as we go forward.

Although changes were made in Westminster that mitigated some of the burden facing women, they do not go far enough, specifically for the women who will be affected by the changes come 2018. The upper age limit for benefits has been extended to assist older people who cannot get work, but we must consider the wider impact that that has and the wider impression that it creates. Many older people who have worked their entire life and saved into pension schemes simply do not want to go on benefits. They want what they are entitled to, and to force them to accept these changes without sufficient time to make adequate provision is unfair and illogical.

Using the extended benefit qualification as an option flies in the face of what the Government are professing to do; that is, cut down on welfare dependency. It would be contradictory of the Assembly to accept such a move, which would leave us going backwards, offering benefits as a lifestyle choice rather than a short-term lifesaver.

Keeping older people trapped in a job when they may wish to retire also will have serious ramifications. It will certainly exacerbate the ever-growing problem of youth unemployment, on which there were further media reports this morning. Furthermore, there are implications for sectors in which people are working longer reluctantly. They could well become disenchanted, and that may impact on the

service or skill that they provide. Instead of stabilising the economy, the measures could create a stagnant and disenfranchised workforce who will feel aggrieved by a Government who have once again put the working-class person at the bottom of their mandate.

It is accepted — it should not be accepted by us — that we have a lower standard of living in the North. We have higher rates of poverty and disability. The Bill would automatically impact on a person's eligibility for the winter fuel payment and, therefore, increase our struggle in the battle against fuel poverty. People are being told to save for their retirement to supplement their pension, but the sad reality is that so many people here live on the breadline, and saving is beyond them. Although there can be no argument but that people are living longer, we need to ensure that they have a quality of life as well as a quantity of years.

Mr F McCann: I know that we have debated the Bill in Committee, but I do not think that its overall consequences have seeped into our minds. When you get Bills such as this from Westminster that have serious —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member turn to the microphone so that the whole House can hear his contribution?

Mr F McCann: Sorry about that. When you get a Bill such as this from Westminster and you listen to the Ulster Unionists, you hear that, by and large, there is support but there are serious consequences. Take the issue of age equalisation: 7,000 people may be affected by the changes right away, but, over time, 70,000 people could be £70 less well off. We need to use this period not only to inform ourselves of the consequences but to work out how we can best protect people of pension age and make them aware of the consequences.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is vital that public awareness be heightened. That is one of the reasons that I agreed with the Member and his party that accelerated passage for the Bill should be opposed.

12.00 noon

As the Chair of the Committee for Social Development, Mr Maskey, said, this is not an attack on the Minister's attempt to bring the legislation through, but I believe that the Assembly and the Executive should stand up to Westminster in the way that the Scots have done. By working with Scotland and Wales, we could develop a coalition of the regions to embarrass the coalition Government in London on some of their damaging policy initiatives. We might even gain support from the House of Lords to oppose welfare reform. We oppose the introduction of the Pensions Bill.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Anna Lo, I ask Members to check their mobile phones. A phone — or phones — is affecting the amplification system in the Chamber.

Ms Lo: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the principles and provisions of the Pensions Bill. Following the Pensions Act 2011, which introduced systematic state and private pension reforms in Great Britain, the Pensions Bill has been designed with those predefined provisions in mind. Significantly, it will bring Northern Ireland up to where it needs to be with regard to parity with our counterparts. Furthermore, in the face of an ageing population and, subsequently, an

ageing working population, we need to adapt accordingly. While, on one hand, we can celebrate a healthier and more dynamic population, on the other, we still need to adjust our legislation to reflect those changes and, most importantly, to ensure that we can continue to provide an efficient and effective welfare system.

Members are aware that the Bill primarily provides for amendments to the state pension framework, with one of the key aspects of such changes being the equalisation and increase of the state pension age to 66. Existing legislation dictates that, by 2026, the state pension age for men and women will increase to 66, increasing one additional year for each decade that follows until 2046. The Bill, however, proposes to bring the increase to 66 forward to 2020, meaning that the state pension age for women will be set to reach 65 by 2018 so that the pension age for men and women may be equalised by 2020. Not only do those provisions better reflect our ageing population, as I said, but they serve to address any perceived disparity or inequality in the state pension age for men and women.

The state pension retirement age for women had been set at 60 for a long time. Over a very short period of about eight years, however, there has been a big jump to increase the pension age for women from 60 to 65 by 2018. We have to be very cautious about what is a rapid change for a lot of women. We talk a lot about older women facing fuel poverty; that is something about which we, as a group of politicians, need to be mindful.

In addition to the state pension framework amendments, additional measures in the Bill seek to adjust automatic enrolment provisions for workplace pension schemes, including a revision of qualifying earnings bands used to trigger scheme inclusion and to calculate contributions. The underlying principle behind those particular amendments serves to regulate employers in the area of qualifying pension schemes, given the unambiguous nature of current legislation. Ultimately, however, such changes will serve to further benefit and safeguard employees, ensuring a fair system and increased opportunities for scheme participation. The introduction of an earnings trigger also guarantees that those who earn more than £7,475 a year will be automatically enrolled into an employer's qualifying pension scheme; that, too, should be welcomed.

Mr F McCann: A trigger of £7,000 a year works out at about £140 a week. To ask someone who earns £140 a week to start paying into a scheme would surely have implications for a person who is already paid a very low wage.

Ms Lo: I accept that point. Unfortunately, there is nothing that we can do, but we need to be mindful of it.

Further detail found in the Bill and supporting documentation proposes amendments to indexation and revaluation requirements for occupational pensions as well as payments from the pension protection fund. Fundamentally, the changes give schemes the flexibility, dependent on their rules, to increase pensions in payment by RPI, CPI or a combination of the two. Furthermore, they remove requirements on assessment periods for potential schemes wishing to be covered by the pension protection fund.

Undoubtedly, work remains to be done when the Bill is brought before the Social Development Committee. I hope that the Department and the Minister will give careful

consideration to any issues that emerge from Committee Stage. Considering that, over the longer term, the changes will serve to enhance our welfare system and more accurately reflect our demography and life expectancy, I offer, in broad terms, my full support for the principles of the Bill.

Ms Lewis: I support the Pensions Bill as introduced to the House at Second Stage. In London, the previous Labour Government, in the latter part of their term, and the current Government raised the retirement age from 60 for women and 65 for men. The Bill ensures parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, which I support. Not supporting the Bill would result in additional costs being faced by the Northern Ireland Executive to pay for the difference between the state retirement age here and the rest of the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is imperative that Members support the Bill to ensure that the Programme for Government, the draft of which was laid before the House in 2011, and the budgetary allocations that it contains are adhered to.

In June 2010, the UK Government announced a review of the timetable to bring the retirement age of women in line with that of men. In addition, as decided by the previous Government, the state pension age would increase to 66. However, the current Government agreed that that would happen sooner rather than later, as had been previously decided. The Bill implements the rise in state retirement age to 66 by 2020, rather than 2028. By 2018, the state retirement age of women will be 65. Provision for the equalisation of the retirement age of men and women is made in schedules 1, 2 and 3 to Part 1 of the Bill and repeals previous legislation.

Part 2 amends the automatic enrolment for workplace pension schemes. It introduces an earnings trigger at which an employee must be automatically enrolled on a workplace pension scheme. An optional waiting period of three months forms part of that change to allow for employees hitting the band flexibility should their additional earnings be temporary because of, for example, overtime. Clause 5(1)(c) sets the threshold at £7,475.

Part 3 includes minor technical amendments to previous legislation. It includes the decision by the Westminster Government to use the consumer price index, rather than the retail price index, as the general measure of inflation in relation to state benefits. Part 4 amends existing legislation on money purchase benefits following a case in the Supreme Court. Part 5 contains miscellaneous and technical measures.

Her Majesty's Government have consulted widely on the changes, which have been enacted in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is, therefore, very important to support the Bill to ensure parity with the rest of the United Kingdom on the state retirement age. We are all living longer, and the costs of an ageing population, not only for pensions but for health and social care, are soaring and becoming unsustainable. Those costs are particularly unsustainable in the current economic climate, when budgets are being cut. Therefore, it is imperative that the House supports the Bill.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister outlined the three main planks of the Bill, which are parity, the change in age profile and the financial unsustainability of the current pension scheme. He also talked about the measures in the Bill: automatic enrolment

on workplace pensions; the indexation and revaluation of occupational pension schemes and pension compensation; the operation of the pension protection fund, and so on. He also referred to the revised timetable for increasing the pension age to phase in the increase to 66 between December 2018 and October 2020. He said that the pace of equalizing pension ages for women and men at 65 will accelerate from 2016. By November 2018, women and men will have the same state pension age.

Increases in the qualifying age for state pension credit and the winter fuel payment upper age limit for receipt of working-age benefits, such as jobseeker's allowance and employment support allowance, will also increase. People will have to wait longer, but no obviously beneficial transitional arrangements have been made. Some women already lose out on state pension by up to two years. Other people lose out on their entitlement to pension credit. In some cases, they will lose up to £70 a week. The British Government estimate that bringing forward the increase in state pension age will result in a net reduced expenditure of approximately £30.6 billion between 2016-17 and 2025-26. The estimated net reduction in the North will be around £700 million.

Accelerated passage was sought, it seems, on the premise that it would give women in particular time to plan for their future retirement through savings, and so on. In most cases, surely a question must be asked: "Preparing with what, for what"? All of that is premised on personal responsibility and the fact that saving is wholly determined by individual choice. The fundamental problem is that it fails to recognise that saving for your pension is not necessarily determined by choice but by ability.

Many working people live in poverty and are referred to as the working poor. In the absence of a living wage and job security, working in itself does not necessarily secure the ability to save. The changes will benefit those already more advantaged individuals who can afford to exercise the right to save. The statistical analysis used to underpin the proposal is general rather than specific to the North. Conditions here differ significantly from parts of Britain and particularly from the south of England, the experience of which continues to dominate many of the proposals advanced as applicable everywhere. There is a glaring anomaly in life expectancy. In the south of England's wealthier boroughs, such as Kensington in London, it is much greater than the average. The North is among the areas suffering the worst average life expectancy. A recent 'Belfast Telegraph' report revealed that men living in Belfast city centre can expect to die 10 years earlier, and women six years earlier, than those living in south Belfast. The example quoted is that if you were to get on a bus at Donegall Square and travel to Finaghy, your life expectancy would go up by eight years. I have never been on the bus to Finaghy; it may well put years on you. To be perfectly honest, I cannot comment on that.

It is grossly unfair to disregard inequalities of health and wealth and, at the same time, promote the notion that those most able to save for their retirement are most likely to enjoy longer lives and be less prone to suffer the chronic ageing conditions associated with poverty. Once again, the rich will be rewarded for their advantages. The Bill needs to be properly scrutinised by the Committee, and we remain to be convinced of its merits.

Mr McCausland: I listened carefully to all the points made by Members during the debate, and I trust that I will be able to address their concerns. Quite a number of different points were raised in Members' contributions. Michael Copeland used the word "inevitable", and the general point that I want to make is that there is an inevitability about this. It is very well for folk to say that they are going to oppose it. It is possible to say that, but I suggest that if all of us in the Chamber were to avail ourselves of that luxury, the cost to Northern Ireland would be incredible, unsustainable and disastrous. People need to be honest and face up to that. There is an inevitability about it. However, if they wish, people can avail themselves of what, quite honestly, I regard as — I regret to have to say it — an irresponsible luxury of saying that they will bury their heads in the sand or, perhaps more appropriately, that they will be a bit like Pontius Pilate, wash their hands and pretend that, because they voted against it —

12.15 pm

Mr F McCann: I understand some of what you are saying, but do you not agree that at any Committee meetings we have had, we as a party have raised the serious consequences of the introduction of the Bill and the fact that those most in need in society are the people who will be affected most by its introduction? We have a duty to try to protect those who are most in need in society.

Mr McCausland: I accept the fact that people may indeed have been consistent in raising their concerns. There are concerns right across the Chamber. We know that there are concerns and that there are implications. We have not learned anything new in that regard. Every party has identified concerns. However, the fact is that if we do not go down the road of following parity with the rest of the United Kingdom, we will put ourselves in an impossible situation. I will come to the implications of that in a moment.

I want to pick up on a point that was made earlier by a number of people around the issue of age profile and the different demographics between here and the rest of the United Kingdom. There are areas of Northern Ireland that are healthier than others. Like others, I have not availed myself of the south Belfast bus. Nevertheless, if you look across the United Kingdom, you will see that in 2004, the projected lifespan for men — women do better in this game — in the United Kingdom was 85 years. By 2008, it was up to 86.3 years, an increase of 1.3 years. In England, it is slightly higher. It was at 85.1 years and jumped to 86.5 years, an increase of 1.4 years. In Scotland, it was 83.9 years in 2004, which jumped up to 84.8 years in 2008. It is probably even higher now. The lowest increase was in Scotland. In Wales, it was 84.8 years, which jumped to 86 years by 2008.

Right across the United Kingdom, there is an increase in the average lifespan. In Northern Ireland, it was 84.7 years, and it is now up to 85.8 years, so it is higher than in Scotland, broadly the same as in Wales and slightly lower than in England. However, essentially, you are getting roughly the same picture of age profile across the United Kingdom. I accept that there will be a disparity between the south east of England, where there are much more affluent communities, and working class communities in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham or wherever, just as there will be differences between some of the more rural areas of

Scotland and Glasgow and between one part of Northern Ireland and another. However, those disparities exist right across the United Kingdom. They are not unique to Northern Ireland. Such disparity happens in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Sometimes, an impression is given that the average age that people reach is much lower in Northern Ireland. It is actually very similar to the rest of the United Kingdom.

I picked up on Mark Durkan's use of the phrase:

"at the drop of a hat".

It is unfair to say that this is being done at the drop of a hat. The change in the United Kingdom to increase the age for pensions is not unique to the United Kingdom. If the Member was living in the Irish Republic, he would see that the figure there is currently 66, so it is actually higher in the Irish Republic. I am not trying to appeal to the Member from the SDLP but we are actually bringing ourselves into line with the Irish Republic. In due course, it will increase to 67 by 2021, and it will go up to 68 in the Irish Republic by 2028. These issues are not unique to Northern Ireland in any way.

Returning to the points that others made, the core point is the financial implications of a delay at this stage. If we do not change the pension age in line with Great Britain, if we oppose it, vote it down and throw it out, the cost to Northern Ireland's block grant will be £700 million. Are we going to take that out of the health service? We could do that; we could close a few hospitals. We could take it out of education and shut a lot more schools. Where do you want to take it from? It has to come from somewhere. No one has suggested a means by which we can conjure up £700 million out of thin air. It just does not happen.

In an intervention, Fra McCann said that the implications had not sunk in. There are individual implications, but the broad implication for Northern Ireland is that if you vote against this, you are, in effect, voting to take £700 million out of the block grant for Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maskey: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: I am more than happy to.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. The issue of parity is very important. This House has debated that in the past, and we know it is a very important and contentious issue not easily dismissed — nobody is suggesting that for one second — but, by the same token, while we are always told that parity cannot be broken, the social fund reform programme is a clear breach of parity agreed to by the British Government in advance. There is a view among many Members that we need to test this notion of parity to its extreme, in fact and in practice. I do not believe that we have adequately done that in this House.

Mr McCausland: With respect to those who take a contrary view, this is fantasy stuff. It is not reality. You can say as much as you want about testing the determination of those at Westminster to see this through as they have done in Great Britain; they are not going to allow us to break it. They have said that. Are they going to allow Northern Ireland to have some special privileged position where the pensionable age is going to be different from that in the rest of the United Kingdom? It is just not going to happen. I cannot see any possibility of politicians in the Westminster

Government allowing their constituents to have to work up to an increased pension age while people in Northern Ireland get away with a different figure. It is just not going to happen, and I think it is disingenuous for folk to suggest anything to the contrary.

The financial implications are absolutely clear; those who vote against this are actually voting to take £700 million out of the block grant. So, they can tell us today whether I take this to the Executive to decide whether to take that money out of the health budget and close a few hospitals or take it out of education. Where is the £700 million going to come from? People may look perplexed, but that is the question they have to answer.

A number of other points were raised. In response again to Alex Maskey, we all have reservations about changing the state pension age, and I have said that, but I am very much aware of and alive to the knock-on consequences for winter fuel payments and so on. We are aware of those issues, and we look forward to the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill. The officials will certainly continue to do all they can to assist the Committee in its consideration.

The other point about parity is that this situation is one on which we need to move as quickly as possible. In fact, excessive delay would constitute a breach of parity. There is an obligation on us not only to move on the issue but to move as quickly as possible.

Michael Copeland raised what he sees as the Department's delay in bringing forward the Bill to the Assembly. I should say that it is normal practice for Northern Ireland parity Bills to be introduced after the Westminster legislation has received Royal Assent. It would be inefficient use of Committee, Executive and Assembly time to consider proposals that are still subject to change at Westminster, as that would require the tabling of amendments and multiple referrals. In the present case, an equality impact assessment consultation was carried out between 3 August and 30 September last year. The results were in on 30 September, and the process was not complete until the Committee for Social Development's response had been received. That was not received until 24 November. We then responded to that in a matter of days; the reply went back by 5 December. The Bill was then submitted for Executive approval immediately after that. The Executive approved the Bill's introduction on 12 January, and it was therefore introduced on 23 January. So, everything has moved as quickly as possible. Perhaps there were some bits that we could tighten up where Committee consideration is concerned, but the process has moved as quickly as possible in the circumstances.

I am grateful to Alex Easton, Pam Lewis and Anna Lo for their obvious careful consideration of the Bill and for their broad support. That is the right and responsible way to take this forward.

Mr McDevitt: Tories.

Mr McCausland: Mr McDevitt is nodding over. In his case, I do not commend irresponsibility and financial and fiscal incompetence from people who cannot work things out. Maybe Mr McDevitt is going to tell me where he will get the £700 million —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCausland: I have two points to make. If he wanted to speak on the matter, he might have been in the House instead of being out. If he is so concerned about it, he would have been in the place. The man could not be bothered to be here to ask a question, make an intervention, speak or do anything. The key point is to ask from where he is going to conjure up the £700 million. I am happy to give him the opportunity to answer that. Does he want us to take it out of the Departments of Health or Education? A quick, one-word answer will do: Health or Education? Which are you going to cut?

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Minister for giving way. The name is McDevitt, Minister. I say that for the record, Mr Speaker.

One thing apart from the DUP's willingness to embrace the Tory Government agenda strikes me as interesting. How many meetings has he had with the relevant Ministers in the United Kingdom on this matter? Has he presented an alternative case? How many meetings has he had with the relevant Ministers in Scotland and Wales on the matter? Has he listened to those from this jurisdiction who have taken the time to go to England to raise specific concerns about the matter? Those people include the Church leaders, the trade union leaders and the leaders of other civic groups who feel a duty to represent the people who will be impacted by the change. Does the Minister feel that he is the Minister for a Northern Ireland Government representing the interests of this region, or is he more interested in trying to keep himself in the British Government's good books today?

Mr McCausland: This is the key point. The man was asked a question. Mr McDevitt was asked whether he wanted the money taken out of the Departments of Health or Education, but he did not give a single word of answer. The reality is that he is scared to answer the question. He would prefer to bury it. He is a man who faces up to nothing. He has no recognition of the reality of the situation and prefers to bury his head in the sand. That is reflected in the fact that he did not come in to make a speech. Obviously, he does not really care about the issue at all.

I will move on and pick up on the final points. The Pensions Bill simply aims to create a pension system that is financially sustainable in the light of demographic, social and economic challenges. I spoke earlier about the increased age profile. The reality is that the cost to Northern Ireland of voting against the Bill is £700 million, and I am still waiting for an answer as to where that money will come from. Which Department are we going to take it from?

Mr Durkan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: I think that we have heard enough nonsense from over there.

It is widely recognised that the state pension age has not kept pace with demographic changes in society. People will be receiving their state pension for longer than was thought when the current state pension age increases were set. Subsequent gains in average life expectancy have outpaced the projections on which the current timetable is based.

12.30 pm

I do not believe that any of us welcomes the changes to state pension age, and we have all said that. However, it is widely acknowledged by all responsible people that increases to the state pension age are inevitable. Only those who are irresponsible will suggest otherwise.

I hope that I have addressed all the points that have been raised. I will certainly read Hansard carefully. If there are other issues that I have not addressed or need to be dealt with in more detail, I will write to the Member. I trust that the main point — the implications of the legislation — has been hammered home sufficiently for everyone in the Chamber to understand.

This is the reality that we face. It is a reality that we face in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the United Kingdom. As I pointed out earlier, changes in pension age are also happening in the Irish Republic. This is something that is happening widely. It is irresponsible — I have to use that word because I cannot think of any other word — for people to simply hope that it will all go away. Those people will go out to lobby groups and constituents to say that they did the real good thing and voted against it. However, the reality is that this is something that is coming and something over which we have no control. It is something that is coming down to this part of the United Kingdom. We are simply a devolved Administration. The sovereign power is still at Westminster, where the decision has been made. We have no alternative under parity but to follow suit. People talk about parity and say that they recognise it. This is the test of whether they really do. It is also the test of whether they recognise reality.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 50; Noes 33.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, 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 Easton and Ms Lewis.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Eastwood and Mr Lynch.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill [NIA 3/11-15] be agreed.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for Social Development.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.44 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: Lord Morrow is not in his place. I will move to question 2.

Teachers: Redundancies

2. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's position in relation to the number of teaching redundancies that were predicted recently. (AQO 1182/11-15)

13. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Education how many teachers he anticipates will be made redundant as part of the compensation scheme announced on 17 January 2012. (AQO 1193/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 13 together.

The Executive recently agreed to provide an additional £120 million, which will be allocated directly to schools over the Budget period. Those resources, in addition to the £40 million that I reallocated to the aggregated schools budget in November last year, will mitigate the impact of the budget cuts on schools.

I believe that, through my Department, the employing authorities and the trade unions working in collaboration, redundancies can be managed, as far as possible, on a voluntary basis. However, the final decision for schools on how to live within their budget rests with boards of governors under the arrangements for local management of schools (LMS). Therefore, it is not possible to anticipate the individual decisions to be made across 1,200 schools. However, the recent announcement of an additional £120 million has undoubtedly saved hundreds of front line jobs in our schools.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I am conscious that the Minister stated that he cannot anticipate individual decisions in each school. However, is it fair to say that some of the figures mooted about the extent of potential redundancies are greatly overstated, particularly in the light of the additional resources secured by the Minister?

Mr O'Dowd: Undoubtedly. The minds of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, and, indeed, those of the Finance Minister and I when we were discussing additional finances for education, were focused on the need to secure as many front line education jobs as possible. I believe that we have gone a great way to achieving that.

I have never got into the practice of bandying around numbers of potential redundancies, because each redundancy has its own story and background. It is only fair to those who work in our education system that our focus and attention be on securing jobs rather than on speculating relentlessly about how many jobs could be lost. The work

done by the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Finance Minister and me over the past number of weeks has paid dividends.

Mr Hamilton: I appreciate that the Education Minister cannot target a particular age group through any redundancy package. However, given that it is a redundancy package as opposed to a retirement package, is there a risk that some teachers who are not the intended target of the package could get caught up in this unintentionally?

Mr O'Dowd: We have sent out detailed guidance to the employing authorities and boards of governors. The guidance should be shared with the board of governors of each school that has to make those decisions.

Although I think that the current package is very attractive to those staff in their latter years of employment, it is certainly not directed at them. I made it clear that I am not seeking to remove older teachers from our service. However, there has been a clear indication from teachers' representatives, and this has also come up in discussions with the employing authorities, that a bracket of teachers would require an enhanced package for them to be able to leave the service with recognition and respect and without damage to their pension contributions. We have a duty to do that, but I am not targeting older teachers. All age groups play a valuable role in our education system. If older staff wish to stay on in a school, they should be treated the same as everyone else in that school. Redundancy should not be based on age profile.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the Minister will want to ensure that, where redundancies do occur, individuals who find themselves redundant do not re-enter the teaching profession through an indirect route immediately after redundancy. What specific assurances can he offer the House that this will not become a process that could be abused by some schools seeking to rehire very qualified teachers on the cheap?

Mr O'Dowd: Let us make it clear: this redundancy package is to remove staff from the system, because, and this is unfortunate, staff are the most expensive element in education, and rightly so. We are a personnel-driven service, and we need personnel on the ground delivering the education service. This is about removing that cost base from education; it is not about allowing older or more expensive teachers to retire so that cheaper teachers at another level can be brought in. This is about removing a post from a school; it is a true redundancy package.

The use of substitute teachers has been much debated in the Assembly. Once again, I appeal to boards of governors, which have the responsibility for the employment of all teachers, including substitute teachers, to use our newly qualified teaching cohort to allow them to gain experience in our schools. We have made it less favourable for schools to rehire retired teachers, because we pay them only at the lower rate. So, if a retired teacher comes back and is perfectly entitled to be paid at the higher rate on which they retired, we will not meet that cost, meaning that the school will have to make up the difference. We have also sent out guidance and guidelines to schools on how they can promote the use of newly qualified teachers.

I have no legislative power to stop retired teachers going back into the system, but I think that there is a moral

obligation on boards of governors and others to prevent it from happening. I will further interrogate the legislation and seek further legal advice, and if it comes to my attention — this is a very big “if” — that I have the legal powers to do something, that boards of governors are not acting on the guidance and that the practice is continuing, I will bring it to the Assembly's attention.

Mr Craig: With regard to working out the number of redundancies in any of our 1,200 schools, does the Minister not find it unacceptable that, given where we are with the new education budget, boards have not asked schools to readjust their three-year budget estimates around the new budget that has been given to the Minister? That in itself leads to an almost impossible situation where predicting redundancies is concerned. Does he not find it regrettable that there is no flexibility, which means that those who are volunteering to leave, normally the elder teachers, will not be part of the predicted number of redundancies under the curriculum criteria that the unions force him to use in a redundancy situation?

Mr O'Dowd: The employing authority should supply boards of governors with the most up-to-date information. I am disappointed to hear that that may not be the case. I will double-check that with my Department's officials to make sure that any information held by the Department that should be in the hands of the employing authorities is in their hands. After we have finished this Question Time session, I will check with my officials to make sure that that is the case. You are quite right: boards of governors cannot plan for the future if they do not have the most up-to-date information in front of them. That is why we were so keen to get the information out to them.

The redundancy criteria follow an agreed practice: we have an agreement with the trade unions on these matters. I am not minded to breach that agreement. We now seek a smooth process in which these redundancies will take place. At the end of the day, each school is best placed to decide which teaching posts they can make redundant at this time. I do not think that I can do that from this position.

I will check with my officials to ensure that all relevant information is in the hands of the employing authorities and that the employing authorities are making that information available to the boards of governors.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have just been advised that question 3 has been withdrawn.

Schools: North Down

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Education how much capital expenditure for new school builds will be provided in the North Down area over the next four years.
(AQO 1184/11-15)

Schools: Upper Bann

7. **Mr S Anderson** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the plans for new school capital projects in the Upper Bann constituency over the next 12 months.
(AQO 1187/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 7 together.

As I set out in my statement to the Assembly on Monday 26 September 2011, I have commissioned the five education and library boards, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other sectors, to co-ordinate a strategic planning process to shape the future pattern of education delivery.

All previously identified newbuild projects will be critically assessed alongside all other potential projects as part of the area planning process. That will determine how potential projects will contribute to the overall infrastructure needed, and, if identified as a priority in the area plan, they might be taken forward within the funding available.

Until the area planning process has been progressed, I am not in a position to give an update on plans for new school capital projects.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he give us an assurance that the Bangor Central Integrated Primary School project and the Hollywood multi-schools project, which includes a nursery unit, will be given funding, especially given the threatened closure of Redburn Primary School?

Mr O'Dowd: It would be irresponsible of me to give any assurances about any capital build programme at this time. I fully understand and respect the right of the Member to raise issues about schools in his constituency and to lobby on their behalf. However, he has to understand that the area planning process has to progress. We have to identify where schools are to be built not simply on the basis of the needs of a school but on the needs of education in an area. We are dealing with a very limited capital builds budget. Regardless of the budget, it is only right and proper that we build an infrastructure that assures us as far as possible that it will be there for at least our next generation of young people. Unfortunately, I cannot give assurances to the Member about his constituency or to any other Member for their constituency.

Mr S Anderson: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for his announcement today about the nursery unit at Waringstown Primary School, which I, my colleague Stephen Moutray and the local MP, my colleague David Simpson —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask his question, please?

Mr S Anderson: I am just coming to that, Deputy Speaker. I am sure that the Minister will be pleased that we are thanking him for that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Please come to your question.

Mr S Anderson: OK. In what way, Minister, will you proceed with the build projects in that period? How do you prioritise them in respect of need and sector?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member and the House that, for all recent development proposals, I have acted on the advice of my officials. Signing off on all development proposals is open to the same public scrutiny as any other decision that I make, so I do not want to be seen to be giving preference. To balance that, the Member asked about an update on the plans for new school capital projects in the Upper Bann constituency over the next 12 months. I have less good news in that regard. I refer to my answer to Mr

Dunne: I cannot state at this stage which school projects will go ahead. The Member asked about the criteria that I will use. My decision will be based on the outcomes of area planning and on need. It will be cross-sectoral. I will not build schools on the basis of creed; I will build them on the basis of need. The area planning process and the decisions on development proposals will be open and transparent, and they will be open to interrogation by the House and others.

Mr Lyttle: My colleague Judith Cochrane threatened to kiss the Minister for the start of progress on nursery provision. If he could sort out the need for newbuild schools, I would perhaps come down there and kiss him as well. How will the Minister communicate the deadline and timescales for the area planning with the schools that have been waiting for new buildings for years?

Mr O'Dowd: I will have to tell my wife that there is a house that I can get a kiss in. *[Laughter.]* There has to be a standard answer to this. In the past, schools were given the impression at a very early stage in a building application that the build would go ahead regardless. As soon as they made the application, or it may have got as far as an economic appraisal, a school thought that its destiny was set and that a newbuild would be achieved. If I were to say anything other than what I have stated to the two Members who spoke previously — that area planning will be the guidance on which schools will be built — I would be giving false hope and wrong information to the House about future capital build programmes.

Let us allow area planning to progress. The Assembly, and I as Minister, should ensure that we are building schools on the basis of need so that they are there for at least the next generation of young people who come through our education system. We can be assured that we are putting our very limited budget to best use. That is the message. If all 107 of my fellow MLAs were to stand up and ask me what will happen to school A, B or C, I would have to give them the same answer.

2.15 pm

Special Educational Needs and Inclusion Review

5. Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education when he will publish the consultation responses to the review of special educational needs and inclusion. (AQO 1185/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A summary report of responses to the consultation on 'Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion' was published on Monday 30 January 2012 and is available on the Department of Education's website. The report provides an analysis of the responses received and an indication of my preferred policy options. Ahead of the publication of the summary report, I gave a presentation to the Committee for Education on 18 January to detail my key proposals. I said that I planned further engagement with stakeholders to inform how best my proposals can be taken forward.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he please inform the House of any planned timeline for the implementation of recommendations resulting from the review?

Mr O'Dowd: The Department is undertaking another phase of discussion with stakeholders. When we finalise the proposals, the most significant recommendations from the review will require legislative change. Therefore, I do not expect any change to the current status of special educational needs (SEN) provision prior to summer 2013 at the earliest. Any significant proposals that require legislative change would have to go through the full rigour of consultation and Committee scrutiny, and they would be brought before the Assembly for the final passage of the Bill.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus a Aire. Given SEN's importance, can the Minister give any assurance that its funding will be safeguarded?

Mr O'Dowd: The Department currently spends more than £200 million annually on SEN throughout the education sectors — and rightly so — because we must ensure that the needs of young people with SEN are identified and resources put in place to protect their education attainment. An amount of money is set aside each year — around £4 million a year over the next number of years — to assist in the training of teaching and other staff throughout the education sector. I hope that special educational needs will be protected in the next spending round and comprehensive spending review (CSR), as my predecessor and I achieved in the current CSR, and that we continue to spend a significant proportion of the education budget on the needs of children with special educational needs.

Mr Copeland: The question was on an extremely important topic. Will the Minister detail briefly how the educational psychology services required by schools to assess children with special needs are apportioned? Will he confirm whether he has any knowledge of the alleged practice of the use of stopwatches in the apportionment of educational psychology services when children eventually get to benefit from those services?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not aware of the practice that the Member described in the second part of his question. If he has specific case histories that he wishes to forward for my attention, I will be happy to examine them to see why such practices are in place. There may be a rationale for that. Therefore, I do not wish to comment any further at this stage.

Child psychologists should be apportioned on the basis of need. I have received various reports suggesting that a number of sessions are allocated to each school rather than on the basis of need. However, it is my firm understanding that those sessions should be allocated on the basis of need. They are one reason why the SEN review was conducted and why we wish to move forward with the implementation of the agreed proposals resulting from that. We want to ensure that throughout schools, all children receive a first-rate service, so that the service in Belfast is no different from those in Derry, Enniskillen or anywhere else. I mention those services only off the top of my head and am not identifying them as being good, bad or indifferent. The SEN review is about ensuring that all children receive appropriate responses to their needs and that those responses are all of an equally high standard.

Mr P Ramsey: First, I want to put on record that I am an insulin-dependent diabetic.

The Minister will be aware that there are children in primary school who have complex special needs and that a number

of them are statemented. Has the Minister any plans to review the guidelines on the administration of insulin in primary schools?

Mr O'Dowd: In the near future, I will meet Diabetes UK to discuss that and a number of other issues related to how we support young people with diabetes in schools. I will listen carefully to the case presented to me. I am aware that the matter has been brought to the media's attention. There was an event in the Long Gallery, which, I think, Mr McDevitt was involved in. I will listen carefully to the presentation of the cases that I will undoubtedly hear at that meeting and will make my views known on the matter at a later date.

DE: Budget

6. **Mr Murphy** asked the Minister of Education whether the additional funding that he secured recently will alleviate the pressure on his departmental budget as well as on schools. (AQO 1186/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I confirm that the additional £120 million that I announced on 12 January will be allocated directly to schools over the next three years. While that additional funding is, indeed, welcome, we are still facing significant financial challenges and pressures right across the education sector. That extra funding will help to alleviate the pressures in schools but will not fully eradicate them. It will be important that schools continue to address the pressures facing them and take necessary action to ensure that they live within their budget.

My Department will continue to work towards a sustainable schools estate and the creation of a modern management delivery system under the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). A more effective, efficient school and management system will lead to savings that, in turn, will be invested in the delivery of front line education.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his reply. I am encouraged by the additional spend that he has received over the Budget period, but, as he quite rightly says, that will not address all the shortfalls. Will the Minister detail what the shortfall in the education budget will be over the Budget period?

Mr O'Dowd: Over the next three years, we have to secure savings in the region of £150 million, which is a significant amount of money for any Department but especially the Education Department, given that it is personnel-driven and many of its services are identified as front line. There are very difficult decisions ahead for the Department. I have to say that that additional £120 million has taken a great pressure off, but certainly has not eradicated it.

As we discussed earlier in relation to the issue of redundancies, boards of governors will have difficult decisions to make, as will the education and library boards, CCMS and the other managing authorities, in the years to come. Along with the Executive, I am endeavouring to deliver the ESA Bill in time so that any savings secured go into front line education services. In respect of delivering a sustainable schools estate, I think that that is the right and proper way forward to ensure that savings are driven into front line education not only in this CSR period but the next.

Mr Storey: I think that we all recognise that the education estate, in respect of capital and resource, unfortunately faces very difficult times. A particular concern that keeps re-emerging in relation to budgets is the entitlement framework, with it becoming a statutory requirement in 2013 and funding coming to an end. The Department has already rearranged the numbers — 24, 27 to 18, 21. Will the Minister give an assurance to the House that he will allow flexibility in any new area planning structure so that the entitlement framework can be delivered?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member is right in what he says. The reason why I staggered the delivery of the entitlement framework is that I was conscious of the difficult budgetary factors that our schools face. I staggered the delivery over a number of years to allow it to take place. We have been planning for the entitlement framework since 2006. A significant amount of planning has gone into that already and a significant investment has been made.

We are withdrawing funding from the area learning communities, which in most areas, I have to say, have played an excellent role not only in preparing for the entitlement framework but in the elusive sharing of education that we are quite rightly driving towards. Many area learning communities have been the foundation stone on which I think we can build the sharing of education. I am conscious of working towards that in the future and of seeing how we can keep the project alive in some format.

Area planning will be driven by the local communities, local schools, local knowledge and local structures. I do not want to be rigid in the implementation, but I want to see in place an area plan that is capable of delivering the entitlement framework. Our schools and current structure — the education boards — and, going into the future, ESA, will be well placed to deliver such a structure that will allow schools to be flexible within certain parameters. The objective of delivering the entitlement framework will, certainly, be achieved.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go nuige. I thank the Minister for his responses up until now. Will the Minister provide us with some detail as to when we will receive information as to how the additional funding that he has received will be allocated?

Mr O'Dowd: That matter was raised earlier with me by another Member. I am of the view that the information has been distributed to the employing authorities. Earlier in the session, I gave a commitment to go back to my officials and ask them to check that that information had been distributed to boards of governors. It is vital that boards of governors have the most up-to-date information possible so that they can produce their schools' next three-year plans and so that they know their financial position and know what, if any, redundancies they will have to make to keep themselves within their budget. Once I leave the Chamber, I will immediately ask my officials to ensure that that information is with the employing authorities and the boards of governors.

Schools: Viability Audit

8. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Education when he will publish the findings of his Department's viability audit of schools. (AQO 1188/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department received the first viability audit reports from the boards on Monday 16 January 2012. The boards have also sent each school a copy of the information specifically relating to that school. My officials made an initial assessment of the reports and are engaging with the boards to obtain further information. Boards have been asked to resubmit the viability audits by 6 February and to submit proposals to address the position by 15 February. When the information is complete, the five reports will be published by the boards as soon as is practicable.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his response. Due to the sensitivity of the publication of the audit, what implications do you foresee for schools in north Belfast?

Mr O'Dowd: I understand there is some sensitivity around the publication of the audit, regardless of whether it is North Belfast or any other constituency. Much of the information will already be in the public domain. I am bringing the information together so that I as a Minister, the boards and other managing authorities have a clear picture of our schools across the sectors.

The viability audits are not the endgame, and the media or others should not be using them as some form of league table or as a means by which to map out a school's destiny. Some schools may be clearly identified as having such problems that they are unsustainable going into the future. If that is the case, I have a duty to ask their managing authorities what plans are in place to secure the education of the young people at those schools. In the majority of cases, I think we will be seeing a position in which schools may need further support, and we will be asking the managing authority what further support it is giving to those schools and how it is assisting the schools to work out of their current financial or educational underattainment.

We are entering the next stage of viability audits and moving towards area planning. This is not the final destination, and no one should use these reports as a league table or speculate on them in such a way as to damage the reputation of any school.

Mrs Overend: From what I understand, the viability audit was to lead to an area plan. I find it strange that you are now putting forward additional criteria. Are you unhappy with what has come back from the viability audit? Have you decided to add additional criteria in order to get the results that you wanted?

Mr O'Dowd: No; I am not adding any further criteria to the viability audits. I am insisting that the criteria that I set out are adhered to. That is a responsible thing for a Minister to do.

I stood in the Chamber in September 2011 and set out the process clearly for Members. I have published the terms of reference for the viability audit, and they have not been met. However, I have no doubt that they can and will be met. We are not in a crisis situation. The boards will be able to return completed viability audits, and then we will be able to move on. Therefore, it is not that I did not get the answer I wanted; the question that I asked has not yet been answered. When the answer comes back with all the statistical information, we can move on to the next stage.

2.30 pm

Employment and Learning

DEL: Staff over Retirement Age

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many civil servants are continuing to work in his Department even though they have reached retirement age and have earned full pension rights. (AQO 1196/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):

Since September 2008, there has been no default age for retirement in the Civil Service. The majority of staff in the principal Civil Service pension scheme have a pension age of 60, but, for most, the state pension age is later. There are currently 72 employees in the Department who are aged 60 or over. A full pension requires 40 years reckonable service. Full pension rights are not defined in the scheme. Staff retiring at the age of 60 or over will receive a pension proportionate to their individual reckonable service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members who wish to stay for Question Time to listen carefully. I am picking up a lot of background noise, which is making life difficult. Therefore, please respect the Chamber.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. I very much appreciate it. Will he tell us whether any civil servants have retired and come back into employment in the Department? What impact does that have on opening up job and promotion opportunities for other staff in the Department?

Dr Farry: I thank Dr McDonnell for his question. I am not immediately aware of any such situations in my Department or across the core Civil Service. However, I appreciate that it is relevant in aspects of the wider public sector in Northern Ireland at present.

University of Ulster: Jordanstown Campus

2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what consultation has taken place with the community in relation to the relocation of the University of Ulster's campus at Jordanstown to an expanded campus at York Street, Belfast. (AQO 1197/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Girvan for his question. The university informed me that it is preparing its submission for planning permission for the proposed new campus, and it is expected to take place in March 2012.

A phased approach to consultation with the community has been undertaken. The initial phase comprised consultation with political representatives at Assembly, Westminster and local government levels in Belfast and with the North Belfast Partnership Board. Where specific community groups have requested meetings, the university has met with their representatives. Over the past year, the second phase of consultation with key stakeholders in Belfast has been led by the university's planning consultants, in line with the planning strategy in the pre-application discussions leading up to the submission of the planning application in early 2012.

The university is now embarking on the next phase of consultation, involving engagement with councillors,

community leaders and community groups. In addition, the university has recently appointed consultants to prepare a master plan for the redevelopment of the Jordanstown campus and will be embarking on a parallel series of meetings with political and community leaders to discuss how the campus will evolve.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his response. I want to find out exactly what consultation went on. A lot of it seems to have taken place on the Belfast side, but, as far as I am concerned, extremely little consultation has taken place with the communities in Jordanstown and Newtownabbey and with a lot of the businesses that will be affected by the removal of such a large campus from an area —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Girvan: No consultation seems to have taken place at local level in Newtownabbey. It all seems to have taken place in Belfast, and I want to know why that has been the case.

Dr Farry: I understand the point that Mr Girvan makes, and, towards the end of my answer, I stressed that those consultations are set to commence. It is important to stress that this is an issue that has an impact on Belfast, particularly north Belfast, and Jordanstown in east Antrim. This is a good story for the university, and, accordingly, it is a good story for Northern Ireland. It is also important to stress that activity will continue on the Jordanstown site, and the university is committed to maintaining a number of particular courses in sports and some specialist engineering facilities.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus a Aire. Will the Minister explain his Department's strategy for the continued development of the sports institute that will remain at Jordanstown?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Maskey for his question. That is a matter of detail for the university to take forward. Ultimately, universities are autonomous bodies. We respect their independence, and it is in no way my intention to micromanage what the universities do. However, it is worth stressing that the University of Ulster has made a commitment to retain the sports institute. Members can be reassured on that point.

Mr Cree: The Minister has said that the entire university campus will not now be relocated. Will he advise the House whether a proper business case was done and what the costs and benefits of the relocation that is envisaged will be?

Dr Farry: A proper business case was undertaken and approved by my Department and the Department of Finance and Personnel. The university submitted a series of different options and full economic appraisals for each of those options. The relocation to Belfast was clearly the premier option.

The relocation will require a significant investment of potentially £250 million, and my Department has already committed funds. The public contribution will be £16 million, with the remainder coming from the university. The university is driving forward that scheme with the strong support of my Department and wider government.

Information and Communications Technology

3. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what actions his Department is taking to address the skills issues in the information and communications technology sector. (AQO 1198/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dickson for his question. The information and communications technology (ICT) sector is recognised by my Department as an important sector in the Northern Ireland economy. A vibrant IT workforce is critical to the success of every sector, and a world-class technology skills base is an essential prerequisite for success in the global economy.

Over the period that I have been Minister, I have listened to the concerns of employers in the ICT sector on skills issues. In response to those concerns, I established and chair an ICT working group made up of key employers in the industry, together with representatives from the universities, the colleges and other Departments. The purpose of that new working group is to develop a vision and strategy to ensure that the skills needs of the sector are met; align supply to demand to ensure a better match in skills; enhance career attractiveness to assist with the continued growth of the sector; and ensure that the education sector meets the needs of industry by providing the appropriate curriculum and qualifications.

The first meeting of the group was held on 12 January. An action plan will be produced to deal with skills provision, sector attractiveness and improved communications. That action plan will provide a road map with specific actions for all the stakeholders in the sector. That will ensure that Northern Ireland ICT companies continue to grow and that we remain a location of choice for inward investment.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his answer and for setting up the working group. Will he tell Members when the action plan will be ready for future development? It is all very well having action plans, but, at the end of the day, those need to become practical plans.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dickson for his supplementary question. That is the course of action that we are undertaking. It is my aim to bring this to a conclusion by April. It has to be a short and targeted intervention.

One of the advantages of devolution in Northern Ireland and the scale of our society is that we can have a hands-on approach to the needs of industry. Whenever particular problems arise or are perceived to have arisen, in any particular sector, the Government have a duty to respond. We must ensure that we in Northern Ireland are up to our game and operate at full efficiency. We must also ensure that we help companies to grow and attract new companies into our society.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, do we perhaps oversell the resources that we have when we go looking for foreign direct investment, given that we have a shortage of graduates in ICT and suchlike? Will you undertake to review whether the 2009 scheme that DEL ran will be reinstated for the transition period? Will you also undertake to talk to CCEA about reinstating computer science as an A-level subject?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCrea for his questions. There are two points that I should make in response. It is important that

we continue to promote Northern Ireland as an investment location for ICT companies. ICT jobs tend to be highly paid, and they fit in very well with the aims of the Programme for Government and the economic strategy. It is important that we address the skills issue to ensure that we continue to be an investment choice for a number of companies. We can do more to make Northern Ireland an attractive choice for potential students, and we all have an agenda of trying to increase the numbers doing STEM subjects at higher education level.

We also need to address the wider issues with the secondary level curriculum, and I am pleased to see that the Department of Education is one of the Departments that have agreed to be represented on the working group. There is a distinction to be made between teaching ICT as a subject — in essence, it is about the application of ICT skills to the modern world — and teaching computer science, which is software and programming skills. It is often in the latter area that companies look for young people to build their career and further their education. We are certainly very keen that the universities and FE colleges develop further what they do on software development.

Mr D McIlveen: The Minister will be aware that his Department currently funds only one apprenticeship place in advance of level 3. Will he outline how we can seriously address the skills issue if we are not investing in level 4 and level 5 apprenticeships?

Dr Farry: I am pleased to say to Mr McIlveen that just this week I signed off on a series of initiatives that will be rolled out over the next months to deal with the skills needs of employers. The initiatives are about turning into practical reality the skills strategy that I launched in May. One area that we are looking at is the development of a level 4 apprenticeship. We have to get the message out that it is important to invest in higher-level skills. All the evidence shows that we will need more and more people with higher-level skills as our economy moves ahead over the next 10 years. Equally, not everyone has to go down the route of doing a classic higher education, university-based degree. There are other areas in which people can demonstrate that they have the high-level skills that employers need. Some employers may want people to go into the workplace at the age of 18 rather than going down the route of a university degree or apprenticeship. That is certainly very much on our agenda and is definitely a priority for me and my Department.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a chuid freagraí go dtí seo. Ba mhaith liom an méid seo a fhiafraí den Aire, más é do thoil é. Will the Minister consider the promotion of software development or software testing locations in the Bridge to Employment scheme?

Dr Farry: We are certainly very open to the development of software testing at all levels at which the Department operates. Of course, it is often a higher-level skill, and that is probably where the majority of our focus will be. Over the past months, we have run the software testers' academy, with the co-operation of the South Eastern Regional College. The huge demand for and interest in the academy shows that a lot of people want to get involved in the ICT sector. Again, that was a targeted intervention aimed at addressing companies' needs. So I think that we can move ahead in

this area on a broad front. It is a critical area for the future of the economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I wish to advise Members that question 6 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Youth Employment

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of whether youth unemployment will rise in the short and medium term, and whether he will continue to seek additional resources to enable young people to gain work experience through employment initiatives such as the Step Ahead programme. (AQO 1199/11-15)

8. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to address the rise in youth unemployment. (AQO 1203/11-15)

9. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what further initiatives his Department will introduce to tackle youth unemployment. (AQO 1204/11-15)

11. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department is taking to address youth unemployment in the East Londonderry constituency. (AQO 1206/11-15)

12. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline his Department's initiatives for tackling youth unemployment, and how it is engaging with other UK Administrations on this issue. (AQO 1207/11-15)

Dr Farry: Mr Deputy Speaker, Members tabled five questions on youth unemployment and one on general unemployment. With your permission, I will address the questions on youth unemployment as a group and seek additional time for doing so.

In Northern Ireland, the increase in youth claimants — those aged 24 and under — between November 2007 and November 2011 was 155%, compared with the overall UK rise of 97%. Although the youth unemployment rate may be marginally lower in Northern Ireland at 18.4%, compared with 21.1% in the UK as a whole, it nevertheless constitutes a major challenge in absolute terms. Around 20,000 young people are unemployed here.

2.45 pm

Youth unemployment brings its own challenges. Young people risk being denied the opportunity to apply their recently acquired skills, and insufficient experience to compete for job vacancies is a particular problem for them because it is difficult to get such experience without having a job. There is a danger of young people being lost to long-term unemployment.

Youth unemployment is, of course, an international issue, and many Governments have made targeted interventions. Notably, in Great Britain, the Government recently announced a new Youth Contract, an initiative that will invest £940 million in new measures over the next three years to help young people to progress in the labour market. The contract provides for increased time with personal advisers, weekly job search reviews, 100,000 work placements over the next three years, a new wage incentive to encourage employers to offer jobs and a new programme targeted at the most

persistent young people who are not in employment, education or training.

In addition to Youth Contract measures, Wales has put in place the Jobs Growth Wales programme, a £75 million scheme designed to create 4,000 jobs a year for young people. Scotland has introduced the Community Jobs Scotland scheme, whereby organisations are offered a grant of up to £6,000 for each job created. That scheme will create 2,000 jobs over the next three years and represents additional investment of £12.4 million.

My Department already has a comprehensive range of measures in place to help unemployed people, including young unemployed people, to find work, but more needs to be done. Therefore, I recently circulated to my Executive colleagues a set of proposals to help young people and to address the threats to the future of our economy if we do not take effective action now. The Executive should, shortly, consider the options, and it is for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to consider the issue of funding in the first instance. I will make a full statement to the Assembly when a package of measures has been agreed.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the Step Ahead programme has been excellent? I congratulate him on attracting additional resources for 500 places. Unfortunately, however, those 500 places, to my knowledge, will allow people to work for up to 10 weeks, whereas the previous programme, which was superb, was for six months. Will he consider reviewing that situation so that the next Step Ahead programme will last for the original six-month period?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Douglas for his supplementary question. I was pleased to be able to secure funding in the latest monitoring round to allow the Step Ahead 2012 programme to commence. Unfortunately, it has to be a 10-week intervention to cover the rest of the financial year because it was funded by monitoring round moneys. We are required to do more about youth unemployment, but, first, there are difficulties in balancing the budget for the ongoing employment service programmes that we have.

As all Members will be aware, with over 60,000 claimants in Northern Ireland, we are working well ahead of the capacity of the system. We have been on a financial bare-knuckle ride this year, but we have managed to ensure that, in the main, the budget has been balanced. Those are structural problems that we will face over the next number of years. The discussions about how to address those problems in a more stable way in the future years of the comprehensive spending review period are ongoing.

Mr Hamilton: Does the Minister agree that the involvement of companies is essential in taking forward any new initiatives? Will he outline what initial discussions or engagement he has had with the private sector in anticipation of a new package coming online?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Hamilton for his initial question and his supplementary question. The critical aspect of any new initiative that we would take in Northern Ireland to deal with youth unemployment will be based around work experience. That is the particular barrier that young people face in competing with others because they cannot get on the first rung of the ladder without having some degree of

experience. Therefore, there is a critical role to be played by employers in that regard.

I say to employers in particular that it is not just about acting for the common good of Northern Ireland and being good citizens; it can be a very discreet intervention for the good of their business. Often, if they take on a young person, an employer will find that they bring a lot to the company and have a lot to offer for its future growth. Often, work experience schemes can have a very high retention rate. If we were to have a youth scheme in Northern Ireland, we would hope for a retention rate of at least 50%. A strong message needs to go to the private sector from my Department and others. There is also a role for the public sector to engage in employment programmes, which can be successful for companies and for the common good of Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: I join in welcoming the reintroduction of the Step Ahead work experience programme. How seriously are the Minister's Executive colleagues taking the need to reallocate additional resources for a targeted intervention on youth employment?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Lyttle for his question. It is fair to say that the issue is very much in the consciousness of each Member and every party in the Chamber and, indeed, across wider society. Indeed, a 'Spotlight' programme will focus on the issue tonight. The Executive recognise that we need to have some additional measures in Northern Ireland. I do not want to prejudice the nature of those discussions. In the first instance, I have to defer to my colleagues on the Executive about how they see the way forward and, more importantly, how we can, potentially, resource any new initiatives that we will take. I look forward to having those discussions in the very near future. We have had some preliminary discussions in the economic subcommittee of the Executive, and there has been considerable interest from all the members who sit on the group.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for outlining the resource allocation from the Department for Work and Pensions for the Youth Contract. Today, I received a response to a question for written answer from the Finance Minister, who told me about the Barnett consequential resulting in a net addition of £26.5 million to the Northern Ireland block over three years. How much of that is the Minister for Employment and Learning bidding for in his proposals?

Dr Farry: I thank Mrs Overend for her interest in the matter. She is right to identify that some Barnett consequentials were created on the basis of the introduction of the Youth Contract in Great Britain. As employment is not devolved elsewhere other than Northern Ireland — the Youth Contract applies to the whole of Great Britain — in some respects, Northern Ireland has to do its own thing. It is important to caution Members that those Barnett consequentials are unhypothecated funds; they are not dedicated in respect of a similar measure happening in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is for the Executive to discuss how they want to invest those resources.

I recognise that youth unemployment is a major issue, and other Ministers recognise that it has to be a priority. Equally, there is a host of other pressing financial commitments that the Executive have to recognise. I recognise and respect that process, and I assure Members that I will push the

case for youth unemployment as hard as I can. We will certainly seek significant sums for that, but it is important that we have discussions in private with the Finance Minister about the detail. I will come back to the House to report on the full details if we are able to move ahead with the package.

Confucius Institute

5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the development of the Confucius Institute at the University of Ulster, Coleraine. (AQO 1200/11-15)

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. My Department has supported the proposal to establish a Northern Ireland Confucius Institute at the University of Ulster. The institute will help to further develop relations and partnership opportunities with China; enable inward and outward student and staff mobility; further diversify the Northern Ireland higher education sector; and act as a cultural bridge between China and Northern Ireland.

I have written to congratulate Professor Richard Barnett, vice chancellor of the University of Ulster, on the award of the centre, as I believe that it will further enhance the global reputation of the university and provide further evidence that the academic excellence provided throughout the institution is recognised internationally. The Chinese Language Council has provided initial start-up costs for Chinese language teaching materials and for the transport of academics from China to participate in the institute and in the university's academic and cultural activities. The university has earmarked some of its budget for staffing the institute and for running two offices in Coleraine and Belfast. The Chinese Language Council has agreed to match income generated by the institute.

The university has recently appointed Mrs Yan Liu as director, and she will lead operations on a day-to-day basis. The institute will offer a range of courses and qualifications in Chinese language and culture to the wider public, beginning in autumn 2012. It will also offer bespoke short courses to industry, government and other interested parties.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. What is the Department doing to raise the profile of the Confucius Institute in Coleraine? Specifically, what encouragement and support will be given to young jobseekers to learn Mandarin to improve and enhance their employment chances?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ó hOisín for his supplementary. I am happy to support and promote the institute, and I congratulated Professor Barnett in that regard. I believe that we offered a letter in support of the application. The point that the Member makes is central, which is to get the message out that we have that facility in Northern Ireland and to ensure that we capitalise on that. We are going through a major global rebalancing of the economy. Members are well aware of the BRIC nations, within which the "C" is probably the biggest. With China's economy set to continue its rapid growth over the next decades, it is critical that Northern Ireland is positioned to engage with China in developing future economic opportunities. Other Members

talked about Chinese tourists coming to Northern Ireland in the future.

It is also worth stressing the importance of our students in Northern Ireland gaining greater international experience. Our current students have a very low profile in taking advantage of opportunities to study overseas. I would like to see that promoted much more, and it will be a major theme in the higher education strategy that I hope to launch in the coming weeks.

Mr Dallat: Is the Minister inspired by the philosophies of Confucius? Hopefully, he is. How does he intend to ensure that this wonderful concept gets beyond the academics of the university into tourism and other aspects of life to the great benefit of Coleraine and beyond?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dallat for his supplementary. I have to confess that I am a liberal rather than a follower of the philosophy of Confucius per se. Clearly, however, Confucian philosophy has been a major influence on a number of cultures in the Far East. The central point in all of this has to be that we get the message out that we are moving ahead in Northern Ireland. We have this facility. There are huge opportunities out there for companies in Northern Ireland to enter the market in China. The economic strategy talks of the importance of exporting. If we are to grow the economy, we have to export. Our domestic demand is not sufficient. China is the biggest import market in the world, so we must up our game in that regard. This is a good start, but more has to be done.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister clarify if the 4.4% drop in student applications via UCAS will have a bearing on the overall viability of organisations such as the Confucius Institute?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Robinson for his supplementary. It is important to stress that the figure he quoted is the overall UK figure for the drop in applications. In Northern Ireland, the situation is that our applications are level. There is certainly no threat from a drop in applications to our local universities. Of course, historically, more people have applied to our universities than they have had places. So the potential for accommodating local people in Northern Ireland universities is absolutely central to the development of our economy. We want our young people to stay in Northern Ireland and to build their career here. If we have a growing economy, they will have the incentive to stay. The policy decisions that my Department has taken, with the support of the Executive, around higher education funding and tuition fees will stand Northern Ireland well over the coming months and years.

Mr Kinahan: Given how critical the Minister said China is to our economy, will he support funding for the heads and vice heads who have been asked to go there by or in line with the Confucius Institute? It is offering to pay the internal costs; however, will his Department look at funding to get them there, so that we can learn and forge those links into the future?

3.00 pm

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Kinahan for his supplementary question and his recognition of the importance of China.

In the first instance, those are really issues for the university to face up to. In higher education, I respect the universities' ability to manage their finances themselves, but, obviously, they will want to ensure that they invest their resources in the most sensible way and in the way that brings the best return. As the needs of society and the economy change, I expect that the way in which universities invest their funds in courses and support for courses will change to reflect that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

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

Executive Committee Business

Rates (Amendment) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (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 my provisional grouping of amendments selected list.

There will be one debate on the single group of five amendments, which deal with a proposed rebate for certain businesses occupying previously unoccupied premises. Amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4 are amendments to amendment No 1, so we shall need to dispose of those before putting the Question on amendment No 1.

Once the debate 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.

Clause 1 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, 3, 4 and 5. The amendments deal with a temporary rebate for certain premises.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move amendment No 1: After clause 1, insert the following new clause:

“Temporary rebate for certain previously unoccupied hereditaments etc.

1A. After Article 31C of the principal Order (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments) there shall be inserted the following Article—

‘Temporary rebate for certain previously unoccupied hereditaments etc.

31D.—(1) Subject to the provisions of this Article, the Department shall grant to a relevant person a rebate from the rates chargeable in respect of the net annual value of a hereditament to which this Article applies.

(2) No rebate shall be granted except on an application made before 1st April 2013 to the Department by a relevant person; and any such application shall contain such information as the Department may reasonably require.

(3) This Article applies to a hereditament which—

(a) falls within paragraph (4); and

(b) became occupied during the year ending on 31st March 2013 immediately after having been unoccupied for a continuous period of twelve months or more.

(4) A hereditament falls within this paragraph if it is included in the NAV list and—

(a) when last occupied before it became occupied as mentioned in paragraph (3)(b), it was used for retail purposes; or

(b) if never occupied before it became occupied as mentioned in paragraph (3)(b), it could reasonably have been considered by the Department as likely when next in use to be used for retail purposes.

(5) In this Article—

“F” means the first person to occupy the hereditament after the period mentioned in paragraph (3)(b);

“O” means the owner of the hereditament;

“rebate” means rebate under this Article;

“reduced” includes reduced to nothing;

“retail purposes”, in relation to a hereditament, means the retail provision of goods or services on or from the hereditament.

(6) In this Article “relevant person” means—

(a) F; or

(b) O if O pays the rates mentioned in paragraph (1) instead of F,

but the Department shall not grant the rebate to O unless it appears to the Department that the rebate will be applied for F’s benefit.

(7) Subject to paragraph (8)—

(a) the period for which the rebate is granted shall be the period of twelve months beginning with the day on which the hereditament became occupied as mentioned in paragraph (3)(b); and

(b) the amount of the rebate shall be one half of the rates chargeable in respect of that period in respect of the net annual value of the hereditament.

(8) If—

(a) F ceases to occupy the hereditament during the period for which the rebate is granted; or

(b) the rebate would to any extent contravene an EU obligation,

the rebate shall be proportionately reduced and if too large an amount has been paid or allowed by way of rebate the excess shall be recoverable summarily by the Department as a debt.

(9) Where a rebate is granted in respect of a hereditament, in respect of the period for which the rebate is granted—

(a) Articles 31, 31AA, 31B and 33B shall not apply to the hereditament;

(b) the hereditament shall not be a specified hereditament for the purposes of Article 31C (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments);

(c) if the hereditament is distinguished in the NAV list as—

(i) exempt from rates under Article 41, 41A or 42 or under Article 12(2) to (4) of the Rates (Capital Values etc.) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006; or

(ii) occupied and used wholly or partly for industrial purposes or for transport purposes,

the hereditament shall be treated as if it were not so distinguished.

(10) If the rebate is reduced by virtue of paragraph (8), the reference in paragraph (9) to the period for which the rebate is granted shall be construed accordingly.

(11) The Department shall serve on every relevant person notice of its decision on an application for a rebate.

(12) Any relevant person may, within twenty-eight days of the service on that person of a notice under paragraph (11), apply to the Department for a review by the Department of its decision.

(13) The Department shall serve on every relevant person a notice of the result of the review and any relevant person, if dissatisfied with the result of the review, may appeal to the Lands Tribunal.

(14) On an appeal under paragraph (13) the Lands Tribunal may make any decision which the Department could have made.

(15) The Department may by an order made subject to affirmative resolution modify paragraphs (2) to (8).

(16) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (15), an order under that paragraph may—

(a) for the references to 1st April 2013 and the year ending on 31st March 2013 in paragraphs (2) and (3)(b) substitute references to such date and to such period as may be specified in the order; and

(b) provide that no rebate shall be granted for so much of any period as falls after such date as may be specified in the order and modify paragraph (7)(a) accordingly.’’

The following amendments stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2 to amendment No 1: In Article 31D(4)(a), after “purposes” insert “or office purposes”. — [Mr Allister.]

No 3 to amendment No 1: In Article 31D(4)(b), after “purposes” insert “or office purposes”. — [Mr Allister.]

No 4 to amendment No 1: In Article 31D(5), after “owner of the hereditament” insert

“office purposes’ has the meaning assigned to it by Article 2 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977”. — [Mr Allister.]

No 5: In clause 6, page 4, line 26, after “Sections 1” insert “, 1A”. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Wilson: Amendment No 1 deals with the one-year concession providing a 50% rebate to the first occupiers of long-term empty retail properties in the rating year 2012-13. I will speak to amendment No 5, which provides for the commencement of that. I will also touch on the issue of extending the 50% rebate to include office purposes, which is dealt with in the amendments in the group standing in the name of Mr Allister.

First, I will set out the context in which amendment No 1 has come about, before dealing with the amendment itself. As I indicated to Members during the Bill’s Second Stage last week, we are all too aware of the continuing concerns of business ratepayers in our constituencies about the state of high streets, particularly the high level of empty shops in our core shopping areas.

A key element of the Executive’s commercial rating package consists of measures aimed at making the shopping areas in our town and city centres more vibrant. Clause 2 of the Bill will allow ratepayers to brighten up shop windows in empty shops without incurring full occupied rates. That clause, together with amendment No 1, is intended to encourage business ratepayers to make our towns and city centres more attractive, allowing shop windows to be brightened up and made more vibrant through reducing rates liability where long-term empty shops become occupied again.

As we all know, empty properties can contribute to the run-down, neglected and forgotten-about appearance of our towns. Indeed, that can create a vicious circle, as the resulting neglected appearance leads to other businesses locating elsewhere, exacerbating the original problem. I, along with the Executive, want to try to arrest that decline in city centres, high streets and core shopping areas by encouraging business ratepayers either to make the area more attractive through the shop window display provision or to locate their businesses there, whatever that business may be, with the result that there is increased traffic and footfall.

Encouraging and promoting the long-term use of empty shops and getting them back into use should help to further revitalise those areas. Although I take the view that we are experiencing a transformation in the way that our retail economy behaves and that that leads to the long-term structural oversupply of shops, particularly on the periphery of our towns and cities, I also believe that we need to protect our urban centres from further decline.

I emphasise that amendment No 1 focuses on shops in our towns’ high streets that have been empty long term. That means vacant premises that were last used for the retail provision of goods and services. The focus, therefore, is on high streets and shopping areas where the vast majority of properties are shops rather than offices or other types of accommodation. For that reason, I am not supportive of those amendments that propose to extend the provision to empty premises that are used for office purposes.

However, given the aim to make our shopping areas more positive and vibrant, the Executive have agreed that the incoming business does not have to be retail to qualify for the concession. Any business use of a long-term empty retail property will qualify. Amendment No 1 would insert a new clause into the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 to give effect to that. It would provide for a one-year concession during 2012-13 that would effectively allow 50% empty property relief to continue for a year. For the rebate to be awarded, an application would have to be made to the Department in the next rating year. That change would apply to those long-term empty shops that were previously used for the retail sale of goods and services and that would be occupied in the 2012-13 rating year.

A condition of that concession would be that the property would have to have been empty for at least a year, with relief

then awarded for a year. The property would also have to have been used for retail purposes when last occupied, or, if it had never previously been occupied, my Department would have to be satisfied that it would be used for retail purposes when next in use.

The rebate would obviously be subject to state aid rules, meaning that, taking into account any other assistance, no business could receive any more than the equivalent of €200,000 — I do not know why that figure has been given to me in euros — over a rolling three-year period. That is likely to mean that the maximum rebate would be in the region of £160,000 over the period in question.

Although the rebate would apply to the property when it became occupied, in effect, it would represent the continuation of empty property relief for the first year that the property was occupied. As a result, no other occupied reliefs or exemptions would apply while that one-year concession was granted. The ratepayer would have a choice to make. The remaining provisions of the new clause would make provision for appeals and amendments of the provision by the Assembly.

As I advised Members, this would be a one-year concession, and it would apply to the 2012-13 rating year. Confining it to a limited period should reduce any unwanted displacement and minimise any advantage over established traders. It would also allow my Department to review how successful it will have been. This is a new and innovative policy, and I will have to see whether it will have any unintended consequences, such as encouraging businesses to move about or creating an uneven playing field for new businesses versus established businesses. Should the measure prove effective, I will seek Executive approval to extend the period of the scheme.

However, any exemption would not apply beyond 13 March 2015. Similar to the other measures in the Bill, this is a downturn measure and not a permanent feature of the rating system. As I advised Members last week, given that that change arose from consultation on the commercial rating package, it was not possible to get the detail of the clause finalised before the Bill was introduced. However, the Executive and I consider that the amendment provides us with an opportunity to proactively address concerns about high street decline.

Members will wish to note that amendment No 5 simply provides that the new clause provided through amendment No 1 will come into operation once Royal Assent is obtained.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am pleased that the Minister has decided to future-proof this by having it in euros. He obviously has one eye on reunification. We, on this side, are not wedded to any particular currency in a new Ireland, so perhaps that is something for further discussion with him. Nonetheless, his powers of anticipation are obvious.

In addressing the amendments on behalf of the Committee, I will first refer briefly to its scrutiny of the policy behind the Bill's provisions. Prior to the Bill's being introduced to the Assembly, the Committee liaised closely with the Department throughout the public consultation process and subsequently undertook a period of intense scrutiny of the policy proposals, including a series of meaningful

engagements with key stakeholders within the limited time available. The Committee published a report on its findings, and, as I outlined at Second Stage, it welcomes the general principles of the Bill and will continue to engage with the Department regarding the ongoing work arising from the Bill.

On 11 January, the Minister briefed the Committee on the proposed ministerial amendment to the Bill, and the Committee received a copy of the amendment on 17 January. The amendment provides that new occupiers will be entitled to a 50% rebate for 12 months, which, effectively, provides for the continuation of empty property relief. The property will have to be empty for 12 months and, when last occupied, used for the retail provision of goods or services.

As is the case with the main provisions of the Bill, it will be important that there is an evaluation of the effectiveness of the measures as they operate in practice. The Department has stated that there will be an assessment of its uptake, the extent of any displacement and whether it is proving to be effective in getting empty shops back into business.

I turn to Mr Allister's amendments that seek to widen the scope from retail premises to office premises. In his response to Mr Allister during the Second Stage debate, the Minister explained that that could lead to potential abuse of relief as it may be easier for businesses using premises for office space to relocate multiple times in order to benefit. That said, the Committee did not have sight of Mr Allister's amendments when it last met and, therefore, has not taken a position on them.

I am mindful that the Committee recognised the general concerns raised by the business community during the consultation process about the impact that empty properties can have on town centres. As such, I confirm that the Committee supports the ministerial amendment and the consequential amendment that will apply for the 2012-13 year only and is intended to get empty shops back into use.

Mr Girvan: I speak in favour of the Bill and the amendments as presented, although not all of them.

I will start with clause 1 and how it came about. We were taking cognisance of the evidence received from businesses and retailers in our town centres. Some of the small retailers indicated that they did not wish town centres to be turned into glorified office extensions, which would have been an issue. In a roundabout way, we were hearing evidence that people did not want to see their town centres turned into a proliferation of office-type accommodation and that they wanted to try to keep a retail heart in town centres. As such, it was necessary for us to look at a mechanism to help bring that about. As put forward by the Minister in his presentation last week, the 50% reduction and extension for one year for what had previously been retail premises goes some way to allay some of the fears that were brought to our attention.

3.15 pm

On the extension of some of the other aspects of the Bill, I think that the 20% reduction in the increase in the rateable valuation up to £10,000 will benefit greatly a number of the small to medium-sized businesses in our town centres.

The Committee took quite a bit of evidence. I appreciate that the Bill is going through accelerated passage, which

might throw up difficulties. However, I can honestly say that we spent quite a bit of time speaking with key stakeholders and taking evidence, and we believe that we have come up with a very workable way forward.

I take pleasure in recommending the Minister's amendment No 1 to the House. I will be supporting it. The other amendments seek to insert the words "or office purposes". I do not think that a need for those amendments is borne out by the evidence that we received from the business community.

The other area of interest to a number of people who spoke to the Committee was the use of shop windows over the period specified in the legislation to ensure that what is redundant and empty shop space can sometimes be used for display purposes only. I appreciate that that comes with something of a health warning: it is not to be extended to 50% of the shop floor area. The window is the window, and it is to be used for the proper purposes, such as community advertisement.

It is my pleasure to support the Bill as proposed, with the exception of the amendments tabled by Jim Allister.

Mr Cree: I welcome the Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill. I thank those Members who have already spoken for their input.

First, I wish to comment on last week's Second Stage debate. It would appear that a Freudian slip by me in commending the First Minister for bringing forward the Bill — although I am quite sure that he did play an important part — caused so much panic in the Finance Minister's mind and in his party. I would like to reassure him today that the coup d'état to which he referred has been delayed. Last Tuesday afternoon, I had to attend a meeting of the Assembly Commission. As such, I was unable to be present to hear the Minister summing up. I missed his particular brand of wit, but I did read his contribution.

As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I was pleased to take part in the evidence-taking and wide-ranging deliberations. I fully endorse the Committee report, which, although supportive of the Minister's proposals, does contain alternative suggestions. On widening the scope of the levy options, several sectors are suggested rather than just retail; for example, telecoms, banking and financial institutions, wholesalers and large hotel groups. I did not think it necessary to spell those out last week, as I assumed that the Minister had read the Committee's report.

We have already debated the Bill's general principles at Second Stage. We now have a number of amendments before us. It is important that we give them due consideration and scrutiny today, given the fact that the Bill was granted accelerated passage.

As he said he would last week, the Minister has tabled his own amendment, amendment No 1, which would add proposed new clause 1A to the Bill. The new clause deals with the specific issue of empty shops through the provision of a one-year concession during 2012-13. That would result in the 50% empty property relief staying in place for an extra year. The Ulster Unionist Party is supportive of that amendment for a number of reasons. First, there is currently a high level of empty shops throughout Northern Ireland, and the strengthening of the measure, by making it applicable

for a further year, is a welcome development for which the Minister is to be commended.

Secondly, we need to do all that we can to ensure that we provide the necessary help to address the problem of our struggling town centres and shopping areas. We all know from experiences in our constituencies that empty shops are becoming more of a problem, and that creates a very real issue for the local economy. For example, it can create aesthetic difficulties in town centres, and that discourages footfall. We know that a lack of footfall is one of the main factors that has a negative effect on small and medium-sized businesses.

Thirdly, the amendment reflects the view, expressed in the consultation process, that this is an area of particular concern. I am pleased that the Minister has reacted positively to public opinion.

I will now consider the amendments proposed by Mr Allister. They have all a similar effect, in that they insert the words "office purposes" into the Bill. Therefore, Mr Allister would like a 50% relief to be afforded to hereditaments which are used not just for retail but for office purposes. The definition of "office purposes" is contained in article 2 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, which, as we have heard, includes:

"the purposes of administration, clerical work and handling money; and 'clerical work' includes writing, book-keeping, sorting papers, filing, typing, duplication, punching cards or tapes,"

— I do not know whether that still happens —

"machine calculating, electronically recording information and computing, drawing and the editorial preparation of matter for publication".

If we are serious about tackling the blight that empty properties are causing on towns and cities across Northern Ireland, I can see the merit in broadening the proposals to include more than just retail. The Ulster Unionist Party will listen to the debate on the issue and hear what the Minister has to say in his summing up.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. During the previous debate on the Bill, I expressed my party's support for it, and today I want to concentrate on the proposed amendments. I very much welcome amendment Nos 1 and 5. Many of us are aware of the effect that the recession is having on our town centres. We have a growing number of empty shops that give many towns an appearance that is not at all conducive to business and trade. The impression that we want to give is of vibrant town centres which welcome trade, entice people in, increase footfall and add to the business done in those centres.

The incentive offered by the new clause proposed in amendment No 1 is positive. It offers a 50% rebate for one year, and that will encourage businesses to occupy premises which have previously been unoccupied for at least one year.

I cannot support amendments Nos 2, 3 and 4, which propose to include in the rebate such properties that are used for office purposes. After all, what we are trying to do is turn our town centres into places where business is done

and people are enticed in to shop and spend money so that we create employment and lively trade. In my view, if we extend this measure to include offices, we are in danger of creating administrative centres in our town centres. I believe that that often leads to a situation where town centres are deserted after 5.00 pm, and they almost become ghost towns at night. I agree that the new clause proposed by amendment No 1 is a positive measure and will contribute to the revitalisation of our town centres, but, unfortunately, I cannot support amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the amendments proposed today by the Minister and the Member for North Antrim. The nature of the Minister's proposals, since their inception in the summer of last year, has proved to be a source of contention for many Members and the interests that they represent. Concerns have been well voiced about the introduction of the large retail levy and the suggested impact that that could have on future investment and job opportunities in the Province. However, such concerns have been offset, arguably, by the anticipated outcome and what has ultimately served as the justification for the levy: an extended level of rate relief for additional small businesses with an NAV of £5,001 to £10,000, as touched on in previous discussions on the Bill.

Additional funds for local small businesses should be, and are, welcome at a time when our economy most needs them. Both the intent and the end goal of the measures should not be overlooked, regardless of personal or party opinions. Based on the substance of the Minister's earlier presentations to the House, we support the concept of extending the small business rate relief (SBRR) scheme and are content with the underlying intentions of the temporary measures. Further to that end is your recognition of the severe impact that vacant units are having on town and city centre economies, as is evident even in our own constituency, Minister.

We welcome the provision of revised rating criteria for unoccupied properties. The chief amendment tabled by the Minister today serves to enhance the already revised criteria for providing a temporary rate reduction of 50% for new owners of retail premises previously unoccupied for one year. Arguably, any incentive for prospective businesses to establish themselves in the current difficult high street trading situation has the potential for positive change, but the aspect of the Minister's amendment that sets it apart is the twofold nature of its impact. Although aimed primarily at enticing retail businesses to fill empty shop units and, therefore, create new jobs and investment opportunities in communities, the amendment also lends itself to ensuring that town and city shopping precincts become more attractive to consumers, which can fundamentally help to stimulate not only civic pride but economic growth.

The nature of the subsequent amendments, as tabled by the Member for North Antrim, follows a slightly different direction than those of the Minister, with the focus shifting to include office units in the scope of the provisions. Although it is fair to reason that, like retailers, office businesses can create the potential for additional employment and investment opportunities in our communities, the buy-in element from consumers is likely to be lacking. Therefore, their role in attracting people back into our declining town and city centres is slight when weighed against the draw of retail trade, coffee shops and the like. That is not to say that

offices do not make a valid contribution to our high streets. However, we must exercise due caution and good reason in how we choose to amend the Bill, noting that any possible amendment will undoubtedly have a greater bearing on the cost and, indeed, the consequent reduction in income.

This is a retail business boost initiative, and we support it on that basis. In considering all the amendments brought forward today, the overriding principle should not be simply what is best for our economy but what will help to regenerate our townscapes and cityscapes and restore faith among local consumers. Although I am certain that office-based businesses can contribute to our economic recovery in years to come, it is the retail sector that helps to provide the economic and social lifeblood of our communities. On those grounds, we should seek to encourage growth in the sector. In conclusion, therefore, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, we will offer our support to the amendments tabled by the Minister.

Mr Hilditch: I rise in support of the departmental amendments being introduced at Consideration Stage and welcome the initial explanations given by the Minister in the House today. Last week, we had a thorough debate on the principles of the Bill at Second Stage. That covered the various aspects and depths of the arguments raised and presented during what was an extensive consultation, as already referred to. I believe that we will supplement that work today with the potential passing of amendment No 1, which is the insertion of clause 1A.

As with other business in the House, Members' thoughts turn to their own constituencies and how decisions impact and affect local situations. Like other provincial towns, Carrickfergus has an ever-deteriorating situation, with the percentage of vacant properties reaching an extremely worrying level.

3.30 pm

We are the only walled town in Northern Ireland outside Londonderry. However, visitors' experience of the historic settlement is ruined by the increased dereliction of the traditional town centre, where property owners and small and independent retailers are struggling. The Rates (Amendment) Bill will be beneficial and will, with other schemes, provide some relief to those who face hardship. That is why I welcome amendment No 1. Historic town centres such as Carrickfergus will benefit, particularly with the window display scheme complementing amendment No 1. Most visitors come to the town for the cultural and traditional experience and want their visit enhanced; they do not want to see blight. Perhaps other agencies and departmental bodies can work in tandem with that scheme so that we can see a quick impact in conjunction with the Bill.

We can all probably see the benefits to our communities of the 50% long-term empty property relief and give it a general welcome. I appreciate that the Minister has explained various aspects of the scheme. However, perhaps he could elaborate on the competitive advantages of the scheme, particularly over the existing and established traders, who may question that aspect of the Bill, perhaps indicating a degree of state aid.

With regard to policing the scheme, how do we ensure that property owners are being fair and pass the benefit on to those renting their properties? Are there measures

against those tempted to be unscrupulous? That having been said, the relief is welcome, and I look forward to the Minister's response, particularly on the extended measure and its retail boundaries, particularly reflecting the other amendments.

Mr Humphrey: Like my colleague Mr Girvan, I support the Bill and the Minister's amendment. This is a Bill to address the temporary downturn in our economy. Of course, since our previous debate we have heard that the United Kingdom is on the verge of a double-dip recession. Therefore, it is important, as I said last week, that this local Administration deal with the local issues that face local traders with a local solution.

The Minister consulted widely across the sector in all our major towns and cities. I know that the organisations that came before our Committee — the Federation of Small Businesses, the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA), the chambers of commerce, city centre management and Pubs of Ulster — gave a view to which the Minister and the Committee listened. I am grateful to the Minister and colleagues on the Committee for that.

This scheme is about revitalising our towns and cities across Northern Ireland. It annoyed the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party last week, but, as a Belfast representative, I am going to centre my views on Belfast. I do not know why it caused the consternation that it did. Business improvement districts (BIDs), which are in legislation that will come from the Department for Social Development in time, will augment the Bill and deliver revitalised city and town centres across Northern Ireland. From conversations that I had with the city centre management of Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and Belfast City Council, I know that people are looking forward to those pieces of legislation because a 50% rebate over 12 months is a huge incentive for any business to do exactly what is set out in the Bill.

Local councils — I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council — are grappling with the issue of derelict and vacant buildings across Northern Ireland. In fact, Belfast has moved in a number of areas where buildings have been left lying for some time by unscrupulous landlords; such buildings have become a blight on main streets and attract vermin and fly-tippers. Those issues must be addressed. I welcome the Bill and the legislation that will flow from it because it is to incentivise business, and business needs that support at this time. It also represents joined-up government between this regional Assembly and local councils in Northern Ireland.

Empty shops damage the reputation and image of our towns, cities and high streets across Ulster. That incentive will help the proprietors of empty retail premises to think outside the box. It will deliver vibrant streets, address blight and market premises. What do I mean by that? If you have an area of a town or city that is run down, dilapidated, unattractive, not user-friendly and, frankly, threatening, people will not locate there. If shopkeepers and small business owners do not locate there, people will not shop there. There will be no trade, and so the whole area will become dilapidated.

One example of that is the area around North Street and Lower Garfield Street in Belfast. There has been huge blight in that area for years, to the extent that even the statutory

agencies gave up. The footpaths were lifting because they planted the wrong type of trees. The street lights were not repaired, and there was a huge amount of antisocial behaviour and graffiti there. It was an area that people, frankly, did not go to at night-time.

Let us bring in the whole issue of tourism. Belfast hosted the Tall Ships a few years ago. How can you connect the city centre of Belfast with Royal Avenue? Royal Avenue was the main shopping thoroughfare at that time. However, as I said last week, the city centre has shifted somewhat to Victoria Square. That has brought with it problems as well, because, as shops have relocated to Victoria Square, premises in Royal Avenue and other parts of the city centre have become vacant or other tenants have moved in on a temporary basis, such as those running Christmas shops and Halloween shops. That has been hugely damaging for the city, because the major tourist attraction in Belfast is the shopping experience. So, vibrant city centres are hugely important.

In 2006, Belfast City Council brought in an evening economy initiative. As part of that initiative, opening hours of shops were extended to encourage people who worked in the city centre to stay in Belfast, have a meal and go shopping or have a few drinks afterwards. That was hugely successful and created an almost European-type atmosphere in the city centre. It was something that made the city centre a much better place to be for tourists and those who work, live and shop in it. It was hugely positive for the city. What happened? The economic downturn occurred and the shops could not afford to stay open.

We got this message very clearly from those who came before our Committee: any help for small businesses, even if it allows people to move to normal profit so that they can get a monthly wage, is extremely welcome. We must encourage the private sector. There is a psyche in the United Kingdom, particularly in Northern Ireland, to always look to government, regional or local, for investment. If you look at some of the major cities in the United States, such as Chicago, that is not the case. We need to get the private sector to the same point as in those cities. In Chicago, shops and companies sponsor street furniture, such as flowerbeds and shopfronts in the main thoroughfares. That leads to a more vibrant and attractive city centre. That is what we need to ultimately move to. The current economic climate will not allow that to happen, but that is the sort of thing that we need to move to.

There is an opportunity cost of doing nothing, and it is simply not good enough for us to do nothing. Government must be proactive, must be responsive and must intervene directly, where necessary. I absolutely support amendment No 1, as proposed by the Minister. However, I do not support amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4, as proposed by Mr Allister, the Member for North Antrim. I will explain why. In my constituency of North Belfast is the Shankill Road, which for years had a reputation for being a tremendous shopping road; people came from across Belfast and the greater Belfast basin to shop there. Sadly, that is no longer the case. At 3.30 pm or 4.00 pm on a Saturday, the Shankill Road is, tragically, like a ghost town. I have met the traders and helped them, but, frankly, people are not coming there to shop because the mix of shops, cafes, restaurants, and so on, simply is not there any more. Somewhere in the region of 60 to 70 shops have closed. Unfortunately, prior

to devolution, government decided to knock many of them down, so there are large areas of green space and blight, with the biggest landowner being government. Many of those shops ceased being shops, which had generated wealth and employed people who spent money in the area, and became offices. On a Saturday, those offices are not open. The shopping experience that once was there is not there, so people have stopped coming. That is my experience of my constituency and the area in which I live. I do not want that to happen across Northern Ireland, and I fear that Mr Allister's amendments would deliver just that.

A number of years ago, I sat for a time on the Greater Shankill Task Force. I tried to encourage it to work to attract businesses into the area by providing low-cost office accommodation in a business environment. That did not happen, and the effect was that many shops closed, many jobs were lost, and many shops became offices.

As I said last week, businesses in Northern Ireland need a rapid response. I have spoken to businesspeople in the city centre, in my constituency and on the arterial routes. Sometimes, the focus is on the centre of towns and cities, but we must not forget that the arterial routes linking them are hugely important as well. The truth is that those people are crying out for help. They do not want help in two or three months' time because, as we all know from conversations with chambers of commerce across Northern Ireland and shop owners in the areas that we live in and represent, they need action now. They face the ongoing threat of closure, as do chains of shops across the United Kingdom. Anything that government can do quickly is welcome and must be done. I commend the Minister on the Bill, which has my support.

Mr Allister: I welcome much about amendment No 1. My difficulty with it is that it does not go far enough, hence the origin and purpose of amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4. I have no proprietary interest in any office accommodation, but members of my family have a shared interest in some.

The issue relates to how we best help to revitalise failing commerce across the Province. There seems to be a popular misconception that the Bill applies only to town centres. I find nothing in amendment No 1 restricted to town centres — I see the Minister nodding in agreement. The new clause applies to a country shop as much as to a town shop. Of course, there are, understandably, many more town shops. What makes our towns vibrant and populates them? Fundamentally, it is their provision, first and foremost, for shops, which should be the biggest draw. However, it is also their provision for offices, which help to increase footfall and provide employment, as do shops.

Therefore, if we are trying to revitalise and rejuvenate the commercial life of towns and villages, why would we shut our minds to the encouragement of office use as well as retail use? It seems to be the misconception of some Members, who, I assume, have read the amendment, that it is a retail initiative and that you would get the rebate only if you set up a retail business in empty premises. That is not correct. Had they listened carefully to the Minister — if some of his party members had listened carefully to him — they would have heard him concede that empty premises do not have to be used for retail to qualify for the concession.

3.45 pm

Even if Members take nothing else out of what I say, I want them to grasp and consider two points before deciding whether there is merit in amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4. First, as amendment No 1 is drafted, the qualifying criterion is not the use to which you put the premises but their use previously or historically. If the premises were previously a retail unit and have been empty for a year, you qualify for the rebate, irrespective of the use to which you put them. Therefore, you could, in fact, set up an office business in premises that were previously used for retail but have been empty for a year, and claim that rebate. You could then regularise your planning through a retrospective planning application that, probably, would not even be decided in the year that you were there.

Therefore, the notion that, somehow, amendment No 1, as drafted, would protect retail use is a fallacy. In fact, under amendment No 1, one could put former retail premises into office use and get the benefit of the rebate. When Members such as Mr Girvan, Mr Humphrey and Mr Bradley say that they do not want to encourage a trend towards office use rather than retail use, I respectfully suggest that they reconsider their support for amendment No 1 because it takes us down that route. Were it otherwise intended, the qualifying criterion for the rebate would not be the historical use; it would be the proposed use.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I just want to finish my point. If the proposed use is unrestricted and unlimited, it can be retail, office or anything else. Therefore, those who say that they are trying to protect the retail integrity of town and village centres are wrong if they think that amendment No 1 will do that — it will not. It is in that context that I say that there is sense in amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He will have heard what I said in my contribution. I said clearly that my suggestion, as a former member of the Greater Shankill Task Force, was for low-cost office accommodation to be available for the type of business to which the Member refers. Of course it is absolutely right to get the right mix; no one is questioning that. However, the problem in the area that I used as an exemplar is that offices replaced shops that attracted people on Saturdays, for example. Getting the mix right is, therefore, crucial. That was very clear from what I said, so do not misrepresent what I said.

Mr Allister: I understand entirely, but I am drawing on what the Member said. I understand the ethos and the thinking, and, by and large, I agree with a lot of what has been said about trying to protect the integrity of retail use. However, my point is that the vehicle put forward in the Minister's amendment will not do that. The Minister's amendment will allow a rebate for premises with an office use, provided that the historical use was retail, as much as it will for premises with a retail use. Therefore, if the ambition of the Members who made that point, such as Mr Bradley; Mr Dickson, I think; Mr Humphrey and Mr Girvan is to protect the integrity of retail use, they have the wrong vehicle in amendment No 1 as drafted. If amendment No 1 had been drafted so that the proposed use had to be retail, I would understand the Members' points entirely. However, it is not drafted like that; it is drafted solely on the basis of historical use. So, I say to Members: if, through the Minister's amendment, you

can import office use through previous retail use, why would you shut the door on amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4, which regularise the situation and make it a level playing field?

I said that I wanted Members to take two points on board. My second point is about the fact that, under clause 2, you can get a rebate on your rates if you have a window display. Think about the following situation. You have an empty office on the high street, and you can put a window display into it and obtain the rebate. However, you cannot put people in it to work and get the rebate. So, you can get the rebate for doing nothing — putting up a window display — but you cannot get it if you employ people and give them jobs on the same premises if it has an office use.

On the basis of those two very elementary and self-evident reasons, I strongly say this to the Minister: never mind who is proposing this; if there is merit, sense and logic in what is being said, take on board the points that have been made. I implore him to do that, because he is in the most incongruous position. He is creating a rebate that could be for premises that are used for office purposes provided the old use was retail, but not for premises in which the old use was as an office. He will give a rebate if a window display is stuck up in an office, but he will not give it if you employ three people behind the desk. I really think that the Minister needs to give that some serious thought. Maybe I have missed something fundamental in the drafting of amendment No 1, but my reading of it is that this is where it takes us. If that is the case, surely amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4 are the natural corollaries or common-sense approach needed to complete that circle. It is on that basis that I urge the House to support them.

Mr Agnew: It is always interesting to hear Jim and to follow his contribution. I hope that Members will listen to some of what he says. I am interested to hear the Minister's response to see whether he listens to what was said rather than to who said it, as Jim pointed out.

I am in the difficult position of being the final Member to speak in today's debate on the Bill's Consideration Stage. I support the Bill, and I suppose I will be reiterating, to some extent, what some have said. I am an MLA for North Down, and I live in Bangor. Virtually every day, I hear of another business in our town centre that is in trouble. As many Members have pointed out, the situation is urgent. As was expressed previously, getting the legislation through quickly is key, but, equally, it is important to get the legislation right.

Amendment No 1 is key, because a lot of what we are trying to do in the Assembly is promote new business start-ups. Extending the rates rebate for the first year of occupation of premises will help those new start-ups and, indeed, encourage them to come in. It will help them through what is often a difficult first year of trading. In that regard, I welcome the Minister's amendment and am keen to support it.

An issue has been raised which was raised in the Green Party's submission to the consultation. Although many of us are standing here to defend our town centres, there is nothing in the legislation that restricts it to town centres; it is based on size. While much of it will be targeted at town centres and much of the levy will be targeted at out-of-town shopping centres, that is not exclusive. In the Second Stage debate, the Minister highlighted some of the problems of having legislation that would apply the levy exclusively on

out-of-town centres, but the Green Party believes that this legislation goes some way to doing that, and we support it in that regard.

Although the proposal to allow window displays in empty premises does not address footfall, it addresses the appearance of our town centres and their attractiveness to shoppers and prospective entrepreneurs. In this slump in the economy, we are going through what we hope is a short-term difficulty. It is key that we ensure the attractiveness of our town centres during this difficult time, and there is benefit in allowing the window displays and improving the attractiveness of our town centres. I take Mr Allister's point. Arguably, it would be better to have a business operating in the premises than to have a mere display, but I believe a display is better than nothing.

One concern that I have with Mr Allister's proposed amendments is that they might extend the rebate too far and that, therefore, the cost could be increased and the value diminished. I will listen with interest to the Minister's response before I decide on how to vote on Mr Allister's amendments. He certainly raised questions that require answers.

It is fair to say that this measure will not be a panacea for the degradation that some of our town centres are facing; we will need other measures. One of my regrets is that PPS 5 is yet to be published. It would restrict out-of-town development. There can be no better example than Bangor town centre of somewhere that has suffered through the growth of the out-of-town shopping centre. Such development has been very much at the expense of Bangor town centre.

The measures in the Bill and the amendments are not a panacea, but doing something and not letting the perfect become the enemy of the possible is key. As the phrase goes, "Every little helps".

4.00 pm

Mr Wilson: I thank all the Members who took part in the debate and thank them for their amendments; I will address them in my winding-up speech. Those who recognise that the purpose of my amendment is to increase activity in town centres have hit the nail on the head. They recognise that one way of bringing more activity into town centres and, as Mr Allister pointed out, into peripheral areas is to try to take away the dereliction in some of those areas and to increase footfall through them. I do not want to go over all the points, but they have all been supportive, and I appreciate Members' support.

I turn to Mr Allister's amendments. I want to make it clear that I will not judge amendments to any legislation or proposal that I have made on where they come from or who makes them.

Mr Agnew: Does that include the Green Party?

Mr Wilson: Even the Green Party, and that really is stretching me. *[Laughter.]* We need to be more mature in the Assembly than to say that, if something does not come from my side or from my supporters, it cannot be good. The point of the exercise, even though it was accelerated passage, was to make sure that, if there were unintended mistakes or consequences in the Bill that my officials or I — we do not

claim infallibility on these issues — did not spot, we should take cognisance of them. I made it clear at the start that I would have preferred a line-by-line discussion of this issue in Committee, but it was not possible for all the reasons that I gave in the debate on accelerated passage. I listened to Members during the debate, and Mr Allister has tabled amendments that he believes will improve the Bill.

I agree with Mr Allister on a number of points. He has indicated that, once people take over premises, the rebate does not apply just to businesses that are shops as we understand them. It does not matter what the business is. I hope that I made that clear in my opening speech when I talked about arresting decline and encouraging business ratepayers to make an area more attractive or to locate their business — whatever it may be; I was not specific — there to increase traffic and footfall, to encourage and promote the long-term use of empty shops and to get them back into use to help further revitalisation. Therefore, I hope that Mr Allister is not saying that I was presenting that as a measure for shops only. I sought to make that clear.

Mr Allister: No. In fact, I said that, if Members had listened carefully to the Minister, they would have heard him say that it did not need to be retail for the concession to apply. The Minister made that point, but it fell on deaf ears. I am glad that it is now beyond dispute because it fundamentally undermines the objection of some who think that by rejecting amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4, they are in some way circumscribing or protecting only the retail use of town centres.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for that.

Secondly — perhaps I did not make this clear enough in my speech — whenever we talk about retail use and retail services, whether that is the use that premises were previously put to or will be put to in future, we are talking about many of the activities that could be classed as office use anyway. I was going to intervene to make that point when Mr Allister was making his speech, but I allowed him to define it himself. Retail services will include businesses such as estate agents, solicitors, accountants and insurance companies. Those are businesses to which the public go to purchase services. People present themselves in those premises and purchase services from the businesses. So, whenever we talk about retail purposes — I think that I used that term on a number of occasions during my speech, but maybe I should have clarified it — it includes the kinds of thing that people may have traditionally associated with office use. Sorry, did you ask me to give way?

Mr Allister: I did. I am much obliged. I am intrigued by what the Minister said. In the Bill, we have a definition of retail purposes:

“the retail provision of goods or services”.

The Minister is now telling us that that could, in fact, include office use. I really must question that. If you look at any legislation that governs or touches on hereditaments of that nature, you will always find a definition of retail purposes or retail use that, on the face of it, could not include offices. Indeed, that point is underscored by the fact that such legislation often includes definitions of office purposes. If you go back to the Office and Shop Premises Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, which still governs so much in the use of premises, you will see that there is a very distinct definition

of retail uses and office uses. So, I really am at a loss to understand how retail services could include offices. If that were so, surely the definition in the Rates Order would be so much different, and the definition in the amendment and the Bill would, peradventure, put that beyond doubt. I am sorry to go on, but, if it is meant to include offices, what is wrong with the amendments?

Mr Wilson: That is the point that I wanted to come to next. I wanted to establish that, in the minds of many Members and members of the public, retail services will include activities that people would sometimes regard as happening in office accommodation. For example, in places where insurance is sold or solicitor's offices and estate agents, the public present themselves and purchase services from or in those businesses. Mr Allister quite rightly asked why, if that is the case, there is an issue with his amendments. The issue is that we are dealing with the kind of — I am at a loss to give the correct term — back-office accommodation where there are no transactions with the public. There is a reason why we have excluded that. This is a new policy that we are developing. We have introduced the policy for a year only because we want to see how it works, and we want to make sure that we do not leave loopholes that people can use to displace and to take advantage in ways that we had not anticipated. Do not forget that the amount at stake is a rate allowance of up to £160,000 in one year.

Let me give an example of the kind of scenario that we seek to cover. Let us take, for example, an office that does not need to interface with the public and can therefore move easily from one floor of an office block to another. It does not matter that the office has moved up, down or across a floor; because there is no public interface, its location is not as important as it might otherwise be. Because the office does not have the same presentational requirements as other offices, moving from one premises to another might be quite easy. When the amount that I mentioned is at stake, the landlord who owns the block could tell the occupiers of the office to move up to the floor above. He could say, “It is empty and has been for a year. You will get the 50% rebate, and, when you move out, I will get the 50% rebate on the floor that you have vacated because it now becomes empty premises, and the savings could be anything up to £160,000 in the year”. We want to stop such movement to avoid paying rates.

Including offices as part of the definition of premises that have been vacated creates the possibility of rates avoidance and rates abuse. The problem is that, one, it is easy to move; two, there are very few consequences of having to move; and, three, the move can even be done in one building that is controlled by a landlord who has the incentive to give people the opportunity to move. He saves on the floor that has been vacated. There is no additional cost other than the cost of moving to the next floor. The landlord can make an allowance for that, but the loss to the public purse could be substantial. That is one example. I know that the Member wants to question me on that point, so I will give way.

Mr Allister: I do not quite follow the Minister. If he is saying that, contrary to all expectations and contrary, I suggest, to how words relating to retail are judicially defined — his officials would see that if they looked — retail services include people such as solicitors, which is a big surprise to me, the ease with which they could move from floor to floor

must be considered. If that is already in his legislation, they can do that anyway.

I am very surprised at the advice that the Minister has received on what passes for retail services. I am no expert in these matters, but I think that we have a Further Consideration Stage of the Bill. The Minister should perhaps take this matter away and come back at that point with an amendment that addresses all the issues. When it comes to the judicial interpretation of retail services, interesting though what the Minister says may be, he would be up against a great deal of judicial authority that would suggest that offices cannot be weaved into retail provision.

4.15 pm

Mr Wilson: First, that is the advice that I have been given. Secondly, let us look at what we mean by services. When I was teaching, I used to talk about the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy and how the tertiary sector included a range of services that the public could purchase, including the things that I have been speaking about today. Those have always been regarded as services — this is important — where there is a sale of those services to the public and the public present themselves at those premises in order to purchase those services or to avail themselves of those services and pay for them.

I will check up on that because the Member has raised the issue. I spoke to officials before the debate about the definition that I am giving, and the way in which it will be applied, I understand, will encompass those activities. I will give way.

Mr Allister: I am much obliged. The Minister has a very specific definition of retail sales in clause 1:

“sales of goods to members of the public who visit the hereditament to buy goods for consumption or use elsewhere for purposes unconnected with a trade or business”.

Is the Minister not creating a huge difficulty if he has a Bill which, in clause 1, so refines and defines retail sales and then he introduces an amendment through which, he tells us, retail services can mean something much wider? Is he not creating untold difficulties there?

Mr Wilson: In fact, if the Member looks at the proposed new article 31D(4), he will see that the term that is used in the paragraph that he has asked to be amended is not “retail sales” but “retail purposes”. Retail purposes, as I understand it, includes not just the sale of goods but the sale of services. The Member has raised an issue, and I am happy to take it away, but I am happy with the discussion that I have had that, when it comes to the interpretation of who will qualify and what premises will qualify under the terms of the amendment that has been proposed, it will include a wider range of outlets than just a shop that sells clothes, furniture, food or whatever.

The Member’s second point was about whether a solicitor could move up and down a block of offices. As I made clear when I moved the amendment, one of the reasons why it will have a one-year life before it is reviewed is that we do not know what its effect will be. Indeed, many of those who encouraged me to bring forward the proposal also raised the possibility that they were not sure of the possible

consequences of displacement and of competition, an issue raised by the Member for South Antrim. We have introduced it for one year only to allow us to review the situation, as I said, to see whether it has unintended consequences. Mr Allister is right: some businesses and some activities will find it easier than others to move from one set of premises to another. We want to find out just how widespread that happens to be, what the potential is for it and whether we continue with the scheme, if there is not widespread abuse, or refine it to ensure that we close the loopholes where there are those kinds of opportunities.

For those reasons, we have excluded the kinds of activity that I have described from the parts of the Bill that Mr Allister has asked to be amended. I believe that that is a sensible decision. We cannot anticipate all the consequences that might arise from the Bill, but this is one consequence that we have anticipated and for which we have seen potential. Around Belfast in particular and probably outside Belfast, there are office blocks owned by one landlord, where movement within that block could save the landlord and the tenant a considerable amount of money. That would be a cost to the ratepayer. Having anticipated that, we believed it right to word the Bill in the way in which it has been worded.

I do not think that we are dancing on the head of a pin. I hope that the Member will accept that, had they genuinely brought to attention bad drafting or unanticipated consequences, I would have been more than happy to accept his amendments. In the light of my explanation, since we do not want to lose money unnecessarily that can be used for other purposes, I ask Members to oppose amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4 and support the —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way a final time?

Mr Wilson: I was on my last word, so he got in just in time. I hope that I do not regret it.

Mr Allister: I am following what the Minister says, but the fundamental point that he has not dealt with is that, in amendment No 1, the determinant is historical use and not the proposed use, which, in fact, allows for office use, provided that the historical use was for retail. He has now expanded that to say that retail use could include solicitors’ offices and so on. Surely the fundamental difficulty with the amendment is that it faces in two directions. It includes, he tells us, because of the way in which it is drafted, someone moving in and setting up an office but only if that is done in an old shop. If it is done in an old office, the person is outside the remit but cannot have a window display.

Mr Wilson: I thought that I had been fairly patient in explaining that the amendment does not cover every eventuality but does cover the following eventuality: given the available premises, the occupancy of those premises at present and the potential to move within them, there is opportunity for abuse and for the provisions to be expanded in a way in which we do not wish them to be expanded. Of course, the Member is right to say that there is potential for that, and I am sure that it will happen. If it happens more extensively than we expect, we will have to decide whether we will continue with the scheme at all or whether we will amend it after a year.

I do not wish to be blunt, but some offices will move from premises that historically have been for office use only and

move into shops. As the Bill is currently framed, it does not exclude that, and, indeed, in trying to exclude that, we would be into the business of examining each use. That would have administrative implications. Rather than lose the impact of trying to get premises back into use, we will live with that. What we will not live with is a situation that could happen and, indeed, has great potential to happen and that we can prevent in the legislation by restricting what the historical use of a building happens to be. I ask the Assembly to give me support in doing that. For those reasons, I ask that Members oppose amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4 and support my amendments.

I thank all Members for taking part in the debate and for their patience in listening to the explanation. I hope that the debate has not become too much about me and Mr Allister arguing about the minutiae. I want to make it clear that, had I believed that his amendments would improve the Bill and not have unintended consequences, I am not too proud to accept changes to legislation that I bring to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 1 is subject to a number of amendments, so I will not put the Question on amendment No 1 until we have disposed of amendment Nos 2, 3 and 4.

Amendment No 2 to amendment No 1 proposed: In Article 31D(4)(a), after “purposes” insert “or office purposes”. — [Mr Allister.]

Question put and negatived.

Amendment No 3 to amendment No 1 proposed: In article 31D(4)(b), after “purposes” insert “or office purposes”. — [Mr Allister.]

Question put and negatived.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 4 is consequential to amendment Nos 2 and 3, neither of which has been made. I will not therefore call amendment No 4.

Having disposed of the amendments to amendment No 1, we now come to amendment No 1.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

New clause ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6 (Commencement)

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Amendment No 5 has already been debated and is consequential to amendment No 1.

Amendment No 5 made: In page 4, line 26, after “Sections 1” insert “, 1A”. — [Mr Wilson (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.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker. I suggest that Members take their ease for a minute.

Pharmacy (1976 Order) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the draft Pharmacy (1976 Order) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

I seek to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule, which, subject to the Assembly's approval, will amend the Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

At the outset, I should perhaps point out that this matter is not about contractual matters in community pharmacy. Rather, it is about the regulation of pharmacists irrespective of their practice environments — professional governance, if you like, in the public interest.

4.30 pm

I will now explain briefly to Members why the Order is needed. The Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland has, since its inception in 1925, been the regulatory and professional leadership body for pharmacists in Northern Ireland. Its current regulatory functions and powers are substantially governed by the Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, which is some 35 years old. The aforementioned statutory rule seeks to amend that Order to modernise and strengthen the regulatory powers of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, with the purpose of giving added assurance to patients and the public in respect of professional practice.

The last 10 years have brought some very substantial changes to the whole of the professional regulatory landscape in the UK and particularly across the health professions. Against that background, it has been recognised by both the Assembly and the Council for Healthcare Regulatory Excellence — the regulator of the regulators — that there is an ongoing need to update the statutory framework for pharmacist regulation in Northern Ireland to better meet the demands of modern regulation. The Department has been working collaboratively with the society to modernise pharmacy legislation, taking forward recommendations in the Government's White Paper ‘Trust, Assurance and Safety: The Regulation of Health Professionals in the 21st Century’.

Having listened carefully to the views of stakeholders and interested parties and, indeed, the views of the House at an earlier time, I seek your approval for the Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 to be amended to provide powers to enable the society to function in such a way as to meet the standards of modern regulation. The Order will create the powers for secondary legislation, which will bring into operation the more detailed legislative requirements relating to fitness to practise and continuing professional development.

The proposed regulatory changes to the existing legislation seek to address its current shortcomings and will, in particular, mean the following amendments. The White Paper recommends that the councils of regulatory bodies should have, as a minimum, parity of membership between lay and professional members to ensure that purely professional concerns are not thought to dominate their work; should have independently appointed members to dispel the

perception that councils are overly sympathetic to the professionals they regulate; and should become smaller and more board-like to enable councils to focus more effectively on strategy and oversight of their executive. Taking those points on board, the current council of 23 members will be replaced by a new council consisting of seven pharmacists and seven lay members appointed through the public appointments process, rather than elected by the membership.

The standards include core functions that professional regulators should undertake, including setting and promoting standards for entry to the register and for remaining on the register and checking that registrants continue to meet those standards. A duty will be placed on the council to set standards of continuing professional development (CPD). That will ensure that registered persons undertake to maintain their CPD as part of a process to ensure the improvement or development of their pharmacy practice, which is a condition of their continued registration.

The amendment to the 1976 Order will reconstitute the statutory committee and extend the range of sanctions available to it. Currently, the statutory committee has only one sanction — removal of a pharmacist's name from the register. The proposed Order will extend the range of sanctions to include warnings, interim order hearings, conditions placed on a registered person's practice, and suspension. The scrutiny committee will act as an initial, paper-based filter of cases, and it will be able, as appropriate and against established criteria, to either apply sanctions directly or refer cases for hearing to the statutory committee.

The repeal of article 18 of the 1976 Order and creation of the power for the society to establish fitness-to-practise processes for dealing with health cases will enable the society to seek medical reports concerning a registered person's fitness to practise and more appropriately handle sensitive health cases.

The changes being made closely parallel similar changes already made to the regulation of pharmacists in GB. In GB, in line with the White Paper to which I previously referred, there is a clear separation of regulatory and professional leadership functions. That was achieved through the formation of the General Pharmaceutical Council for regulation, with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society becoming the professional leadership body. That separation is considered necessary to demonstrate and provide assurances that public protection takes precedence over any professional self-interest.

I note that the society here has developed a partial separation through the formation of a professional forum, albeit that it is still within the same body governed by the council of the society. That is a step in the right direction, and I wish to follow up with the society how full separation can be achieved in the interests of the public and, indeed, the profession. I am also conscious that pharmacy is the only healthcare profession not regulated on a UK-wide basis. That point was raised in the consultation and noted in terms of the benefits of harmonising regulatory processes. However, I consider that, in the public interest, it is right to make important legislative changes now, without the complexity of more radical change and notwithstanding the future consideration of wider integration. In augmenting

the regulatory arrangements for pharmacists, what I propose today represents a significant development for the profession. It also represents a very important provision for the public and patients by ensuring that their interests are fully provided for through the setting of and adherence to robust standards. If pharmaceutical practice or conduct falls below what is expected, appropriate procedures and disciplines can and will be brought to bear.

I am pleased that the profession recognises the need for and supports these legislative changes, which further demonstrates my support for the profession, while enabling it to maintain and develop the highest standards of practice. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): As Members will be aware, the Chairman of the Committee is indisposed, so it falls to me to give the view of the Committee.

The Minister has explained the purpose of the draft statutory rule, and he requires the affirmation of the Assembly before it can become operational. The rule will reconstitute the council of the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland and extend the council's regulation-making powers in relation to discipline.

In scrutinising the legislation, the Committee was aware of the impact of the change to the regulation of pharmacists. It sought the views of the Pharmaceutical Society, the Ulster Chemists' Association and Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland. Although those organisations broadly supported the changes, some concerns were expressed. The Committee raised those concerns with departmental officials at its meeting on 7 December 2011. After that meeting, the Committee advised the Department that it was content that the legislation be prepared. On balance, the Committee was content that the legislation struck the right balance between ensuring patient safety and safeguarding the rights of the pharmacist.

The Committee considered the draft Order at its meeting on 11 January 2012 and recommended that it be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, I support the motion on behalf of the Committee.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. As Mr Wells outlined, the pharmaceutical sector has been well consulted — that has not always been the case — and is also happy with what is proposed. Devolved or local regulation will provide plentiful benefits to pharmacists and, more importantly, to the public. We support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for proposing the motion this afternoon. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I acknowledge the collaborative work carried out by the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland, the pharmacy profession and the Department to produce the draft Pharmacy (1976 Order) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012. We support the pharmaceutical profession and its regulatory body, the Pharmaceutical Society, in their endeavors. We further support the amendment of the 1976 Order and encourage the Minister and his Department to continue their close working relationship with the society and the pharmacy profession. We support the motion.

Mr McClarty: Thank you for allowing me to come in very briefly, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. The Minister will be

aware that the issue was debated in the House in 2008. At that time, it was thought that the existing structures were the best way forward. Has the Minister any plans to meet the Pharmaceutical Society to discuss further the appropriate way forward?

Mr Poots: I thank the Committee and the Pharmaceutical Society of Northern Ireland for the helpful role that they played in all this. It has been good to work in partnership to bring the order forward. The Order is a positive move, and it got a broad welcome from the House and beyond, so that is good news.

In response to Mr McClarty, we will be very happy to have discussions with the Pharmaceutical Society in due course to look at the best way to move things forward after the Order has been approved.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Pharmacy (1976 Order) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Sunbeds (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the draft Sunbeds (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule. Subject to the Assembly's approval, the rule will outline the amount of fixed penalties to be applied to certain offences in the Sunbeds Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which received Royal Assent on 3 May 2011. It had a positive response and a smooth passage through the previous Assembly, and my Department promised to enact most of its main measures within 12 months of its receiving Royal Assent. Those measures entail three sets of regulations and two commencement orders.

The 2011 Act allows an authorised officer of a district council to issue a fixed penalty notice if there is reason to believe that a person has committed an offence under particular sections of it. The regulations that we are debating outline the amount of those fixed penalties, which have been increased from those proposed in the consultation. Many of the responses to the consultation said that the proposed fixed penalties were an insufficient deterrent. I believe that the proposed new fixed penalties are more proportionate to the fines available on summary conviction. All but one of the proposed fixed penalties is set at £250. The fixed penalties outlined in the regulations have been agreed by the Executive and the Health Committee.

One fixed penalty, which is set at £50, remains lower than the rest. It relates to section 6 of the Act, which provides that it is an offence for an operator of a sunbed premises to provide or display any material that contains statements relating to the health effects of sunbed use. The fine on summary conviction for that offence is £200. The fine is lower than the other offences to keep it proportionate to the offence and to ensure compatibility with the European Convention on Human Rights, specifically article 10, which deals with the right to freedom of expression. These regulations allow district councils to deal with offences committed under the 2011 Act without the need to take all offences to the courts. The intention is that only persistent offenders will be referred to the courts.

Mr Wells (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Minister explained the purpose of his draft statutory rule, which, before it becomes operational, requires the affirmation of the Assembly. The rule will set the level of fixed penalties for offences covered by the 2011 Act, the aim of which is to prevent the use of sunbeds by those under 18 years of age and to ensure that those over 18 who use sunbeds are better informed of the risks.

The Committee's view was that the penalties needed to be set at an appropriate level and that the Department's consultation on the statutory rule showed that the majority of respondents agreed that the level of penalties was too low to act as a deterrent. Following its consideration of the draft rule, the Committee wrote to the Department on 26 October 2011 and asked for further details on the level of penalties. The Committee was content with the Minister's

response. He indicated that the Department listened to the respondents and raised the level of fines that would apply. The Committee then considered the draft rule at its meeting on 23 November 2011 and recommended that it be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, I support the motion on behalf of the Committee.

I have to say that the Health Department and those in charge of this legislation listened to every word we said. We entered into a very fruitful dialogue. I think that the legislation was strengthened considerably as a result of the co-operation between those involved in the sunbed industry, those who were drafting the legislation and the Committee.

4.45 pm

It is estimated that between two and three people a year die in Northern Ireland from cancers that have arisen as a result of the misuse of sunbeds. If improperly used, sunbeds can cause not only skin irritation and inflammation but skin cancer, a particularly nasty and painful form of cancer, which can, often, lead to death.

The Committee supported the legislation very strongly. We see it as part of a suite of measures in the Province designed to reduce lifestyle choices that can lead to cancer. We have already seen the introduction of a ban on cigarette vending machines. A ban on point-of-display cabinets in shops is imminent. There will be further restrictions on smoking, and now we have this very welcome legislation on the control of the use of sunbeds.

I am very aware, since this legislation came in, that sunbed emporiums often tend to be in run-down parts of our towns and cities. It is quite clear that they are often aimed at the most vulnerable members of our society and those who are perhaps not fully aware of the dangers of the misuse of sunbeds. It is essential that we discourage young people from getting hooked on the use of sunbeds for various reasons to do with appearance. Therefore, we strongly welcome the legislation and the penalties.

As the Minister says, it is important that we use the regulations wisely and that, initially, it is a matter of warning operators if they transgress and using on-the-spot fines. However, for those who persistently involve themselves in exposing young people to the dangers of the ultraviolet light in sunbeds or those who allow older people to misuse sunbeds without giving them the advice they need, we need to be very strict, because, inevitably, that could lead to serious injury or death.

Therefore, we welcome the fact that the Committee's input had such an immediate and significant impact on the level of fines. We see this as paving the way for further co-operation between the Department and the Committee on further legislation to try to reduce, if possible, the number of people who contract cancer needlessly in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. We welcome the legislation. There are numerous reports outlining the dangers or risks associated with the misuse of sunbeds. Any measure to deter such misuse is to be welcomed. We support the legislation.

Mr Poots: I thank Members once again for their support. I thank the Committee for its co-operation. We have worked closely together on these issues. I know that the Committee is there as a watchdog, but I believe that, as far as possible, on the many things on which we can co-operate and work with each other, we can get good outcomes for the people we serve, which is very useful. I believe that this is good legislation. It was brought forward by my predecessor, and I always supported it throughout that term of the Assembly.

As Mr Wells rightly points out, people lose their lives as a result of the misuse of sunbeds. That is something that we wish to reduce and, if possible, eliminate. This legislation takes us a step along that way. I am particularly pleased that we are targeting younger people very strongly. The last thing we want is for teenagers to have permanent damage or for their lives to be shortened considerably as a result of that damage.

Once again, I thank all Members for their support thus far. As I indicated, I think that this is a step in the right direction for the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Sunbeds (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Adjourned at 4.50 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 6 February 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matters of the Day

Accession of Her Majesty The Queen: Sixtieth Anniversary

Mr Speaker: The Rt Hon Peter Robinson has sought leave to make a statement on the sixtieth anniversary of the accession of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the throne, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Mr Robinson to speak for up to three minutes on the matter. I will then call other Members, as agreed with the party Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes in which to speak. As Members know, there will be no opportunity for interventions, questions or a vote on the matter. I certainly will not take points of order until the matter is dealt with. If that is clear, let us proceed.

Mr P Robinson: You will know, Mr Speaker, that so often the matter of the day deals with the latest bad news or some crisis. I am delighted, therefore, that, today, it celebrates accession day. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II succeeded to the throne on 6 February 1952, and today marks a significant anniversary: the diamond jubilee of her accession to the throne. The sixtieth anniversary celebrates yet another remarkable milestone in her reign.

The Queen's public life has spanned the careers of 12 Prime Ministers in the United Kingdom, 140 Prime Ministers in the Commonwealth realms, of which she is head of state and — bringing it more to home — six Prime Ministers, three First Ministers, three deputy First Ministers and 17 Secretaries of State in Northern Ireland.

I know that, in Northern Ireland, there are different traditions, outlooks and, indeed, different perspectives on royalty. However, I am convinced that everyone in Northern Ireland will respect the significant role played by Her Majesty The Queen over such a long period of time and recognise her many achievements, and, I am sure, for people in this House, not least her recent visit to the Republic of Ireland and the sealing of better relationships between our two countries.

Her Majesty is head of the Commonwealth of Nations, which comprises 54 states. That accounts for 2.1 billion people, which is about one third of the world's population. She has brought a wise head to difficult situations. Her experience gained during such a long tenure allows her to give sound counsel to those who have audiences with her.

A massive contribution has been made to society by Her Majesty, with countless visits around the kingdom as well

as foreign travel. She has a tiring and unrelenting schedule. Then, there are the innumerable official duties of receiving delegations, attending meetings of the Privy Council and other bodies as well as attending to the business of the 600 organisations of which she is patron. Only the limitation of time causes me to abridge the service performed by Her Majesty to her people.

As important of course is the love, respect and devotion her subjects have for their monarch. Just look at the faces of the thousands who line the streets and fill the town centres wherever she goes. It would be remiss to not also mention the signal service performed by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, who has been at her side all these years.

Of course, for us in Northern Ireland, Her Majesty performs the important task of giving Royal Assent to all the legislation that we pass. We very much welcome her visits here. We look forward to her visiting Northern Ireland as part of her programme this year.

On behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, we send our warmest greetings to Her Majesty. We salute her for the duties that she has performed on behalf of the realm and again say, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland: long may she reign over us.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Elliott: I welcome the opportunity to congratulate the Queen on reaching 60 years as Queen of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. I welcome the anniversary wholeheartedly because, as the First Minister indicated, the Queen has been a subject of a United Kingdom and Commonwealth that we all should be proud of and be proud to look up to and respect.

The Queen's visit to the Republic of Ireland last year signified throughout the world new relationships between two nations that are so close geographically but maybe so far apart in other ways. I welcome that visit, which may encourage the Republic of Ireland to look at the possibility of rejoining the Commonwealth. It would be helpful if that happened. I also look forward to the Queen visiting Northern Ireland — this part of the United Kingdom — sometime later this year. She will be made most welcome by the citizens of Northern Ireland.

On 6 February, my family always had a double celebration, because my mother and father got married on that date in 1952 — the day of accession. Quite clearly, it was a date that always held precious memories for our family, and we

always had a debate as to which event on that date was the most important.

Obviously, I wish the Queen and her family well for the future. I hope she has many more years to live and enjoy the respect for her in this community.

Dr McDonnell: I am glad to rise on behalf of myself and the SDLP on this day, the sixtieth anniversary, the diamond jubilee, of the Queen's accession to the throne. Who else in public life has enjoyed as much longevity as she has? On my own behalf, and on behalf of my party and the non-violent republican tradition I represent, I acknowledge and respect the achievement of Queen Elizabeth II and acknowledge and respect all those in this House and across the country who value her monarchy.

As the House knows, my political tradition aspires to and works for a slightly different constitutional relationship, different from the union with Britain. However, my non-violent republican tradition also aspires to and works for a republican model of Government. My political tradition acknowledges and understands that a large number of people in Northern Ireland value the link with Britain, value the monarchy and value the contribution of Queen Elizabeth II. We not only acknowledge that but fully respect it.

I hold to my aspirations and tradition, but we all must recognise that our view of ourselves and others and of our future changes with time, and I hope and believe that that is for the better. For me, the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Dublin last year and her work and that of President McAleese was another important step forward in the process of reconciliation and a process of a better and deeper understanding going forward between all the peoples of these islands.

I congratulate Her Majesty, and I wish her well on her diamond jubilee.

Mr Ford: On behalf of my colleagues here and in the wider party, I am very happy to also join in offering congratulations to Her Majesty on this diamond jubilee. There was talk in this place, not so long ago, about somebody else who did 60 years in a particular job and who served in this House. However, the example that the Queen has set, the way in which she has led the country and the Commonwealth for 60 years, is a remarkable example of public service and one that is widely respected.

We have seen huge change and turmoil in politics in every aspect of public life over those 60 years. Yet for most people in the United Kingdom she has been regarded as the key symbol of the unity of the country and a focus for that positive, warm feeling. Despite what politicians may do, she has remained a rock of stability in that respect.

She has also been that sort of figure of unity on a significantly wider stage than just within the United Kingdom. Others talked of her role within the Commonwealth. There is no doubt that a free association of countries, recognising her role as having changed away from the concept of empire to one in which she is seen as a force for leadership in a way that spans so many differences, will resonate with us. As others mentioned, that was shown for us here most strongly on her visit to Ireland last year. The symbolism of the wreath-laying in the Garden of Remembrance and at Islandbridge, the speech that she made in Dublin Castle and

then her personal engagement with the people of Cork all showed a very different relationship between the people of the United Kingdom and the people of Ireland, between the people of this island, North and South.

The Queen has demonstrated a very strong commitment to building that reconciliation and for assisting us in this place on that journey that we are engaged on. Indeed, I believe she has given us a very strong lead. So, although I certainly wish to pay tribute to the two former Irish Presidents, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese, in that part, today in particular we should recognise the contribution that the Queen has made to that reconciliation, and we should commit ourselves to following the lead that she has set.

Mr Allister: Across the Commonwealth today this is a momentous occasion when we celebrate the accession of Her Majesty to the throne. On behalf of my constituents, I am delighted to join in that celebration and in the passing of good wishes to her.

The 6 February 1952 undoubtedly had its dark side in that it marked the passing of King George VI. In his daughter, however, there blossomed a monarch who throughout times of great change — in the past 60 years we have seen immense change in the Commonwealth and across the world — has demonstrated a steady touch and steady hand, through which many and all of us have benefited.

So it is right and proper that the Assembly should pause to mark that momentous occasion. The question now is: does it end here? What part do the devolved Assembly and the devolved institutions in the United Kingdom now play in the upcoming months of celebration of the diamond jubilee? Will it be a fulsome, magnanimous part or will its part be spoiled by churlish, vindictive republican veto? Perhaps, the stony and churlish silence from the Sinn Féin Benches this morning indicates what is to come.

12.15 pm

It is, however, a challenge to the Executive, on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland, to play a fulsome part and to ensure that, unlike in respect of the royal wedding last year, there will be a gift on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland to mark the occasion and that there will be funding for communities to celebrate the diamond jubilee. I have in my hand a reply from the Culture Minister, who says that she plans to make no extra funding available to communities. Will we see the children of our Province afforded the tradition of a memento to mark that special occasion? I trust that we will. Will we see in the Assembly the return of royal symbols that have been removed —

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, the Member is stepping outside what the matter of the day is all about. I will move on.

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to add my voice to the congratulations to Her Majesty on this momentous occasion. In 2002, it was my great honour and privilege to be delegated by the Assembly to attend Her Majesty's golden jubilee celebrations in London as a delegate of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. It was a truly momentous occasion, which was attended by delegates from the vast majority of Commonwealth countries. I daresay that the sixtieth anniversary will be even more momentous.

It is deeply regrettable that not everyone could join in the congratulations. However, those who did not get it wrong when Her Majesty visited the Republic of Ireland. Today, they got it wrong again.

Her Majesty continues to epitomise dedication, commitment, integrity and respect, as she has always done. She has reigned throughout all our lives. May she be long spared to continue to reign.

Mr McNarry: On a day like today, one is reminded of the words, "God save our gracious Queen". Basically, that is what the nation says today: God save our gracious Queen. There is little that I can add to the kind words that have been said about a quite remarkable lady. She is a mother and a grandmother, who has known her own difficulties in her own family life and come through them. When the nation needed it, and should it ever need it in the future, she has shown that she is its Queen; she represents all of us, lives with all the things that we live with, and understands.

As has been said, it is regrettable that the House cannot share in the proposal that has been put so ably by the First Minister. Are we moving on? Perhaps, when the opportunity arrives for Her gracious Majesty to visit Northern Ireland, which is part of her kingdom, we will have seen changes from what we have seen today.

We can only welcome today as a nation. I feel extremely proud that no one can take the nation away from my beliefs, which I know are the beliefs of most people. Therefore, I am extremely glad to be associated with the debate. Thank you very much for calling me, Mr Speaker.

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 6 February 2012.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this 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 6 February 2012.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr Mike Nesbitt as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; that Mr Fra McCann replace Mrs Sandra Overend as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr David McNarry replace Mr Michael Copeland as a member of the Committee for Regional Development. — [Mr McCallister.]

Ministerial Statement

Speeding Up Justice

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on speeding up justice. Since taking up the post of Justice Minister some 22 months ago, I have repeatedly stressed that one of my priorities is tackling delay in our criminal justice system. I committed to driving forward a programme of work, through the Criminal Justice Board, to speed up justice. The delivery of a faster justice system is a core part of my vision for building a fairer, more just and safer community.

As Members will know, delay has a very harmful impact on the cause of justice. Perhaps worst of all, it prolongs the sometimes traumatic ordeal of a criminal trial for victims. It also wastes the system's resources and reduces the confidence of the community in the criminal justice system. That is why I remain determined to streamline our justice processes and to strip out wasteful and unnecessary delay. This is a complex and difficult issue, representing a challenge of considerable scale. It requires bold thinking, ambitious reforms and, crucially, a long-term commitment to seeing them through.

Since my election, I have been working with senior leaders across the justice system to improve performance. I have been impressed by the hard work of the justice agencies to deliver this improvement, and I want to pay tribute to the strenuous efforts that they have made. Indeed, in what has been the first phase of our shared endeavours, important advances have been made, including the introduction of a streamlined file for low-level criminal cases; new guidance on building prosecution files; and central teams to provide pre-charge advice. We now have an out-of-hours phone line providing prosecutorial advice to the police; a gatekeeper service to scrutinise all files prior to submission to the prosecution service; and the development of four multiagency regional performance improvement partnerships.

While some improvement in performance has been made, and I am confident that the second phase of our work, now under way, will bring further improvements, I am disappointed that we are not yet achieving the step change that is necessary to deliver the kind of justice system that the people of Northern Ireland deserve. The plain fact is that we need to do more and go further if we want to tackle delay.

Last month, Dr Michael Maguire, the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice, published his follow-up review of delay in our system. His assessment was that justice agencies had made great efforts but had not achieved the necessary improvements in performance. Worryingly, in some areas, performance had deteriorated. Dr Maguire concluded that more radical reform is required and that I should introduce statutory time limits. I have considered that recommendation very carefully. I did so in the context of the independent reviews of youth justice and the prison service, which reached similar conclusions about the need for statutory time limits.

The wide-ranging agenda of reform that I am pursuing across the justice system requires a willingness to take new approaches. In relation to speeding up the justice system, I have made clear that I am committed to considering other options if current measures do not achieve the step change required.

Having examined the issues closely and taken advice from a number of quarters, I have concluded that the time is now right for the introduction of statutory time limits. Therefore, today, I announce to the House my intention to introduce statutory time limits within the lifetime of this Assembly. In line with the recommendations that were made by the youth justice review, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) and others, it is my intention that the new time limits will, in the first instance, be applied to the youth court.

As a first step, I have asked the Criminal Justice Board to consider in detail how such time limits could work in Northern Ireland. I will make a further announcement about the results of that work in due course. Although the details remain to be agreed, in essence, the time limits would give the justice system a fixed amount of time to progress a criminal case and would specify penalties for failing to meet them.

I am clear that a crucial part of the Criminal Justice Board's considerations must be how we safeguard the interests of victims in any framework of time limits. I state categorically that statutory time limits are to be a measure that makes victims' experiences and perceptions of the justice system better, not worse. I will not introduce a system without proper safeguards to ensure that outcome. I am also mindful of concerns that time limits should not be applied in respect of the most serious charges. I have asked the Criminal Justice Board to pay particular attention to those concerns.

Members can be assured that any proposals that I bring forward will be the subject of widespread consultation, including with the wider public and the Assembly. In particular, I will continue to work with the Justice Committee, which has shown considerable interest in the issue of delay. I am very grateful to Committee members for those efforts, which have included scrutinising the Department's progress reports every six months. I will ensure that the Committee is given sufficient opportunity to examine any proposals that we bring forward. I will consider the application of time limits to adults at a future date, but I think that it is right that we initially focus on young people. Delays in such cases are particularly troubling and can be highly damaging to a young person's chances of rehabilitation. Indeed, there is consensus across all of the reports that I have received on this matter that the priority should be youth cases.

The introduction of time limits is a significant departure for Northern Ireland, and I am well aware of the huge impact that the change will have. Put simply, however, big problems require big solutions. I am now convinced that time limits are the best way to ensure a strong focus right across the justice agencies on the timely delivery of justice.

Statutory time limits alone will not solve the problem of delay. Time limits will be a catalyst for change, but we still need to bring forward a bold programme of reform to meet the challenge that time limits will set. That is what I committed to at the outset of my time as Justice Minister, and I reaffirm that commitment to the House today.

I referred earlier in the statement to the second phase of our programme to speed up justice, which will help to prepare the system for the time limits that will be set in due course. That phase focuses on the underlying causes of delay through more fundamental and systemic reforms. Last

month, I launched consultations on measures to encourage earlier guilty pleas and to reform committal. Earlier guilty pleas have the potential to speed up processing times, to spare victims the ordeal of preparing for a trial and facing the defendant in court, and to reduce the burden on scarce justice resources. I also propose to remove the right to call and cross-examine witnesses during committal. That can result in a terrible experience for victims; it is right that we are bringing forward proposals to remove it. I also seek views on other ways in which we might reform committal, such as the direct transfer of indictable cases to Crown Court.

Looking ahead, I am reviewing how criminal cases are initiated, with a particular focus on improving performance in summons cases. The Department is also looking at how we can make greater use of video link technology. Although I will examine any proposals for speeding up justice, there is no quick fix. The solution to the problem of delay is a long-term commitment to reshaping our justice system through bold and innovative reform. Statutory time limits have a role to play in achieving that by setting a robust framework for change and ensuring that the whole system is focused on speedier justice. The scale of the task is clear, and it will be challenging to deliver. However, it is a challenge that we must be willing to meet if we are to deliver a fairer, faster justice system.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I thank the Minister for his statement.

In one sense, I am disappointed that this statement has had to be made, because I think it is an indictment of the justice agencies that the introduction of statutory time limits is necessary. One would have thought that they would, at all times, seek to exercise their functions effectively and speedily. The fact that statutory time limits are necessary to do that is something in which I am disappointed, but I share the Minister's frustration that they are necessary.

12.30 pm

Will the Minister outline the proposed timescale for the statutory time limits? Will 120 days be the statutory time limit to deal with cases coming through the youth courts?

The statement also touched on the issue of early guilty pleas, and I welcome the consultation that is taking place on that. Has the Minister looked at the Scottish proposals for reform of the legal aid system, which resulted in a dramatically larger number of early guilty pleas being brought forward? Is he considering a review of sentencing to take into account when a guilty plea is entered in the various stages of proceedings through the courts?

Mr Ford: I certainly share the Committee Chair's disappointment at the need for this measure, but what is absolutely clear is that the efforts that have been made over the last couple of years have not fully addressed the problem in the way that we had hoped they would. I can assure the Committee Chair, however, that we will discuss in great detail with the Committee the precise time limits that might be put in place. However, at this stage, I have asked the Criminal Justice Board to do the preparatory work on which we will engage with the Committee to ensure that we get the best possible take and the best possible arrangements for Northern Ireland.

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

The Member also highlighted the issue of early guilty pleas. I assure him that some of the changes that are already in place regarding legal aid in Northern Ireland already assist in discouraging multiple adjournments. I welcome the fact that I was recently told by some lay magistrates of a district judge in the youth court who, when asked by a solicitor for an adjournment, instead of saying what might customarily have been, "You can have four weeks", looked at his watch and gave the solicitor a time that afternoon. So a lot of work has been going on around that issue. Statutory time limits are designed to underpin that. There is no doubt that, as we look at sentencing review, the issue of exactly what remission of sentence may be granted for an early guilty plea is one that is being engaged with solidly.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement. He referred to Dr Michael Maguire's report, and we see the need for the type of initiative which the Minister has taken. Indeed, it is worrying that, in spite of the efforts of the justice agencies, Dr Maguire is still critical of aspects of the speed of justice. With that in mind, will the Minister give us a timeline for when the Criminal Justice Board will conclude its initial findings and bring them before the Committee so that we do not have undue delay in its work?

Mr Ford: I also thank the Deputy Committee Chair for that welcome. There will be a lot of engagement in the Committee, and having two people on my side to start with is always useful. It is not possible to say at this stage when the board will be in a position to report to me so that I can engage with the Committee. We hope that it will be in the middle part of this year, and we seek to go into public consultation later this year. A number of technical issues must be worked through in some detail, and I would welcome the assistance of the Committee as we go through that work.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, last time you spoke to the Assembly on this matter, you indicated that you were not convinced that statutory time limits (STLs) were a good idea. I think that that was because you thought that the system was not fit for purpose. Will you tell us what you think has changed since then and why you now recommend statutory time limits?

Mr Ford: There is always one who breaks with unanimity, Mr Deputy Speaker.

The simple position is that, at an early stage, as we were seeing work done by the Criminal Justice Board and the different agencies, it was not clear to me that statutory time limits were appropriate and relevant. It is now clear, on the basis of a number of reports that have been received — most notably the CJINI report of last month and reports on prisons and youth justice and others — that there is a general perception that the good work that has been done is not yet enough.

I acknowledge that I did not accept the arguments previously, but I now accept that there is a strong case for statutory time limits. We have also had the opportunity to look at experiences in other jurisdictions. The assistant chief constable for crime operations recently returned to the PSNI after a few years in Scotland, where he had the experience of implementing time limits. His experience

enabled us to look at some of the practicalities of how they worked elsewhere. That underpins the general belief across the criminal justice agencies that the time is now right to look towards the introduction of statutory time limits, at least in youth courts, within the current mandate.

Mr A Maginness: I welcome the Minister's statement. The SDLP welcomes the Minister's conclusion that there should be time limits and believes that their introduction will add a business and administrative discipline to the criminal justice system and to criminal proceedings at large.

The Minister said that, in keeping with the findings of the report on the youth justice system, he will introduce time limits there first. Will the Minister outline when that might start and when he might begin to introduce time limits into the higher levels of the justice system?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for two points that go to the heart of the issue. I said that I hope that statutory time limits will be in operation in the youth court within the lifetime of this Assembly. The reality is that the agencies need at least a couple of years to prepare for their introduction. However, on the basis of discussions that have taken place in the Criminal Justice Board, that work is under way.

We need to examine whether the legislative provisions in the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 are adequate for our needs in this case, or whether we will need to introduce further legislation. That is where the timescale becomes a little difficult. I certainly think that there is a case for saying that STLs will be introduced in the youth court before they are applied in the adult courts. If there is legislation to be made, we will ensure that it covers both courts in a way that could be commenced at different dates. I suspect that it will be an issue for the Minister of Justice in the next mandate to look at the experience of how time limits have been applied in the youth court to determine how they might be applied in adult courts.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I also welcome your announcement today. Wisely, the time limits have been announced to give the various organisations in the justice system sufficient time to make the necessary preparations. I am particularly pleased that you said that, in the first instance, time limits will be applied, where appropriate, in the youth justice system and youth courts.

Minister, will you explain to the House what will happen next? Who will have responsibility for taking this forward? What do you perceive to be the necessary preparations?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for that positive endorsement. The specific issue of — *[Interruption.]* His endorsement makes it merely a four-party agreement so far.

Given the Member's background in youth work, I know that he will appreciate what I appreciate from my background in social work, which is that we need to ensure that we deal with young people who are on the edge of getting into trouble in a way that deters them from doing so and does not leave them in limbo, waiting for the court system to move slowly before things can happen. That also needs to be done in a way that ensures that the victims of the kind of crime that young people are involved in see an early clear up of their case.

The Member specifically asked what will happen next. The Criminal Justice Board is chaired by the Department and brings together all the relevant agencies, most notably the Police Service, the Public Prosecution Service, the Youth Justice Agency and the Probation Board. It will engage in a programme of work to identify the issues that need to be resolved in individual agencies and on a cross-agency basis. Indeed, it has already started that work. The board will work with my staff to determine whether new regulations or primary legislation are needed. On the basis of that work, I will engage with the Committee for Justice, and, if necessary, I will report to the Assembly at the earliest possible time. I hope that that will be in the middle part of this calendar year.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I am sure that everyone agrees that we need more timely justice. However, I ask the Minister to deal with the central concern about statutory time limits — what happens when cases reach their statutory time limits? What assurances can the Minister give to the House and to the wider public that no criminals will walk free as a result of a statutory time limit being reached, resulting in their being let off on a technicality?

Mr Ford: Mr Weir raises a perfectly reasonable matter of concern, which is the "what if?" question. All I can say is that, from the information that came back to us from the assistant chief constable (ACC), from the Scottish experience, it is clear that although, in some cases, people who have committed relatively trivial offences walk free because the system does not work in time, the key issue around statutory time limits is that they are an incentive to ensure that Departments and different agencies do their work within an appropriate time. The Scottish experience is that people do not walk free. That is why, unfortunately, it is taking time to get the measure introduced. We need to take time, rather than try something hasty that may, perhaps, create a set of circumstances that would give rise to the concerns being expressed not just by Peter Weir but by virtually everyone in the House.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Can the Minister assure the House that, in the process of speeding up justice and the incentive to early guilty pleas, the proposed measure will not disadvantage the most vulnerable?

Mr Ford: I see no reason why it would disadvantage the most vulnerable. Those who are, in many senses, most vulnerable are the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of crime. I am determined that statutory time limits will allow victims to see cases being dealt with in a speedy and efficient way. The initiatives that we are proposing around early guilty pleas will enable people to gain some credit for making a plea of guilt at an early stage and, in many cases, spare witnesses and victims the trauma of having to appear in court, or even the trauma of having to think that they might have to appear in court. In that regard, both measures would assist the most vulnerable.

Mr Wells: The Minister will hardly be surprised to know that some of us are quite uneasy about this proposal and that we envisage clever barristers and solicitors manipulating the system to make certain that their clients' cases exceed the time limit so that they get off scot-free. He did not give the honourable Member for North Down the assurance that

no one would get off as a result of this change. Has he considered some form of financial penalty for those who have been involved in such cases, so that if they do not get a case to court in time, they will lose a significant portion of their fee? That might concentrate a few minds and stop such incidents happening. There are those in the House who remain extremely uneasy about the Minister's proposal.

Mr Ford: I did say in the statement, and I will repeat the assurance to Mr Wells, that we will need to take considerable care over the issue of more serious crimes. There is no proposal, at this stage, to move to statutory time limits at the most serious end of the spectrum. I am slightly disappointed by the Member's position on the issue of penalties and of clever solicitors and barristers. I seem to remember, if nothing else, that, on one occasion when I was with the Justice Committee last year, he highlighted the good work that was being done by the Department of Justice in ensuring that clever solicitors and barristers did not twist the system to get away with excessive amounts of legal aid payments. Indeed, he was very supportive of that work being done by the Department, and I look forward to his support as we ensure that similar good work is done on this proposal.

Mrs Overend: As my colleague said earlier, there seems to have been a dramatic change of mind about the statutory time limits. Will the Minister detail how that change of mind came about?

Mr A Maginness: He is on the road to Damascus.

Mr Wells: It is a Damascus road conversion.

Mr Ford: I am not sure that it was the Damascus road, as the hecklers from both sides of the Chamber are saying. It was a simple issue of considering the fact that the system had not improved over the nearly two years that I have been in post and considering the evidence concerning the way in which statutory time limits work in other jurisdictions. I am not sure that expressing a degree of scepticism about something in the absence of evidence and then getting the evidence and accepting the proposal amounts to a Damascus road conversion. It seems to me to be sound evidence-based policymaking by Departments of the kind that I would expect the Assembly to support.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Minister's statement, because we need to tackle delays in the justice system.

It is of paramount importance to protect the victims, but, given that the measure will be used for young people who find themselves in front of the courts for low-level crime and minor offences, can the Minister tell us how he will ensure that their rights are protected? Somebody might be brought through the courts on a first offence, and you really do not want that to impact on the rest of their life.

12.45 pm

Mr Ford: I agree with the point that Ms McCann is making. Ensuring that young people are in court at the earliest possible point consistent with a fair trial protects their interests and stops them from spiralling into further trouble before the offence is dealt with. There are real dangers that, if there are delays in the youth court, some young people will embark on a pattern of crime because the initial offences have not been properly addressed. That is one way in which

we will help to keep young people out of crime by addressing their early offending properly. It is an issue where we will need to look at how exactly that works in respect of which crimes are taken into account, but, fundamentally, the point that is being made is central to the Department's thinking.

Mr McDevitt: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board and, indeed, as a member of the selection panel that appointed ACC George Hamilton, who seems to be personally responsible for the change of policy in Northern Ireland. How can the Minister justify coming to the House only a matter of months ago and saying that this seemed to him to be a very dangerous proposal to put forward at that stage and, with full credit to ACC Hamilton, be able to come to the House today celebrating the unanimity in which, it seems, he was the discordant chord in the first place?

Mr Ford: I am sure that Mr Maginness will manage to educate Mr McDevitt on that particular point later. I thought that I had made it quite clear that the simple point is that, when you consider the evidence, you make policy in line with the evidence. That was not the situation some months ago; it is now the situation in which I find myself, and I have no problem whatsoever with the concept of the Department of Justice and its Minister making policy on the basis of sound evidence.

Mr S Anderson: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, the statement refers to Dr Maguire's latest progress report, and, apart from what you are proposing in your statement, do you intend to take any further action to tackle what Dr Maguire identifies as a deterioration in performance?

Mr Ford: I appreciate the point that Mr Anderson is making. We are looking at improving performance in a significant number of areas, and the point of statutory time limits is to underpin that. It is too long to read out, but I can give the Committee a list of a number of issues that are under way, including around case preparation, general governance, case management when issues get into the system and the reform of committals that I talked about. A number of different issues are running together. The policy on statutory time limits is not the solution; it is underpinning the work that is being done in many other areas.

Lord Morrow: I welcome the fact that, at long last, the Minister acknowledges that big problems exist in the system. He also acknowledges that performance has deteriorated, and, to say the least, it is quite an achievement to get this Minister to that stage. Whether that was via a U-turn or some other sort of a turn is not that important at the moment. When the Minister speaks about speedier justice, I trust that he is talking about speedier justice for victims.

Furthermore, the upsurge in terrorist attacks and activity, which take precedence with Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI), has relegated other crimes, such as burglary, further down the list. Thousands of cases are waiting to be processed, which brings the court system nearly to breaking point. Bearing that in mind, does the Minister intend to provide any further resources for FSNI to ease the backlog and speed up non-terrorist cases to allow victims speedier access to justice without, of course, hampering investigations into terrorist attacks?

Mr Ford: I really am ever so slightly baffled by the suggestion that “at long last” I have acknowledged the problem. I cannot remember the number of times that I have spoken in the House or to the Committee about the problem that we have with the speed of justice. How we address that was an issue to be tested by specific evidence, but to suggest that I did not acknowledge that there was a need for reform, when I have been talking about reform and speeding up the justice system almost since the day that I took office, is utter rubbish.

Lord Morrow spoke about speedier justice for victims. I am not sure whether he was in the Chamber while I made my statement, because I referred several times to ensuring that the justice system works in the interests of victims. He talked about hundreds of cases held up by the forensic science lab —

Lord Morrow: Thousands, I said.

Mr Ford: Sorry, I stand corrected: he talked about “thousands” of cases. The last count that I got was that there were four cases in which there was an issue involving the Public Prosecution Service and the speed of cases being processed through the lab. So, a few facts would help.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to make the statement. To follow on from the previous question, I welcome the Minister’s reassurances regarding victims, and God knows that we have had enough victims in Northern Ireland over the years. The Minister made it clear that victims’ interests will be paramount as statutory time limits are introduced. He also referred to his plan to remove the right to call and cross-examine witnesses during committal proceedings. Where does that proposal sit, as of today?

Mr Ford: I confirm that the reforming of the committal processes is currently out for consultation; sorry, put more accurately, it is being prepared for consultation. There are serious issues as to how we ensure that victims are not put through the peril of having to twice go to court — for committal proceedings and to give evidence in the substantive trial. There are real issues as to whether we should be looking further into removing the normal committal process altogether, as is the case in other jurisdictions. We need to ensure that those on trial receive a fair trial and that victims are not put through the perils of what almost amounts to double jeopardy for them, if not for those on trial.

Mr Allister: So far as it is necessary to do so, I declare that I am a member of the Northern Ireland Bar.

I suggest to the Minister that his announcements today are wholly ill-advised because statutory time limits will inevitably result in people who should face trial — however small the number of cases may be debatable — not facing trial due to the expiry of the time limit. It will be an incentive to feet-drag. He can take it from me that it is not beyond the ingenuity of the defence to participate in feet-dragging. That incentive will exist, and the outcome will be that some people who should face justice will not face justice. When the Minister has to face the wrath of the House for some significant case that falls by the wayside —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question, please?

Mr Allister: — perhaps some of those who cheered him on today will also reflect on the folly of that.

I also suggest that it is utter folly —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Sorry, I must ask the Member to come to his question.

Mr Allister: I also suggest to him that it is ill-advised to abolish preliminary investigations, which act as a filter in respect of weak cases, because to do so will result in cases continuing to trial and inevitable acquittal rather than saving money and time by having such cases filtered out at preliminary investigation stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Minister to respond.

Mr Ford: Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker. On preliminary investigations, Mr Allister, like everybody else, will have his opportunity to comment in the consultation. I thought that I had made it quite clear that we were being careful as to what level of offences would be covered, so the suggestion of “significant cases” falling “by the wayside” is ill-founded. I suspect that in the face of the advice that I have received and the experience noted in other jurisdictions, to suggest that this proposal is “wholly ill-advised” is contrary to the facts.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Justice on his statement.

Executive Committee Business

Rates (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (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 will be one debate on the single group of two amendments, which amend the definition of retail purposes. Once the debate is completed, the second amendment in the group will be moved formally and the Question will be put without further debate. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

We have now come to the single group of amendments for debate. With amendment No 1, it will be convenient to debate amendment No 2. The amendments impact on the definition of retail purposes.

Clause 2 (Temporary rebate for certain previously unoccupied hereditaments etc.)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move amendment No 1: In page 3, line 42, leave out “on or from the hereditament” and insert:

“to members of the public who visit the hereditament”.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 2: In clause 3, page 5, line 37, leave out “on or from the hereditament” and insert:

“to members of the public who visit the hereditament”. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Amendment No 1 makes a minor technical amendment to the provision dealing with the one-year concession that will provide a 50% rebate to the first occupiers of long-term empty properties in 2012-13. I will also speak to amendment No 2, which makes a similar consequential amendment to clause 3 for consistency purposes.

Before looking at the detail of the amendments, I wish to briefly touch on some of the issues that were raised during the last debate that are related to the amendments. As Members will recall, the main provision in clause 2 is intended to encourage business ratepayers to occupy empty premises, creating new jobs and investment opportunities in local communities. It will also make our core retail areas more vibrant where those may have become run down as a result of high levels of vacancies. As Members are aware, the purpose is simply to encourage those properties to be occupied and get them back into use. That will apply where the property was previously used for the retail sale of goods and the retail provision of services.

During last week's debate, I gave examples of the types of empty property that that would typically apply to, and which we can find on our high streets. That includes long-term

empty clothes shops, food stores, newsagents, corner shops, hairdressers, beauty salons and opticians, among others. A number of those have a mix of the sale of goods and the provision of services.

Members will wish to note that the Departmental Solicitor's Office has confirmed what I told the Assembly last week: eligible properties could also include those providing professional services, such as solicitors, accountants and estate agents — all businesses that typically operate out of shop-type premises or premises above shops. Although those may not be what Members would typically consider to be retail services, it is important to remember that those types of retail services are commonly provided in the main streets of our towns across Northern Ireland.

The changes were broadly supported across the Chamber, particularly where they would serve to breathe life back into our core shopping areas, whether in or out of town. On that point, the Member for North Antrim correctly pointed out that the measure would not simply apply to our high streets and town centres, which I readily accepted. However, I believe that those are the areas that will benefit most from the changes provided for in clause 2.

As I flagged up during our earlier debate, I believe that the Executive and Assembly are being forward-thinking in relation to the measure. The measures in the Bill are a serious attempt by the Executive and the Assembly to actively try to breathe life into our core shopping areas. Nowhere else in the United Kingdom has introduced a scheme like that. I think that it is something to be proud of, as we take action to bring long-term empty retail properties back into use.

During the debate last week, I listened carefully to what Members had to say, not only to those comments in support of the change but to concerns that were raised. I was particularly interested in the comments made by the Member for North Antrim Mr Allister. During Consideration Stage, I made it clear that I do not judge amendments to legislation or proposals that are made on where they come from or who makes them. Both my Department and I listened carefully to the issues raised during Consideration Stage. As I set out in the last debate, there is the issue of general office accommodation where there are no transactions or interface with the public.

The amendments clarify the definition in the Bill of retail, trade and services, and establish beyond reasonable doubt that there must be a public-facing front to the sale of goods or provision of services from those premises. That does not change the scope of the measure and is entirely consistent with what I told the Assembly last week during Consideration Stage; it purely clarifies the kinds of premises that will be covered. It is, however, a reaction to a useful debate that took place on this particular measure.

1.00 pm

The intention is that the measure will apply only to properties providing retail services to members of the public. The amendment will make it clear that there has to be an interface with the public. I do not want to create a situation where suites of offices in office blocks move about to get a 50% rebate on their rates. That is only one example.

The provision will apply to properties that offer retail provision of goods or services to members of the public who visit that property. Members must appreciate that we are trying to draw a reasonable balance between encouraging the occupation of empty commercial premises and ensuring that we do not create a dodgers' charter by making the scope of the concessions so wide as to encourage businesses to move about. The revised amendment is crafted to make it clear that the public needs to visit the premises. The policy was always intended for that type of premises.

The amendment will also prevent relief being awarded to those properties that are simply used for e-commerce distribution. Those sorts of properties are of a different character to the empty retail premises that we are trying to get back into business. Members will note that the amendment to clause 3 is simply intended to provide consistency between it and clause 2, as they deal with similar areas.

Finally, as I have made clear in all the debates, this is a new policy. It is untried in the rest of the UK. In light of that, and in order to ensure that the measure does not result in either abuse or unintended displacement of business activity, it is being applied for only one year. I want to see how the measure works and ensure that there are no unintended loopholes that people will use to take advantage of the rating system in ways that we had not anticipated. Should widespread abuse occur, and unscrupulous people start to play the system, I will not be slow in coming back to the House during the year to deal with that by making regulations to close any loopholes.

I thank Members from all sides of the House for the contributions that were made during the debate last week. I hope that the amendments that I have tabled today deal with some of the issues that were raised, and I, therefore, ask for Members' support.

Mr Girvan: I support the two amendments tabled by the Minister. I appreciate that issues caused concern in the debate last week, and I hope that what is presented today will go some way towards ensuring that those comments were taken on board. I feel that it does. I appreciate this opportunity to deal with businesses that are interfacing with the public, which is one of the points that were raised. Offices can and do exist that never have a member of the public darken their door and that do not sell services, so that issue has been dealt with through the added wording in clauses 2 and 3:

"members of the public who visit".

I support the Minister's amendments. I feel that this initiative will go a long way towards giving some confidence back to the community that the Committee and the Assembly are acting on the concerns that have been brought to us.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to support the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill, proceeding, as it is, by way of accelerated passage. Of course, the difficulty with accelerated passage is that everything is done in a hurry. I regret that the House did not support the amendments tabled last week by the Member for North Antrim, because I thought that they had merit. I hope that that does not come back to bite us. The Minister assured us today that he will not hesitate to come back to the House if there are any unintended outcomes, and I am pleased to hear him say that.

The two amendments provide clarification, which is to be welcomed, and improve the Bill accordingly. Therefore, I am happy to support the Bill as amended.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the amendments and welcome the clarity that they bring to the Bill about there needing to be an interface with the public for the benefits of the measure to be gained. I also welcome the Minister's pledge to monitor the operation of the measure and his willingness to deal with any issues that may arise from the operation of the measure in a speedy and effective manner. Therefore, without further ado, I support the amendments.

Mrs Cochrane: I will follow on from what other Members said in supporting the amendments, given that they are mainly technical in nature. I also welcome the Minister's commitment that he will keep the matter under close review so that there are no unintended outcomes.

Mr Allister: I will pick up on a point of Mr Cree's about the speedy nature of the accelerated process, which I spoke about previously in the House. One might expect that you would need to go down that route when events overtake you, but I have discovered to my surprise that as long ago as 1 June 2011, the Minister wrote to the Committee for Finance and Personnel to say that he would be going for the accelerated process for the legislation that was to be with the Assembly by last autumn. Of course, we know that it did not come last autumn. It did not come until this year, and then we had the accelerated process. Maybe if we had not had the accelerated process, we would have had a better opportunity —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I ask the Member to address the amendments. I have allowed him to make his point, but he should now focus on what we are discussing, which are the amendments.

Mr Allister: In relation to the amendments, I have to confess that I remain very sceptical that retail services, as defined, will ultimately be held to include facilities such as solicitors' offices, which the Minister asserts that it will. Maybe it will never be tested, but, in the end, we will see whether my scepticism has any basis in fact or whether the Minister's confidence is totally justified.

I would like the Minister to elucidate for us whether he is now saying that the use to which premises are put during the rebate period must meet his new definition of retail services. If so, on what basis is he saying that, given the construction of the Bill? During the period for which a rebate is being given, does there have to be an interface with the public in respect of that use? Or is it the case that the interface had to exist historically in the use of the building, and historically it had to be used for retail goods or services as now defined but that the current qualifying use of the building can be anything at all, subject only to the restraints, retrospective or otherwise, of planning laws?

If it is the latter, what does the amendment achieve in delivering what is said to be the ambition of the Bill, namely, re-energising our town centres with vibrant new businesses? Is it the situation that you can, in effect, put into what historically was a vibrant business one that does not interface with the public? If it is, how far do the clause and the amendment advance us? Would it not have been better to amend the Bill so that the current use, not the historic

use, was the one that was subject to the new identification of retail services? Perhaps the Minister could clarify where we stand on that because that seems to me to be the touchstone for attaining the goal of the Bill through clauses 2 and 3.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Members who have taken part in this short debate on the Further Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill. I thank those who have given support to the Bill and to the technical amendments.

At least a couple of Members wandered off the main subject, which was the amendments. I trust, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, since they got to make their point, you will indulge me by allowing me to at least respond to them.

Mr Cree talked about the Bill's being rushed, and he said that he was sorry that, as a result, we did not have enough time to discuss some of the amendments. Indeed, he expressed sorrow that the amendments that the Member for North Antrim tabled last week were not accepted. However, he and his party colleagues may, of course, have had some part in that, because, as far as I can remember, they did not vote for the amendments. So, it is one thing to say that he is disappointed that I did not accept the amendments; it is another thing that he did not accept them himself.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way in a minute or two. I am glad that he was so convinced by my arguments that, despite his sorrow that the amendments were not accepted, he voted with me.

Mr Cree: I am sorry to interrupt the Minister on one of his usual tirades, but he obviously does not listen to me. I did voice my protest and supported the amendments that the Member for North Antrim proposed last week.

Mr Wilson: Believe you me, this is not a tirade —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It certainly will not be a tirade; it is now ended.

Mr Wilson: I could show him a tirade, Mr Deputy Speaker, if he wanted one. I was simply making the point that he had the opportunity to vote in favour of Mr Allister's amendments last week. He chose not to, and I take it that that was because the arguments that I put forward were superior and that he, therefore, felt that he could safely support me.

Mr Allister talked about the accelerated passage process and said that we did not have the opportunity to debate the issues as fully as we should have. As far as I can remember, there was no time limit last week when we were discussing the amendments, and there was no limit on how long individual Members could speak for or on the number of Members who could speak. The debate could have gone on all day if we had wanted it to. That did not happen, and given that we did not require an elongated debate, I think that that was supportive of my view that there was plenty of time and opportunity to discuss the issues that had to be discussed.

The Member is right. There was a timetable for the consultation, the responses to the consultation, the work that the Committee indicated that it wanted to do and getting the legislation drafted. I think that I expressed to the Committee at an early stage that I was going to request that the Bill proceed by accelerated passage.

1.15 pm

As the Committee was given early notice, it was able to carry out its own quite extensive investigation and produce a report. Many of the recommendations contained in that report were accepted before the Bill was finally crafted.

The Member spoke about the amendment that I moved today and questioned whether it will fulfil its intended purpose. During the debate last week, he asked me to go back to the Departmental Solicitor's Office to find out whether the definition that I had given and the businesses that we covered in the legislation were going to be covered. The information from the Departmental Solicitor's Office was that the description and the explanation that I gave in the House last week were correct. If one looks at the description, which is very clear now, the businesses that would not be covered by the legislation — I will come to his second point in a minute — are those where people are required to present themselves to the business. That was not originally in the definition. We have included it now so that we are absolutely specific about it. I thank him for the fact that, in the exchanges that we had last week, he helped me on that. He also helped the House to understand that there may well be a gap. Therefore, let us ensure that it is honed. I hope that helping to craft legislation from the hated DUP/Sinn Féin regime here at Stormont does not get him in trouble with his supporters, but I am glad to see that he is playing a constructive role. I appreciate the fact that he has done that.

He also asked whether the definition applies only to the previous use of businesses, not the future use of businesses. In the debate last week, I made it clear that that was the case. I accepted that in some way that may appear to be an anomaly, but I also explained the reason for it. We did not want the definition to include premises that are currently used, for example, as call centres, corporate lawyers' offices and that kind of thing, where the public are not coming to; premises possibly in the same block, owned by the same landlord with the floor above empty, and where the landlord encourages the firm to move upstairs so that it can get a 50% rebate and he can get a 50% rebate because the premises that were previously occupied are now unoccupied. Since there was quite a lot of money involved here — up to £160,000, and there are probably a number of office blocks across Northern Ireland that would fall into that category — we wanted to avoid such situations. I have no doubt that people will look for gaps to see how they can avoid paying taxes, and that was the reason for it.

I accept that we will not control future use, and it will not be limited. The reasons that I gave him were that this was a one-year measure and that the process of checking up where people would contest whether they did or did not fall inside the definition would be a lengthy and expensive process. For that reason, we decided not to look at what use the premises might be put to. I have not hidden that from the House. However, I have assured the House today that where abuses are identified over the year, we will quickly come back with regulations. This is not to be a dodgers' charter; this is to be a piece of legislation that seeks to inject some life back into high streets and town centres across Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I trust that that deals with some of the points that Members have raised. I recommend the

amendments to the House, and trust that Members will give them their support and have no regrets for giving support to them after they have done so.

Amendment No 1 agreed to.

Clause 3 (Window displays not to constitute occupation in certain cases)

Amendment No 2 made: In page 5, line 37, leave out "on or from the hereditament" and insert "to members of the public who visit the hereditament". — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Further Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Committee Business

Education Maintenance Allowance

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

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to expedite the finalisation and implementation of an effective and cross-departmental strategy for young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) and the ongoing review of education maintenance allowance (EMA), in order to address the issues of record levels of youth unemployment and increasing disengagement with mainstream education; and to make the necessary improvements to ensure that EMA is targeted at those in greatest need.

The future of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and its Committee is, of course, subject to consultation. However, regardless of what particular format or arrangements are arrived at, and regardless of where the people on my Committee may go, the issues that we are dealing with will remain, and this House will have to deal with them. The Committee felt that it was timely, in the period that we have left to us, to bring those matters to the House so that they can be debated properly and fully.

I wish to talk, in particular, about the issue of NEETs, and the result of what was a very comprehensive study by the previous Committee. I have to say that NEETs is not the most attractive of words, but that appears to be what we have settled on. It is probably better than the alternative, which is, I understand, zeros. This is an issue that we really have to deal with in the Assembly.

These important issues affect young people in every Member's constituency in increasing numbers as the level of youth unemployment reaches record levels. One in five of our young people is unemployed, and it is getting worse. The economic cost of youth unemployment in Northern Ireland alone is somewhere in the region of £250 million. Some of our young people have seen emigration as their only option, while others have further disengaged not only from education or training but from society as a whole. Employment without skills or training is not an option for them. This and other factors prompted the previous Committee to undertake an inquiry into the NEETs issue, the purpose of which was the development of a strategy for those young people. It focused on who they were, the reasons why they were in that category, and how best they could be helped and supported. Members of that Committee were regularly presented with evidence that the NEET group was continuing to grow — a situation that continues to this day, given the ongoing economic downturn. Even when the economy begins to recover, the situation is unlikely to improve in the short to medium term.

In its NEETs inquiry report, the previous Committee considered the benefits of the education maintenance allowance (EMA) incentive for young people to remain in full-time education. The Committee recommended:

“the criteria for receiving EMA should to be focused more on those to whom it provides a particularly significant incentive to re-engage”.

It is worth saying that the EMA scheme was introduced jointly by DEL and the Department of Education (DE) in September 2004, its main purpose being to enable young people from lower-income backgrounds to remain in post-compulsory education at school or college. Its key objectives are to raise participation, retention and achievement rates in the eligible groups.

In 2004-05, the participation level in post-16 education was 78% in Northern Ireland compared with a level of just 67% in England. Northern Ireland's participation level later rose by nine percentage points to 87%, while England's rose by 15 percentage points to 82%. Although many Members will know the details of EMA and that it is being considered for review, the costs may not be so well recognised. EMA costs approximately £26 million a year, with 60% of recipients in the schools sector, administered by the Department of Education, and 40% in further education colleges, allocated by DEL. Amid increasing concerns about the efficacy of the allowance, a decision was taken by the two Departments in 2010 to have a formal review of the scheme. To date, and I am speaking in February 2012, that review has produced no conclusions. That is the point of the debate, and I am grateful that the Minister is here for it. We have talked long and hard, but we have delivered next to nothing. We cannot countenance that.

There is a further type of non-means-tested education maintenance allowance available to young people, and it is paid at the rate of £40 a week to those who are engaged in recognised training activities. This is the only scheme of its kind in the United Kingdom, and it allows young people on it to access both EMA and social security benefits while training for future employment. Under the legislation, which dates from 1950, the payment is limited to participants in the Department's Training for Success programme. It cannot be paid to young people engaged in pre-vocational training in schemes such as Give and Take, which is organised by Include Youth. I have to say to the Minister that members of Include Youth will be watching intently to see how the Assembly deals with the issue. It seems to me to be a complete travesty that those young people cannot get the support that they so badly need. The whole idea of EMA is to encourage and support those from the most vulnerable and disadvantaged parts of our society. Given that we cannot do that, the Minister ought to do his best to deal with the issue while he is still in post.

The Committee believes that the Department must seek to target means-tested and non-means-tested education maintenance allowance at the areas in which it will be most effective. That must surely mean young people not in education, employment or training. The Committee heard how the Scottish Government have already carried out a complete reform of their EMA scheme. Although the allowances continue to be means-tested, the scheme now includes additional flexibility in the entitlement for vulnerable students, including those who are homeless or in care. The

Scottish model focuses on non-formal learning as the most appropriate method for vulnerable young people to continue to develop their skills and to progress towards formal learning and qualifications.

With the support of the Executive, DEL officials have had a dialogue with a number of other relevant Departments in order to start work on a NEETs strategy. A stakeholder forum was also established and feeds into the strategy being developed by Departments. However, during a recent briefing session by the Department, my Committee was disappointed to learn that not only has the strategy not been finalised but the relevant research has not been completed. Minister, that is too little, too late; it is taking too long, and we risk appearing to be too lackadaisical. We have to deal with this issue. At this time, it is vital that the House gives time and space to understanding why the issue of NEETs and EMA must be addressed as an urgent priority.

1.30 pm

I commend the motion to the House and seek Members' support in calling on the Minister to join in ensuring that his Executive colleagues support the finalisation and implementation of an effective and cross-departmental strategy for young people not in education, employment or training and that the ongoing review of education maintenance allowance is expedited as soon as possible.

In the couple of minutes remaining to me, I wish to speak just as a Member of the House. When I engage with young people, through Voice of Young People in Care, Include Youth or any of the other opportunities that I have had — discos, get-togethers and all sorts of things — what strikes me most is that they are not merely statistics. When you look at statistics, you come up with all sorts of plans, but the young people are dehumanised. When you talk to young people, you cannot help but be impressed. When you hear of some of the issues that they have had to overcome and the challenges in their lives, you just wonder how they make it at all. They are great young people, and they deserve our support.

Minister, my colleague Sandra Overend, who will no doubt deal with the matter in her speech, mentioned that money was coming as part of the Barnett consequentials from the youth contract highlighted in the United Kingdom. Your bid should be for all of that money, not just some of it.

There is no greater challenge for the Assembly than to prepare our young people for their future life. We must not be complacent. The issues that we are dealing with are life-changing; on many occasions, they are, in fact, life-threatening. I say to all Members that young people are society's most vulnerable, and they are people whom we can help. This is a good thing to do, and I urge the entire House to support the motion.

Mr D McIlveen: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. As the Chairman of the Committee said, we could probably bandy statistics around the Chamber all day, and, truthfully, it would not achieve very much unless we try to grasp the human cost of the issue.

If you bear with me, I will read a letter that I received from a constituent a couple of weeks ago. I will not name the young man, but he is involved in Include Youth's Give and Take programme. He feels highly discriminated against as a

result of the way that the EMA payments have been divided. So I will read, from the top, exactly what he wrote:

"I started on the Give and Take programme as I couldn't continue with school. I was under paramilitary threat and had to move to a B&B. I am really struggling for money and I miss my family. I go to Give and Take in Ballymena to get an education in a way that works for me. I wanted to get my Maths and English qualifications and some work experience to help me get a job. So far, I have received my numeracy entry level 2 in just over a month. I have no financial incentive or support to participate in this scheme, yet if I was in school, tech or mainstream education I would. I feel that this is extremely unfair and I don't feel as valued as those who do get EMA. It would help me with lunches and transport as I make the effort to improve myself. I hope that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister for Education will seriously look into this issue to help young people like me."

I am happy to pass the original letter on to the Minister if he wishes to see it. That letter shows just how heartfelt the plea is from those young people. We need to sit up and listen to young people who are trying their best to improve their life. Schemes such as Give and Take are vital and have fantastic success rates. After about one year on the scheme, around 60% of young people involved will progress to formal education, training or employment.

Just last Friday, I had the opportunity to visit the last ever — subject to future funding — Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust residential event in Ballintoy. It was in my constituency, and I was invited to take a look. It was eye-opening to see how a group of young men who have many challenges, disadvantages and barriers that most people in the Assembly probably know absolutely nothing about — certainly, not from hands-on experience — have been taken onto the scheme and to see the dedication that teams have shown to bringing those young men together and helping them to deal with the challenges that they face. That is a vital service.

The one thing that was raised time and time again by the young people I spoke to was exactly the same thing as was raised in that letter. It really is the crux of the matter. Record levels of youth unemployment and increasing disengagement with mainstream education are a serious problem in this country. I completely support the call to finalise and implement the strategy to address the problem of young people who are not in education, employment or training.

With specific regard to EMA, the scheme's key objectives, according to the 2010 DEL review, are to enable young people from a low-income background to remain in post-compulsory education at school or college; encourage young people to fulfil their educational potential; and ensure that those who are most disadvantaged receive additional help and encouragement to receive funds. Surely the Minister can see that those objectives are most likely to apply to young people in the NEET demographic.

We have to remember that about £26 million is pumped into the EMA scheme each year. All that we ask is that those funds are channelled to those who need them most. That is the issue. We are not here to ask for more money, although it would be nice. We just ask that the money that your Department has is channelled to where it is needed most. I

am not convinced that, so far, that has been the case. Certainly, the loud and clear message from people whom I have visited in various parts of the sector is that those who are most disadvantaged and have the biggest challenges are the ones who, quite often, are left at the bottom of the pile.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Mr D McIlveen: I encourage the Minister to take my comments on board. I look forward to his response.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a chur in iúl don rún fosta. I express my support for the motion and call on Minister Farry to retain EMA in the first instance. That will be my emphasis. I would like to hear a commitment from him on the way forward on EMA. It needs to be protected. As other Members said, it is an invaluable lifeline for many young people who want to stay in full-time education.

In the current economic climate, in which there are so few jobs for young school leavers, we must help and encourage students to stay on and get the best education available to them. Statistics show that 87% of young people in full-time education are in receipt of EMA — a statistic that, in itself, certainly proves the need for the allowance. Our party has always argued that access to education is a right, not a privilege. It should be based on the ability to learn and develop, not the ability to pay.

Various Members outlined the background to the EMA scheme. In 2004, it was introduced by the Department of Education and DEL jointly with a remit to incentivise young people from low-income families who otherwise may have left full-time education because of the financial implications for their family. DEL has lead responsibility for the scheme. That Department commissioned a PricewaterhouseCoopers report in March 2010, effectively conducting a review of the scheme. Generally, it found that, although EMA delivers on those principles and makes a difference to students from low-income families, it could be improved for maximum effect. It could be directed even more towards those who are in greatest need. Objective need is obviously the key criterion for Sinn Féin in the debate.

The overall budget, as David McIlveen just said, should and, indeed, must be maintained and distributed where it will have most impact on those who have greatest disadvantage. I welcome the emphasis that the Committee Chair, Basil McCrea, placed in the debate when he described the exclusion of some groups from EMA entitlement as a travesty.

I asked the Minister for Employment and Learning a question for written answer on why young people taking part in the Give and Take scheme specifically are not entitled to education maintenance allowance. I also asked about the financial help that they are entitled to. My understanding of the issue was greatly enhanced by a presentation by Include Youth to the Employment and Learning Committee on Wednesday 25 January. Include Youth gave our Committee compelling evidence for why people on the Give and Take scheme should be entitled to the EMA.

The Minister gave me a fairly lengthy reply. If, as he stated, there are either legislative or policy provisions that prevent him from extending the EMA to those vulnerable young people, those provisions must be urgently reviewed and

amended with a view to ensuring that those young people are given parity of treatment with their peers.

The Minister referred to the difficult budgetary position facing the Department. He has great sympathy from all sections of the House on that. However, Include Youth would reiterate that, in such circumstances, the young people who are most vulnerable and need most support from DEL should be the first to receive it rather than being the very ones denied it. Human rights and equality principles require nothing less. That is also critical to the creation of a fully inclusive society that balances increasing economic productivity with enhancing social inclusion. The Committee Chair gave the example of Scotland, where there is greater support for vulnerable young people in education and training. I ask the Minister to show in his response considerable political will towards bringing people in from the cold and making sure that they are adequately supported to remain in education and training.

Mr P Ramsey: The debate is both timely and hugely important. Although today's Committee motion is specifically focused on NEET young people, it is set in the wider context of the tsunami of youth unemployment that we are experiencing. I will give some figures to support that. Between November 2007 and November 2011, there was a 155% increase in the number of young people under 25 out of work. That was the highest increase of any of the jurisdictions, and it was 43% higher than the figure in Scotland, which recorded the second biggest increase. Youth unemployment is in a serious crisis. There is no doubt that the welfare reform legislation that is coming through will mean that a lot more vulnerable young people will become part of that tsunami.

I welcome the Minister to the debate, and I sincerely hope that he gives a full commitment and guarantee. We want to ensure that all the good work that the Employment and Learning Committee has done over a number of years is set in stone, and we want those commitments.

The draft Pathways to Success strategy was put to the Executive in March 2011 and went out for consultation on 24 March 2011. The previous mandate's Committee for Employment and Learning put enormous effort into producing two huge volumes of a report on young people not in employment, education or training. That report provided the basis for research and recommendations that are complementary to the departmental scoping study. The Department is examining the potential now for a tracking system, and, as it was put to the Committee, it is:

"tendering for research projects into the views of parents and young people."

It does not seem to compute with the Department that that process started in 2010.

We were informed that 66% of young people fell into the category of having no identifiable barrier. We do not know why they are NEET, yet we have no figures, because the labour force survey's data are indicative. That is a major indictment of the process in the Department for Employment and Learning. It was put to the officials at the Committee on 14 December that perhaps the reason our young people are in that category is that we do not have the data. I totally agree with that point.

I commented at that stage — I stand by it — that a dedicated team is needed to bring forward concrete solutions to the issues and that we are merely paying lip-service to the young people who are falling into the NEET category if we do not have that dedicated unit. There are no targets or set goals for reducing the number of young people who are NEET. That is what we are supposed to be doing, but, from what we are told in Committee, we are some distance from that point, despite what the Programme for Government may touch on. The number of young people falling into the NEET category is rising. There is absolutely no doubt about that. Economic difficulties serve only to increase that number, but I see no clear, definitive road map from the Department to address the issue.

1.45 pm

The review of EMA and the number of young people not engaged in the formal education system are issues that must be brought before the House as a matter of urgency. We have a system that is, by and large, not targeted well enough. If it is not carefully tweaked, it will put barriers in front of many people who seek to continue their education. There are two key issues: we need to ensure that as many young people as possible stay on at school post 16 so that they can gain qualifications to ensure that they play a full part in the future labour market; and we need to be careful about the sensitive issues that mean that young people who are not engaged in the formal education system are catered for financially.

We need not go too much into the argument of targeting EMA at those who need it. I have no doubt that the Minister is aware of the need to ensure that EMA meets the goals outlined previously. A number of Members raised that. There is also the public finance context of DEL working alongside other relevant Departments; there is a need for a much more collaborative approach. The Committee's engagements as part of the inquiry uncovered that, and we saw models of best practice in the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

I do not want to touch on the point of engaging young people who cannot avail themselves of EMA due to their participation in pre-vocational schemes. Barry McElduff and other Members made the point about the Give and Take scheme run by Include Youth. Those young people are not entitled to the means-tested EMA received by their counterparts in mainstream education.

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

Mr P Ramsey: I urge the Minister to listen to the debate and to come forward with an action plan to resolve the issue.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion. It gives the Assembly a timely opportunity to consider the Executive's approach to providing our young people with meaningful education, training and employment. As Members said, we know, as a result of the Northern Ireland labour force survey, that almost 48,000 young people aged between 16 and 24 are not in education, training or employment. That is a staggering figure, but it is not an issue for DEL alone to be concerned with. The Programme for Government must be used as an opportunity by the Executive to set out the action that they will take to deliver improved outcomes for our young people in early years, primary education, skills delivery, work experience and job creation.

The Alliance Party firmly believes that it must be unacceptable to the Assembly that any young person would not have the opportunity to reach their full potential. The human consequences for our young people of not engaging with education, training or employment have been well set out today. I thank my colleagues for that. They include increased economic inactivity, but, most important, they have serious impacts on individuals' health and well-being and can lead to an increased risk of depression and criminal activity.

Elected representatives need to provide leadership on the issue. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning is committed to progressing a positive skills and employability agenda for young people. My colleagues on the Committee for Employment and Learning have also shown leadership for young people by conducting a full inquiry into how we might improve interventions to help young people who have disengaged. The inquiry found that many community and voluntary sector organisations conduct exceptional work on behalf of our young people. Some of them have been mentioned already: Barnardo's, the Prince's Trust, Include Youth, GEMS NI and the Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust. In my constituency, some innovative work has attempted to connect young people with the creative industries, such as gaming and programming, as ways of linking skills acquisition with interesting and rewarding employment opportunities for our young people.

It is also clear from the inquiry that improved early intervention in primary education is essential in identifying and addressing the reasons why a pupil becomes disengaged at an early stage. Another key finding is the need for improved careers guidance. The Department for Employment and Learning assures us that it has a robust menu of options for careers guidance available to teachers and professionals. However, I remain concerned about the quality and relevance of the careers guidance that we give to our young people in schools, and I am particularly concerned at the lack of monitoring and tracking of the educational, training and employment outcomes.

Establishing a steering panel composed of Executive Ministers and community and voluntary sector representatives is a further recommendation of the Employment and Learning Committee's report. I would be grateful for an update from the Minister on that.

As mentioned, of particular concern to the community and voluntary sector organisations, which deliver excellent work with our most vulnerable young people, is the need for a more flexible use of education maintenance allowance to include prevocational interventions. I hope that the Executive and the Minister for Employment and Learning will look to the Scottish Government for examples of how that might be achieved in the EMA review.

The key feedback from our Committee's inquiry, however, is that, despite all that great work, if we are to give our young people the hope and opportunity that they deserve, we need a united Executive approach that sets clear aims and objectives as well as timescales in which we can achieve those. The requirement for effective collaboration could become even more acute if and when the Department for Employment and Learning, which is currently the lead Department on this important strategy, is abolished. I therefore hope that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have given careful consideration to how the youth

education and employment strategy will be implemented in the absence of a Department for Employment and Learning. Indeed, the recommendation of the Committee's inquiry is that, from January 2011, OFMDFM should be the lead Department on the issue.

Much reference has been made of late to a "lost generation". I am reliably informed that that phrase appears at the front of Ernest Hemingway's novel 'The Sun Also Rises'.

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

Mr Lyttle: It is high time that the Executive got serious about ensuring that the sun rises on all our young people and that we give them all the hope and direction they need to achieve their full potential.

Mr Ross: Let me first of all say that the heading for the motion on the Order Paper is slightly misleading. It might lead the Minister for Employment and Learning, the future Minister of the Department that has those functions and, indeed, the Finance Minister to believe that we are concerned to get more young people receiving EMA. I do not think that that is what the motion means, and it is certainly not my belief.

The issue of young people who are not in employment, education or learning or training is one that, over the past number of years, has received high levels of media attention and, indeed, attention in the House. As Members said, the previous Employment and Learning Committee engaged in quite a bit of work on the matter.

Of course, we need to have a strategy that ensures that young people value education, want to engage in education or training and avail themselves of opportunities. However, the way to achieve that is much wider than the role that DEL or the Executive can play. Indeed, it is much wider than the role that government can play. Efforts are made in other areas to get greater investment into Northern Ireland and to have greater career and job opportunities for people. Indeed, as the Member who spoke previously said, efforts are also made in early years education. That is very important, given that that is the first formal interactive education that young people have and that their experience of it will stay with them throughout the rest of their educational career. However, there is also a role for the voluntary sector, local communities, businesses and parents, all of whom have a responsibility to help to raise young people's achievements and aspirations.

The issue of poor results and underachievement, particularly in Protestant working-class areas, is one of which we now are well aware. A level of disengagement and a negative attitude towards formal education does not surprise us any more, even though it is not something that we are encouraged by. We need to widen access to education, and the University of Ulster is involved in the Step Up programme, which has been useful in doing that. Other Members spoke — this proves that our Committee listens — about Include Youth, which runs the Give and Take scheme. That scheme focuses on young people who are all considered to be in the NEET category. Most of those young people come from a care background, have difficulties with essential skills, come from deprived areas or did not complete their mainstream education. The Committee was told at subsequent briefings that those individuals are not

entitled to receive EMA, although their peers in further education colleges or schools are. They are also not able to claim the non-means-tested EMA that those involved in Training for Success can. If EMA is to be successful, it must help those most in need. Young people on the Give and Take scheme pass that criteria and should qualify, but, of course, they do not. The question for the House is what to do about that. Do we simply want to expand EMA — I do not think that we do — or do we make sure that it is targeted better and includes those who undertake pre-vocational courses?

I do not think that government should necessarily simply give young people cheques to get involved in education or training just for the sake of it. Doing that will almost create a culture that means that, as long as people turn up and clock in, they will receive their payment, irrespective of whether they go to learn. We need to be cognisant of that.

I listened to other Members say that we cannot treat people as statistics or argue over statistics. Although, on the face of it, I agree with that, we must ensure that the decisions that we take on spending taxpayers' money on schemes such as EMA are based on fact and outcomes. Although we do not have all the answers to the questions that the Committee asked, we do have some. For example, in the debate on EMA at Westminster, the UK Government claimed that 90% of those who received it would have stayed in school or education anyway, and the research that the Committee was given by PwC suggested that between 64% and 70% of young people who received it would have stayed in education anyway. The Committee was also told that some 55% of young people saved the money; 52% spent the money on leisure and going out; and 45% spent the money on clothing. That proves that much of the money provided through the current EMA scheme is not used for its primary purpose. Therefore, it is not a good use of public money. As we heard from Include Youth, we need to ensure that the money that is spent by government is targeted at those who need the money to get to school and to buy books or lunches and to ensure that they have no additional barriers to education.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Ross: I finish by saying that I support the motion. It is important that we do not extend EMA. We must reduce its cost and make sure that it is targeted at those who need it most.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gidh nach bhfuil mé i mo bhall den Choiste Fostaíochta agus Foghlama, ba mhaith liom mo thacaíocht a thabhairt don rún tábhachtach tráthúil seo.

Although I am not a member of the Assembly's Statutory Committee for Employment and Learning, I take great interest in its work. I support this important and timely motion. My party colleague from West Tyrone, Barry McElduff, has spoken on the benefits of EMA and has eloquently outlined Sinn Féin's well-stated position on the matter.

I want to use the few minutes that I have to focus on the part of the motion that deals with the strategy for helping those who are currently not in education, employment or training and who, as the Chair of the Committee outlined, are unhelpfully given a none-too-pleasant-sounding acronym. However, I constantly throw the word "fracking" about the

House, so I am hardly one to pontificate about the use of none-too-pleasant-sounding words.

We face a crisis. However, we are not alone in doing so, and the challenge is faced by Governments across the developed world. Finding employment for our young people is proving to be a massive problem, let alone finding employment that is meaningful and sustainable and will provide a useful outcome to individuals and society as a whole. As the motion suggests, this is not an issue that should be looked at in isolation. All Departments, together with the community and voluntary sector and the private sector, need to work together and come together to draw up a strategy to deal with the issue.

No longer can we stand here talking about youth unemployment, EMA and those who are not in education, employment or training. We need to stop complaining about how bad the problem is, because, as we do so, 500 people leave these Six Counties every week and are joined by at least another 1,000 people who leave the other part of this island. We face a situation in which many of our best and brightest young people have given up. They have given up on waiting any longer. They have given up any hope, and they have given up on finding some sort of light at the end of the tunnel. Emigration has returned to our shores once again. We need not only to tackle the heart of the problem, which is creating adequate training and employment for those currently outside the system, but to inject some serious hope into our society.

2.00 pm

We need a multi-departmental approach; many Departments face such problems and difficulties. One of the saddest facts is that many of the people who are not in education, employment or training come from families that previously found themselves in the same situation. The problem has become generational through no fault of the individuals concerned, many of whom have been let down by the system.

In my area, transport, travel and a lack of access to broadband present a serious problem for most young people. That all leads to a vicious cycle, yet we hear it being reported over and over again. How do we deal with that? Amazingly, it is quite simple. We see the same thing happening time and time again, and we need to remove those barriers. The Minister for Employment and Learning needs to take more of a lead. I acknowledge his work so far, and I look forward to his response to this proactive motion. I want him to engage with other Ministers on the three issues that I raised, which will involve engagement with the Minister for Regional Development and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I also encourage him to engage with the community and voluntary sector and the private sector to see what gaps exist in the provision of services in deprived and rural areas.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion and thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning for bringing it to the House. It is a vital part of the debate on how we move forward. As some Members said, we are talking about a situation in which one in every five young people is unemployed today. Last June, I spoke in the Chamber about having witnessed some of the worst rioting and violence that I had seen for many years. I am certainly not saying that all the young people who were there were unemployed.

When I say “young people”, I am talking about young men and women, young girls and boys, many of them with hoods on. However, many of those young people were not in education, employment or training. All I would say is that that situation could be replicated across Northern Ireland in disadvantaged communities.

As the Chairperson of the Committee said, it is not about talking up the problem but doing something about it. As my uncle Sammy used to say, we can talk about it, we can have statistics about it, and we can read about it, but at the end of the day, doing it is doing it. We need to leave the Chamber saying that we are going to do something about this situation. It is not so much about rhetoric but about doing something about the problem.

My colleague Alastair Ross highlighted the main issue, which is that EMA is not targeting resources at the most vulnerable people in our community. A number of Members have mentioned the young people who are currently on pre-vocational schemes such as Include Youth’s Give and Take programme. That is an absolutely fabulous scheme, but those young people feel, in some sense, let down by us in that they are unable to access the support that encourages participation and achievement in the schemes that we are highlighting today. They are not entitled to the means-tested education maintenance allowance received by their peers in schools, in further education colleges, on Training for Success programmes and in other situations.

For me, that is not only deeply inequitable but deeply unfair. From the heart of what we are doing as an Assembly, as an elected body, it is deeply unfair. The principle should be that those young people who are most in need of financial support to participate and to achieve in education and training should be the first to receive it, rather than the very ones being denied it. Some of the most vulnerable young people in our society are being denied access to opportunities to which other members of the community and many other young people have access.

Unlike many of their peers, those young people struggle with high levels of poverty, living completely independent lives and training to gain qualifications while managing food, rent, utility and laundry bills, often with little or no support.

To my knowledge, the Department’s formal response is that it is not possible to pay a non-means-tested allowance to students on programmes such as Give and Take or to students undertaking other pre-vocational training programmes because of — this is the key bit — benefits legislation. If there is a problem, let us get it sorted. As our Chairman said, let us get it sorted with a sense of urgency.

I have a few other things to say, but I will finish with this. I say to the Minister —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Douglas: Yes, go ahead.

Mr B McCrea: I would just like to hear what the Member has to say.

Mr Douglas: As a very famous singer once said, “Thank you very much.” These are indeed either legislative or policy provisions, or they could be budgetary constraints. The Minister refers to budgetary constraints, but we should be

targeting the finance to increasing the accessibility of the most vulnerable young people, rather than denying them that. As part of the Minister’s swansong, he has a great chance to do something about that. Indeed, I concur with my colleague that he could bid for the entire £25 million from the Barnett formula.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to speak in a debate on what I consider to be a hugely important issue. It is one that can lead to poor physical and mental health, a greater risk of offending, suicide and of those affected and their children becoming trapped in intergenerational poverty. There is not only an economic imperative to address the issue but a moral one. Young people in care, those whose parents are unemployed and those with disabilities are all recognised as being those who are furthest from work, and they require considerable support to enable them to become even work ready. The unidentifiable 55% not included in those categories must also be helped.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

As Members have said, the previous Committee for Employment and Learning undertook an excellent inquiry into the issue and identified, fairly comprehensively, the way forward. However, that report was over a year ago, and now is the time to have some action on the issue. There is a need for re-engagement for the young people who are currently NEET and prevention for the young people under 16 who are at risk of becoming NEET. As the previous Employment and Learning Minister recognised, whatever their background, aspirations or aptitudes, every young person should be given an opportunity to progress through adolescence, fully equipped to play an active role in society and to gain the skills that they need to enter the labour market.

Recently, I attended an event in the Long Gallery that was hosted by the Chair of the Committee, Basil McCrea, where we met representatives of Voice of Young People in Care. It was touching to hear the comments from a lot of those young people whose circumstances are purely a result of decisions that their parents made. They find it especially difficult to improve their employability and prospects for a brighter future because they cannot afford to think about their education while simply trying to afford to live without worry. It is important that EMA is targeted to those in need, including those who are unable to access mainstream education and training and are on pre-vocational schemes. Every other Member who spoke in the debate mentioned Include Youth’s Give and Take scheme.

Many of those not in education, employment or training are identifiable, as they come through the education system. So I sincerely hope that the Minister has discussed with the Department of Education those currently at risk of becoming NEET.

Will the Minister tell us what progress has been made on developing a tracking system for those young people coming to school leaving age who we already know to be at significant risk of becoming NEET? I would also like to hear about the strategies for reaching the other 55% who are unknown.

I would like to hear whether the Minister has had any discussion with the Minister of Education on establishing a task force on NEET prevention, with a specific focus on identifying geographical areas and schools in which young

people most at risk of becoming NEET are located. Is a programme being prepared to reduce the flow of such young people becoming NEET? Will the Minister detail his plans to specifically address young people who are not in education, employment or training?

In answer to a question for written answer, the Minister identified the £26.5 million Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland as a result of the youth contract that the Westminster Government —

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. While she is asking the Minister to provide a list of information, and given that one of the key objectives of EMA is to raise participation and achievement rates, does she agree that it is also important that the Minister comes back to the House with solid evidence of achievement rates of those in receipt of EMA? At the moment, that information does not seem clear. Does she agree that it is important that we get that information as well?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mrs Overend: Yes, I appreciate where the Member is coming from on that. We have statistics on various issues and we need real results on those matters, so thanks for your intervention.

I will pursue the Minister to bid for all of that £26.5 million.

In conclusion, this is a hugely important issue and one that the Committee for Employment and Learning has emphasised. It heard from numerous organisations and people who talked about the issue, and we recognise that it is important. I appreciate the Minister being here. I hope that his Executive colleagues, although not in the Chamber, will listen and heed the feelings of Members. I understand that the Minister has some sort of plan in place. I am keen to hear how all his Executive colleagues will address this issue in future. The Assembly needs to take this issue seriously, and I hope that the Minister and Executive will prove that they do.

Mr Eastwood: The term “lost generation” has become one heard often these days. Few families are not dealing with the prospect or reality of youth unemployment — a generation of our young people with extremely limited horizons for future employment. If action is not taken, the danger is that their demographic will face the prospect of being interned in a cycle of long-term joblessness, suffering the demoralisation of dependence on benefits. That young generation, who should be most energised at the start of their working lives, has suffered in the past years the brutal effects of this recession. That depressing narrative should force public representatives to act. The best social programme that any Government can provide is a job. Stormont needs to cultivate an environment in which employment is incentivised in every sector of our economy. If those in the NEET category are neglected, the North will face consequences in the long and short term.

It is fair to say that the Executive have been slow to react thus far. Across the border, successive Governments have instigated a raft of apprenticeship programmes, which have facilitated graduates and non-graduates. Every Department in the Dublin Government has been instructed to commission a programme that brings young people into

the Civil Service while retaining their social welfare payment. Where is the equivalent programme in the North?

It is vital that EMA payments are retained. If the draft Programme for Government’s commitment to garner a smart economy is to come to fruition, it is essential that our young people are encouraged to prioritise education. For many of our young people, EMA offers an extra incentive and security to further their education, thus benefiting our economy and society in the long term.

I welcome the Minister’s recent answers in the House, and particularly his identification of the £26.5 million Barnett consequential in the youth contract. I urge the Minister to bid for that full amount to begin to address this issue. I ask the Finance Minister to support a co-ordinated effort to tackle youth unemployment.

2.15 pm

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that, in relation to the Barnett formula, this is out of a £1 billion initiative by government to tackle youth unemployment and, therefore, it is not a matter of other Departments saying let us give a couple of bits and pieces to this? I think that we, as members of that Committee, are on the moral high ground to be fighting for that.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Eastwood: I do not think that I will need it, but thank you. The Member makes a relevant point. In the House, we often talk of every Department being a Department of the economy. I think that every Department has to be a Department for tackling poverty as well. That goes right across everything we do.

According to the ‘Belfast Telegraph’, 48,000 young people have no education, no job and no hope. That is an increase of 20% over the past five years. It is clear that now is the time to act. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: The scourge of high youth unemployment is one of the issues that should concern us all, because it is a tragedy not just for this generation but for the next, in that, in terms of inculcating the work ethic and getting into a pattern of useful contribution to society, it is something that will have long-term implications.

When you look at the EMA, it seems, on the face of it, like a magnificent idea. It is to encourage and to retain in education those who are dropping out and those who are not attaining. Few would question the theory and the logic of a project like the EMA. However, you cannot simply afford to say that it sounds like a good project, therefore it must be. You have to critically analyse it to see whether it is, in fact, delivering.

One of the things that amazed me was that, when the Committee was examining the subject with the departmental officials back in September, and we began to probe how we would evaluate the effectiveness of the EMA, we were told about the PwC investigation into it that took place, but we were then — as I said, amazingly — told that PwC was not able to tell us how many of the young people who benefitted from the EMA ever attained qualifications. Qualifications are not everything, but they are an essential building block, on

most occasions, to getting into and sustaining employment. We are paying out money on a weekly basis but do not know whether or not it is manifesting itself in a situation in which those in receipt of it are improving themselves, attaining qualifications and bettering their opportunities to get into work. We were told by the officials that that could not be done — I do not know how much money we spent on the PwC report, but I am sure that it was not insignificant — because there was no mechanism for tracking the young people in the programme. That seems to me to be the most elementary flaw in such a process. You devote resources to young people to stop them dropping out and to get them back into education, but you do not put in place a tracking mechanism to see whether it is actually working. It is only when you know that that you can see how it needs to be fine-tuned, where it needs to be refocused and how you need to adjust it. It seems to me that an elementary mistake has been made in that regard.

It comes in the context of an approach to all of that that, sadly, has been rather laid back. It is well over a year since the last Committee for Employment and Learning produced a report. It has largely been gathering dust. In September, we were told that a consultation process would be under way and that the Executive would be making decisions in the spring of 2012, with a view to making real changes two academic years hence. It will be interesting to hear from the Minister, but I suspect that, since September, there has already been significant slippage.

Are we serious about this issue? On the information we have gathered to date, in the absence of any tracking facility, and in the urgency that seems to have attended any investigation of how the programme could be improved, we seem to be demonstrating an almost horizontal attitude rather than a proactive attitude to this matter. That is a tragedy for the young people in this country, many of whom are struggling with a morale issue about how they are ever going to make it in society.

Society owes to do what it can. It cannot spoon feed everyone, but it owes to do whatever it can to help young people into employment. EMA may be working, but the truth is that we do not adequately know because we do not properly track its implementation.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House take its ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the Minister for Employment and Learning will be called to respond.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Assembly Business

Committee Chairperson Appointments

Mr Speaker: Before I move to Question Time, I want to make an announcement. I wish to inform Members that I have been notified by Michelle Gildernew that she will be indisposed for a number of weeks, following an accident. She has resigned as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The nominating officer from Sinn Féin, Mr Pat Doherty, has nominated Ms Sue Ramsey to fill the vacancy, and she has accepted the appointment. As a Member may not be the Chairperson of a Statutory Committee and a Standing Committee at the same time, Ms Ramsey has been replaced as the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures by Mr Gerry Kelly, who has also accepted the appointment.

I am satisfied that the correspondence meets with the requirement of Standing Orders, and I, therefore, confirm that Ms Sue Ramsey is Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Mr Gerry Kelly is Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures, with effect from today.

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Sexual Orientation Strategy

1. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring forward a revised sexual orientation strategy. (AQO 1210/11-15)

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

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): As I have said in previous answers, it is our intention to publish a sexual orientation strategy during 2012. Stakeholders and organisations from the sector will be fully encouraged to participate in and contribute to the associated public consultation process.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the junior Minister for his answer. It is important that we are aware that it will be published in this coming year. Will the junior Minister assure us that the strategy will be released in conjunction with the revised cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) programme, which is currently being drafted by five parties? It was intended that the CSI programme be released in conjunction with the sexual orientation strategy.

Mr Bell: The CSI is, obviously, being developed by five parties, and we await responses from some of them. Everybody will have an opportunity to input into the process.

Mr Eastwood: Will the junior Minister clarify the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) position on civil partnerships and adoption by gay couples?

Mr Bell: Civil partnerships are the responsibility of the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is my understanding that a judicial review of the existing adoption legislation is ongoing. It is a matter primarily for my colleague the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

Mr Humphrey: How will the strategy fit with the range of other OFMDFM strategies that will be brought forward shortly, including the CSI strategy?

Mr Bell: It is a question of complementarity. We want the policies to respect and complement all of the section 75 groups.

Mr Agnew: Will there be any mention of gay marriage in the sexual orientation strategy? Has any progress been made on providing full equal rights to gay couples?

Mr Bell: Questions on those matters are the subject of much discussion and have been the subject of much discussion in the media over recent weeks. The issue is not under active consideration.

European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations

2. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on how they plan to recognise the 2012 European year for active ageing and intergenerational solidarity. (AQO 1211/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: I am pacing myself, Mr Speaker, so I will ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer that question.

Mr Bell: The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is committed to the principle of equality of opportunity for all the people here in Northern Ireland. The European Union has designated 2012 as the European year (EY) for active ageing and solidarity between generations, and it aims to promote conditions for a better future for our young and older citizens. Junior Minister Anderson and I have already met representatives from the European Commission and various stakeholder organisations to discuss proposals for marking EY 2012 in Northern Ireland.

On 25 January, we attended an event in Parliament Buildings to promote the work of Linking Generations Northern Ireland, which is designed to promote and support the development of intergenerational practice across the region by providing real opportunities for older and younger people to meet and learn from each other. We also intend to discuss the issue with the new Commissioner for Older People and the Commissioner for Children and Young People and take their views on how best to mark this year. When it is finalised, it is anticipated that some of the programmes will include events promoting the benefits of active ageing, the launch by OFMDFM of the ageing strategy consultation and the development of proposals to extend age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services.

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

I thank the junior Minister for his answer. There have been many examples of best practice intergenerational work in our communities over the years, and I pay tribute to the members of the Bovalley Community Association, an intergenerational group, who are in the Assembly today and whom I met earlier. Will the Minister confirm that any events planned by his Department to mark this year of active ageing and intergenerational solidarity will have as broad a reach as possible, and will he ensure that all communities are allowed to be at the fore of such initiatives?

Mr Bell: That is important. I welcome the fact that my colleague George Robinson MLA invited the group here today, and we welcome their participation and that of all community groups. As far as possible, we will take part and try to involve them in the strategy and the work that we are doing.

Our officials are drafting the framework with input from both the Older People's Advocate and the Older People's Advisory Panel. That will form the framework for a new strategy that will be based on the United Nations principles for older persons. Just so that Members can have a heads up, the United Nations principles for older persons have been prepared with a global perspective. However, the proposed strategic objectives included in the framework document have been drafted to reflect society here while retaining the ethos and spirit of the UN principles. The community groups, organisations and people undertaking the work will help us

to accurately reflect society here, and I congratulate them on the work that has been undertaken.

Mr Dunne: I was delighted today to see a commitment in the Programme for Government to extend the age discrimination legislation to include the provision of goods, facilities and services. Will the junior Minister give an update on that commitment?

Mr Bell: That commitment is in the draft Programme for Government, and I thank the honourable Member for North Down for raising the issue to extend the age discrimination legislation to the areas that he identified. It is being taken forward in Great Britain, and officials here are considering the legislative implications for Northern Ireland. Although we recognise the value in eliminating discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services in relation to age, we also need to carefully consider the impacts that such legislation may have. I will give you an example: at the moment, being allowed to discriminate on age allows us to provide services to older persons free of charge. Therefore, we want to be careful as we work through the legislation. However, OFMDFM's intention to extend the age discrimination legislation to goods, facilities and services is a significant undertaking. It will involve the development of primary legislation, which will take around three years to complete.

Mr Copeland: I thank the junior Minister for his answers given on behalf of the First Minister. I confess that the closer I get to 65, the younger it seems. What assistance has been provided by OFMDFM thus far to assist with the work of the Pensioners Parliament?

Mr Bell: Martina Anderson and I attended events organised by the Pensioners Parliament. Most recently, I attended an event in November, and spoke on behalf of the Department. We submitted ourselves to questions taken directly from the Floor of the Senate Chamber. The work and commitment of the Pensioners Parliament is to be commended. Martina Anderson and I noted that, at a conference in Belfast due to start at 9.00 am, pensioners were queuing to get in from 8.30 am. That indicates the celebration we should have that people are living longer. We should welcome the commitment that they can bring forward. The Pensioners Parliament is one means by which older people can hold government to account. It is a procedure that we very much welcome.

Ms Ritchie: Bearing in mind the need to protect older and younger people and the fact that you have addressed, along with junior Minister Anderson, the Pensioners Parliament, can you confirm what discussions have taken place at joint consultative committee level regarding the need to address the serious concerns presented by the welfare reform proposals, which will have a detrimental impact on the elderly and, in particular, pensioners?

Mr Bell: The honourable Member raises some particularly valid concerns in relation to welfare reform and the concerns that that presents. Importantly, people will have seen what the Northern Ireland Executive did over the Christmas period to attack fuel poverty and its impact, which was one of the key areas for elderly people. You saw the provision of finances that were given there, and also for many older people living with cancer.

In the work that is being jointly undertaken with the new Commissioner for Older People, and in our work with Patricia

Lewsey-Mooney, we are looking to see what events we can take forward, not only on the issue of welfare but to see how we can improve relations and understanding across our society.

Public Appointments: Code of Practice

3. **Mr McKay** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the revised code of practice for ministerial public appointments. (AQO 1212/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: On 16 January this year, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, John Keanie, sent an updated code of practice for ministerial appointments to all Ministers in the Executive. The deputy First Minister and I strongly support the work of the commissioner, and are asking all our colleagues to implement the updated code within their Departments with immediate effect. The main changes in the updated code provide clarification on the recording of ministerial appointment decisions and introduce a facility for Ministers to create, if they wish, a reserve list of substitute candidates for appointments should an unexpected vacancy arise within one year. Those are sensible and practical suggestions, for which I am grateful to Mr Keanie. Given the restrictions on government spending, I welcome the additional flexibility that reserve lists bring to the appointment process.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his response.

It is accepted that anyone appointed to serve on a public body must have the requisite skills. However, does the First Minister accept that, unless we remove some public appointments from the remit of the code, we might never effectively start addressing the under-representation of women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds across the public service?

Mr P Robinson: The legal requirement, and, in my view, the proper requirement, is that appointments should be made on the basis of merit. However, we do need to recognise that there are many occasions when it is, for instance, necessary to appoint boards that have a balance of skills and knowledge. That does require us to look at a range of issues and, where possible, should be on the basis of the balance within the community.

Mr D McIlveen: Will the First Minister list the public bodies that his Department is responsible for, and perhaps provide an update on the appointment of a new Police Ombudsman?

2.45 pm

Mr P Robinson: The key bodies for which OFMDFM has responsibility that fall within Mr Keanie's remit are the Commission for Victims and Survivors, Ilex, the new Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation that is being set up, the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission, and the Commissioner for Children and Young People. Of course, we also have a role in the appointment of the Police Ombudsman, although responsibility for day-to-day pay and rations lies with the Department of Justice.

Mr Elliott: The First Minister mentioned the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation. I am interested to know whether there has been any recent progress on the appointment of the corporation.

Mr P Robinson: An advert seeking a chairperson for the corporation will appear fairly shortly. The recommendation of the panel that carried out the initial interviews was that we should advertise again to ensure that we get somebody with the requisite skills. We will also look for additional members that we can put in a pool of candidates for membership, and we have started work on that. It is hoped that the advertising will happen this week — if not this week, then next week — so that that can be done as quickly as possible.

This is an extremely important development. It is close to the city of Belfast but within the city of Lisburn. It has massive potential to bring jobs to the region on a long-term basis, and it has the size and status to be a regional centre, so it is important to the whole of the Province.

Social Protection Fund

4. **Mr Swann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline their plans for the social protection fund for the remainder of the current budget period.
(AQO 1213/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: The Executive established a social protection fund (SPF) to assist those most in need in the wider community. This year we agreed to prioritise fuel poverty through the fund, and we committed the full £20 million budget to a winter fuel poverty payment scheme. That is being progressed by the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. Through the scheme, a one-off payment of £75 will be made to persons in receipt of income-based means-tested benefits, including income support, income-related employment and support allowance and income-based jobseeker's allowance. Pension credit recipients and people in receipt of cancer treatment in line with criteria determined by DHSSPS are receiving one-off payments of £100. Those entitled should begin to receive payments in the coming weeks, with the majority of payments being made by the end of this month.

Although funding for the programme was secured for only this financial year, we are committed as an Executive to securing moneys for future SPF programmes during the remainder of the current Budget period. We will seek to identify revenue streams during budgetary exercises. With that in mind, our officials will continue their discussions with departmental colleagues to develop proposals that will form the basis of the future social protection fund spend programme.

Mr Swann: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Does he accept that there was a serious deficiency in the first round of the social protection fund, given that families with disabled children were not included?

Mr P Robinson: It might be worth pointing out that, when we look at criteria, they have to be criteria that fall within the overall funding available. Even with the criteria that we have set on this occasion, when we have had a longer period to prepare, we have exceeded the £20 million. Indeed, we were successful during the January monitoring round in getting sufficient funding, and I think that we have spent about £22.5 million on the SPF this year.

There are many areas of society that would undoubtedly benefit from further funding being made available to them. However, as we look to the fund in the long term, we will, I think, see that that there is perhaps a view that simply doling out money is not the best way, and certainly not the only way, of assisting those who are most vulnerable and in the greatest need. We will perhaps look at more holistic ways of giving assistance to the section of the community that needs it most.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Given that the social protection fund was designed to help to protect vulnerable individuals from the worst aspects of financial cuts, have Ministers given any consideration to using the funding in future years to help to fund an anti-poverty strategy?

Mr P Robinson: Maybe that flows from the comments that I made to the Member. Rather than simply looking at it on the basis of handing out sums of money to individuals, we need to see whether we could develop the programme more strategically to be of greater assistance to sectors. In doing that, we will consult fully, and I hope that the Committee will help us with that.

Mr Spratt: Will the First Minister give precise details of when payments will start and whether all vulnerable groups will be paid quickly?

Mr P Robinson: As I understand it, the Department for Social Development will deal with about 250,000 payments. It has the data available, and I understand that the money will be paid during this month. However, we added to our criteria for patients suffering from cancer, and DHSSPS set down criteria for that. We believe that about 6,000 people are entitled to receive payment under that scheme. However, it can be done only if they agree to it. Not everyone who has cancer will have told friends and relatives about it, so it is a sensitive issue. The application process closes, I think, on 15 February. Of the 6,000 entitled, the last figure that I heard was that 3,000 had already put in applications, and I urge any others who wish to seek that assistance to do so before 15 February.

Mr Durkan: I wish to follow on from earlier questions: will the Minister outline details of any further funds, or initiatives, which seem to be the way he would rather go, to help to cushion the blow of welfare reform on many vulnerable and disadvantaged people here?

Mr P Robinson: I am being particularly careful not to be prescriptive, because welfare reform will clearly have an impact. We fool ourselves if we do not recognise that it could be a significant factor for many families in Northern Ireland. Over the next number of months, we probably need to assess the impact that it will have; what strategies we can put in place to give assistance; and how best we can use that fund.

At the same time, it was only in the Budget that we were able to identify the £20 million for this financial year. We have an agreement in principle that we will attempt to get a similar size of fund for future years, but that work is ongoing. The Budget review group has discussed and will continue to discuss the issue, but we need to identify a source of funding for the remaining three years.

Corporation Tax

5. **Mr Weir** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the devolution of corporation tax powers. (AQO 1214/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: The Government's response to the consultation on rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy was published on 20 December 2011. There was considerable support for lowering the corporation tax rate, particularly from the business community. Three quarters of respondents were in favour. However, there remains work to do, and we are determined to continue to make progress on that important issue.

The ministerial working group met on 15 December 2011 and agreed that, between now and the summer, it will seek to establish with clarity the costs and benefits, administrative changes and potential legislative vehicle for transferring corporation tax powers to Northern Ireland. On 10 January and 24 January, officials met HM Treasury and HM Revenue and Customs to begin the detailed work needed to determine how the devolution of corporation tax would work in practice. Initial discussions covered costings, the design of the administration system, how the block grant adjustment might work and the economic impact. Further meetings of officials are being scheduled.

We now have a draft Programme for Government commitment to press for the devolution of corporation tax powers and to reduce its level. Our draft economic strategy demonstrates how we will ensure that benefits are maximised. Although we want those powers, we must ensure that the costs do not outweigh the benefits. We will not pay over the odds. The date for the next ministerial working group meeting has been set for 7 March, when we will assess progress to date. The group is expected to submit a report to the Government in the summer. Following that, a decision will be taken.

Mr Weir: I thank the First Minister for his answer. What implications, if any, does the current debate on Scottish independence have for the prospect of corporation tax powers being devolved to Northern Ireland?

Mr P Robinson: As far as Her Majesty's Government are concerned, there will be sensitivity around those issues, perhaps not so much on the debate on independence, but on the "devo max" debate, because, unquestionably, the maximum form of devolution is probably more popular among the Scottish population.

Northern Ireland is a unique case. We share a land border with a country that has a significantly more attractive level of corporation tax. We are coming out of a very long period of conflict and division. Our economy has been set back over a sustained period. Therefore, it needs a considerable lift. The rebalancing of our economy is needed much more than in Scotland. It also needs to be pointed out that, because devolution of corporation tax powers is not a free ticket, there is a downside to the block grant. The reduction to the block grant in Scotland would be significantly greater — perhaps around £2 billion — were its Government to reduce the level to that of the Republic of Ireland. All those matters will be taken into account. Northern Ireland has a special and unique case and a very sound argument.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister outline measures that are being examined to mitigate the cost to the block grant of reducing corporation tax?

Mr P Robinson: The Finance Minister has, obviously, set out a series of measures on the basis of current circumstances. A reduction in the block grant to allow for corporation tax to be lowered would, probably, not affect anything other than the final year of the comprehensive spending review period. It is likely that the Executive would look at it on the basis that we would announce a future date for the commencement of a reduction in corporation tax, were we to get the power to do so. We would still enjoy the ability to sell locations in Northern Ireland to foreign direct investors on the basis of what would come down the line and be in place by the time those companies arrive and become profitable.

Of course, on top of that, the Budget review group looks constantly at where savings can be made. There is no doubt, however, that the ability to lower the level of corporation tax would significantly help with investment opportunities. When the deputy First Minister and I were in the United States and, indeed, in other parts of the world, it was the one trendy factor that chief executives and leading officials from various companies would look at in order to encourage people to site foreign direct investment. Therefore, there would be a return with regard to jobs as well as the obvious advantages that would come from the additional tax take that would develop.

Mrs Overend: My colleague asked a similar question to mine. Is there clarity as yet on the financial reduction from the Northern Ireland block grant? Can the Minister explain to the House how that will be measured and provide some detail?

Mr P Robinson: I wish that I was the one who measures it. I could set it at an appropriate level. The Chancellor has indicated that the reduction will not be negotiated; it will be done by a set formula. It should be done on the basis of reduction of the corporation tax level that is received at present.

If that is what happens, that is not unhelpful to Northern Ireland because going through a period of conflict has obviously had an impact on private sector development in Northern Ireland.

Given the period of recession that we are coming through, the figures for our present corporation tax levels are probably as low as they are likely to be. However, there are other factors that can be taken into account and that, in my view, are negotiable, namely whether they take into account the benefits that the Treasury would have as a result of us lowering the level of corporation tax. Reducing the number of people who are dependent on benefits and increasing the tax take in Northern Ireland, in respect of both VAT and other peripheral taxes, would clearly make a difference to the Treasury. National insurance also makes a difference to the Treasury. Nobody knows the figure as yet, and those are the issues that officials and, eventually, Ministers will have to decide on.

3.00 pm

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Speaker: Question 15 has been withdrawn.

Invest NI: East Londonderry

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the financial and non-financial assistance provided by Invest NI to start-up and existing businesses in East Londonderry in the last four years, and for her assessment of the success of these businesses as a result of this assistance. (AQO 1225/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): In the last four years, Invest Northern Ireland has made over 500 offers of support to businesses, bringing total investment in the East Londonderry constituency to £48 million. In addition, 800 new business starts were created in the constituency in the same period. Of course, the last four years has also seen the onset of the economic downturn. A number of measures have been implemented to help our businesses deal with its impact. Most recently, in November 2011, I launched the Boosting Business campaign, which provides a range of support, both financial and advisory, to help businesses cope with the impact of the downturn. A key element of the campaign is the jobs fund, which aims to help boost employment creation in the shorter term. Under the jobs fund, a number of new and existing businesses in East Londonderry have already been supported. You can be assured that Invest Northern Ireland is working hard to identify new projects that will lead to further job creation in the constituency.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her very full and detailed response. Does the Minister have a percentage for the number of companies that are located in the East Londonderry constituency and assisted by Invest Northern Ireland but are from outside Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: If the Member means foreign-owned firms in East Londonderry, I will try to get that information for him. I know that we have been working mostly with indigenous firms in the East Londonderry area. However, I will endeavour to get him the percentage figure that he is looking for. I will write to him and place the information in the Library for other Members to see.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that there is real scope for firms to carry out research and development programmes due to the two excellent universities in Northern Ireland and their top quality graduates?

Mrs Foster: I absolutely agree. Indeed, just last week, we launched the Northern Ireland Advanced Composites and Engineering Centre at the Science Park. That work has been ongoing with Bombardier and other major firms. It was supported by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and we were delighted that the Business Secretary, Vince Cable, was able to come along and jointly open the centre with me last week.

We have seen an increase in business spend on research and development. That is encouraging, but I accept that that is from quite a low base. We want to encourage more firms to become innovative and to spend more of their bottom line on research and development because firms that have engaged in research and development alongside the universities have really benefited from it.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware of a recent event in my constituency that brought together community reps, businesspeople and

elected reps. One of the major issues raised at that event was finance for microenterprises. What has been done in that regard?

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, we have launched the SME growth loan fund from Invest Northern Ireland. We hope that that fund will be able to help firms, however small, that are struggling to gain access to finance in the most traditional way, from the banking sector. We hope that the procurement process for the fund manager will be finished very soon, and we will then be able to go live with that.

I entirely accept the point that small and medium-sized businesses are being continually pressed in relation to access to finance and banks. That is the case even for firms that have a banking relationship. I use the term "relationship" very loosely because some of the banks are bearing down very heavily on some of our companies. It is a matter that everybody in the House should be very concerned about. If banks put businesses that are trying to get through difficult times out of business, they will not gain the finance from those businesses in the future. Job losses will occur as a consequence, and our economy will not be able to sustain that. The banks have to step up to the mark and work with the rest of us to take our economy through very difficult times. Short-term measures may work in the short term, but they will not help us in the medium to longer term.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for her continuing interest in east Derry. She will be aware that, recently, the Assembly acquired the former army barracks at Shackleton, Ballykelly. Will she seriously consider the setting-up of a special task force so that the opportunities that that presents can be maximised?

Mrs Foster: I know that the Member takes a special interest in the former barracks at Ballykelly. He has raised the issue on many occasions with the First Minister and deputy First Minister. As he will know, we are seeking specialist advice on the options for the site. That is being prepared by the Executive's asset management unit. The site has almost 300 acres, with almost 1 million square feet of buildings. Therefore, of course it has massive potential for the area. At Executive level, I will watch with great interest to see what comes out of OFMDFM, and I will obviously be very interested in what is to be developed.

Irish Times and InterTradelreland Innovation Awards

2. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the Irish Times and InterTradelreland innovation awards. (AQO 1226/11-15)

Mrs Foster: InterTradelreland (ITI) has been involved in the Irish Times InterTradelreland all-island innovation awards for the past three years. During that time, ITI has promoted and encouraged companies in both jurisdictions to engage in and involve themselves in innovation. I understand that 18 companies have been shortlisted across six categories: organisational system process innovation; product innovation; service innovation; application of R&D; green-tech innovation; and public service innovation. However, I am disappointed that only one Northern Ireland company has been shortlisted.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for her response. I am sure that she agrees that the Irish Republic does not have a monopoly on innovation. Therefore, the statistics that she has highlighted are deeply disturbing. Will she also comment on the nomination of Bord Bia, which local food producers tell me operates an increasingly protectionist stance?

Mrs Foster: I hear what the Member said about the latter point. I am hugely disappointed about the fact that only one of the 18 companies that have been shortlisted is a Northern Ireland company. I understand that that is not a new phenomenon. I looked into the matter: only two were shortlisted last year, and only one was shortlisted in 2010. There is a pattern, and I have to ask why that is the case. When I asked who was judging the awards, I learned that, apart from InterTradelreland staff, all the judges are from the Republic of Ireland. That causes me grave concern, and I am writing about it to InterTradelreland's new chairman.

I was astonished by Bord Bia's nomination and shortlisting given what I have said about the protectionist practices of Bord Bia in relation to Northern Ireland food. However, I am taking the matter up with the new chair of InterTradelreland and its chief executive.

Mr A Maginness: I share the Minister's disappointment that more Northern Ireland firms have not been nominated to the shortlist. However, I hope that the Minister is not, in any way, undermining the value of having such competitions and awards, particularly for innovation, which provides an excellent basis for the development of industry, North and South. Does the Minister agree?

Mrs Foster: Certainly, I welcome any competition that encourages innovation, but surely the Chair of the ETI Committee must be concerned that only one of our companies has been shortlisted for that award. I have to ask why that is the case. Is it the judging panel? Is it the media partner, which is 'The Irish Times'? What is the problem in getting more companies from Northern Ireland shortlisted? In the previous question, the Member asked me about the importance of research, development and innovation. It is hugely important for our economic development that we continue to encourage companies. How are they encouraged? They are encouraged by being on shortlists for awards and all those things.

As the Chair knows, the implementation of an innovation awards scheme on a North/South basis is part of the Belfast Agreement and is listed in the British-Irish Agreement Act 1999. However, all it says is that we are to implement:

"an innovation award scheme on a North/South basis, with support from the private sector".

Perhaps there is something that we need to look at in relation to the awards scheme to see if it could be better managed and to ensure that there is equity and fairness as regards Northern Ireland companies.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister has given clarity and context to her views on the nomination process. Given that, of the 18 nominated organisations, seven are from Dublin and none is from Belfast and she does not think that that is an accurate reflection of the mix, what would be an accurate reflection?

Mrs Foster: When you see that, out of 155 applications, only 24 were from Northern Ireland companies, it tells us that there is a problem, not just in Belfast but across Northern Ireland. The issue for me — I hope that the ETI Committee will follow it up as well in respect of InterTradelreland — is how we can make the scheme more attractive for firms to become involved, so that our small companies, as well as those of the Republic of Ireland, get the benefit of the InterTradelreland innovation awards.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As we grapple with the worst recession that we have faced in a generation, with soaring unemployment and emigration, the fact that this awards ceremony proves to be a priority for the DUP and its Ministers is very concerning to me. Would the Minister not be better providing support and assistance to local firms, so that they can compete across the world with innovation, instead of targeting cheap attacks on a good all-Ireland body?

Mrs Foster: The Member's question and the tone in which it is asked show where the Member is coming from. He is saying, "Do not ever attack InterTradelreland", even when there is plainly something at fault in relation to that award ceremony. If the Member thinks that I will shy away from such issues, he has obviously not been around for very long.

Boosting Business

3. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many additional companies have been supported as a result of the Boosting Business campaign. (AQO 1227/11-15)

12. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on Boosting Business, which was launched by Invest NI in 2011. (AQO 1236/11-15)

Mr McCarthy: To lower the tone of debate, I will ask question 3. *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 12 together.

As of 30 January 2012, Invest NI, through its newly established enquiry handling team, has received a total of 3,214 new enquiries, via the 0800 number, online and text response, since the launch of the Boosting Business campaign on 14 November 2011. That is against an overall campaign target of 2,500 enquiries.

A large number of those businesses and individuals have been supported with a range of advice, guidance or Invest NI programme support, while others have been referred to Departments and agencies — for example, DEL, DARD, HMRC, and local councils — or to business information websites such as the Northern Ireland business information website, nibusinessinfo.co.uk, as appropriate.

An example of the positive impact of the Boosting Business campaign includes the Focus on Finance events organised at various locations across Northern Ireland. Demand for the six initial events was such that three additional events were run in January — two in Belfast and one in Newry. In total, 527 delegates across the wider business base attended those events, with 276 businesses subsequently signing up for up to five days' free consultancy to address specific financial issues.

Invest Northern Ireland has also organised three ABC of Selling seminars, aimed at helping delegates improve their selling skills and getting practical tips on how to increase sales, close a deal, manage a sales force and develop an effective sales strategy.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. The figures that she cited are impressive, but, at the end of the day, we want to see the creation of jobs. Can the Minister give any indication of how many jobs have been created as a result of all the figures on enquiries etc that she has given? We want to see jobs on the ground. Thank you.

3.15 pm

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that jobs is just one part of the Boosting Business initiative. There are five parts to Boosting Business: jobs; exports; research and development; new technologies; and skills. To date, across the various job fund measures, a total of 1,796 jobs have been promoted, of which, before the question is asked, 378 have been created.

Mr Easton: Is there any advice or strategies in place to help businesses to increase their exports?

Mrs Foster: Exporting is one of the five themes of the Boosting Business initiative. We have been quite successful in that area, but, as we are coming from quite a low base, there is much more to do. Last week, figures were released by the Department that showed a 9.5% increase in exports, which was very pleasing. I have also been trying to encourage firms to export to the BRIC countries, and exports to those countries were up by 29.7%. I think that that is telling and demonstrates that firms are looking to export to different places. They have discovered that the world is a small place and that there are many opportunities in Brazil, Russia, India and China that people need to look at and take up. We want to do more with those companies to encourage them. In particular, we want to strengthen their supply bases in Northern Ireland, so that the companies and their supply chains are able to make gains.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister referred to the importance of research and development. How is the Boosting Business campaign helping to deliver a much needed increase in research and development amongst our local businesses? Has the Department seen an increase in the number of partnerships being forged between businesses and our colleges and universities?

Mrs Foster: We hope that the new Northern Ireland Advanced Composites and Engineering Centre will help with the research and development that is being taken up by small companies. That centre is available to big companies and to many smaller companies that do not have access to the sort of expertise and materials that are in that centre. We hope that companies that make up the supply chains of Bombardier, FG Wilson, Wrightbus and all the other big firms will take advantage of the facilities there.

We have also found that the innovation voucher scheme, through which small companies can buy in innovation expertise from the universities, has been hugely successful. That has worked well with both universities, the further education colleges and the agricollleges. There is a lot going on, but there is always more to do. We need to continue with

research and development and innovation and trying to be innovative ourselves.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that, for many small businesses that are starting off, some sort of start-up help is important? What consideration has she or her Department given to returning to some sort of start-up grant? How much is being invested in the Boosting Business campaign?

Mrs Foster: I know that the Member is probably looking back to the days when companies that completed the Go For It programme were given a grant of £400. We currently give assistance in the region of £1,500 to those who are not in education, employment or training and decide to set up a new business. We also assist those who want to set up a business in a neighbourhood renewal area with slightly less than that — I think it is £1,000. Money is available in those two areas. When an evaluation was done on the £400 that was given to Go For It programme applicants, it was found that it did not make the difference that was needed for some. However, I accept that we are now in different economic times, and that it may need to be looked at again. I will do that.

I do not have the entirety of the figures on how much we are spending on Boosting Business. However, I am happy to write to the Member with those figures.

Mr Kinahan: When the Programme for Government was put forward, there was talk of 25,000 jobs being created. I asked the Minister whether she would use think tanks or other ways of discussion with business that would lead to the creation of jobs, and she recommended the Boosting Business campaign. However, when I looked at it, I must admit that I could not see how it would do that. Today, we heard —

Mr Speaker: Do I detect a question?

Mr Kinahan: The question is this: what other mechanisms is she looking to put in place to ensure that we listen to businesses to determine what they need in order to create jobs?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that I meet various business forums almost every week, and I work with them. My most recent encounter with the business community was a discussion about whether it felt that the economic strategy was going in the right direction and what other things needed to be included in it. As the Member knows, the strategy is out for consultation at the moment. If there are issues that the business community wants to raise with me, I will, of course, listen to it. I have done so and will do so in the future.

Business: Telecommunications

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline any plans her Department has to improve telecommunications further for businesses in South Belfast. (AQO 1228/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In September 2011, my Department published the telecommunications action plan 2011-15, under which it has set out its priorities for further developing Northern Ireland's already world-class telecommunications infrastructure over the next four years. That includes the

implementation of a project to deliver broadband services of at least two megabits per second to all premises across Northern Ireland and an initiative aimed at improving access to mobile voice and data services across the region. Those multi-million-pound initiatives, which will be delivered on a Northern Ireland-wide, technology-neutral basis, are currently being scoped with a view to full procurement commencing in the summer of 2012.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she update the House on the broadband fund?

Mrs Foster: We have already secured £4.4 million from the broadband fund, and, combined with the £5.5 million allocated in the 2011-15 Budget and matching EU funding, we are going to be able to deliver that minimum two megabits per second broadband service. That is good news. We would like to have had more money from the central pot, but we are having ongoing discussions with Broadband Delivery UK (BDUK) to try to source additional funding of up to £6 million to deliver an innovative project aimed at improving mobile broadband coverage. As Members will know, I have often said in the House that we need to look at mobile signals more and more because people are moving away from static computers to handheld devices. That is the direction of travel of our telecommunications strategy, and we will concentrate on that.

Dr McDonnell: What is the Minister's assessment of the potential for job creation as a result of the improvements in South Belfast? How will that impact on the developments at Queen's University? Is there some synergy there?

Mrs Foster: There are always synergies between the academic institutions and new technology. It is my hope that we will remain at the forefront of telecommunications in the UK, in conjunction with our universities, working closer together. The Member has always been very supportive of the work that was carried out by MATRIX, the industry-led science panel. Telecommunications was one of the areas identified by that panel of academics, working with industry and facilitated by government to deliver what is new and upcoming for the economy in Northern Ireland. Telecommunications remains at the forefront of innovation for this economy.

Ms Lo: What measures is the Department taking to ensure that access to Project Kelvin and the Hibernia Atlantic line will be available for small and medium-sized enterprises?

Mrs Foster: Project Kelvin, as the Member knows, is one of our flagship projects in Northern Ireland. It gives us a really competitive advantage over the entirety of these islands because we have a direct link to the United States. It is an open access project, and, therefore, it can be used by any company. There are points of presence throughout Northern Ireland. Certainly, if the Member has a particular company in mind that she wants to encourage to use Kelvin for competitive reasons, I urge her to speak to Invest Northern Ireland so that we can take advantage of what is an absolutely marvellous piece of equipment.

Electricity: Social Tariffs

5. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has considered the introduction of means-tested social tariffs for electricity. (AQO 1229/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am already on record as stating that any move to introduce social or affordability tariffs in the energy sector would be extremely complex and unlikely to solve the hardships caused by fuel poverty, not least because such tariffs have to be paid for by other customers. There is an immediate potential impact on wider economic competitiveness and employment, potential impacts on competition in the energy market and additional burdens on households, some of which could be pushed into fuel poverty themselves as a result of having to subsidise others.

In 2010, the regulator's office carried out a consultation, 'Assisting with Affordability Concerns for Vulnerable Energy Consumers'. Feedback indicated that, although there was broad agreement that affordability assistance should address affordable warmth and not just help with electricity bills, there was no consensus on who should receive assistance, what mechanism could be used to identify and assist them and how much any assistance should amount to. That in itself sends us a message.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's comprehensive response. We have just come out of another cold snap, and I welcome the winter fuel payment and, indeed, the extension of the fuel payment being paid to cancer patients. The Executive have accepted that there is a need to provide that. Are there other ways to help low-income families and the most vulnerable? On the one hand, the Executive provide assistance through winter fuel payments, and, on the other hand, we cannot tackle the issue of the increase in electricity prices.

Mrs Foster: I accept what the Member says: there continue to be issues, particularly with fuel poverty. It is difficult to achieve what she wants to achieve through a social tariff. There needs to be a conversation about how we can help those families. As the Member will know, I am bound to say that it is a matter for the Department for Social Development, and it is leading on all those issues for the Executive. That does not mean that we do not work across Departments, and, indeed, I have been working with Nelson McCausland, on energy efficiency in particular, to find ways in which that can make a difference to bills that are going out to low-income and vulnerable families.

Mr Dunne: How does the Minister assess the viability of the proposed second North/South electricity interconnector, and what impact will it have for consumers here?

Mrs Foster: It is important to have our interconnector in place. As the Member probably realises, huge costs are passed on to consumers in Northern Ireland by dint of the fact that the interconnector is not up and running at present. As I understand it, the issue is to be addressed by the Planning Appeals Commission in the very near future, and we hope that there will be an outcome. It is not for me to talk about where the line should go or about any of the planning issues surrounding it. All I know as energy Minister is that we need that second interconnector, and we need it very soon.

Mrs Overend: Given that small businesses consistently identify electricity as their most widely used energy source and the Carbon Trust as the most widely recognised source of information on energy-saving advice for homes and businesses, what impact has the fact that the Carbon Trust

no longer delivers Invest Northern Ireland's sustainable energy programme?

Mrs Foster: As the Member is probably aware, a new programme was developed that not only covered electricity but gave advice on other areas with which businesses have difficulties, particularly in the area of water. That matter is still ongoing, and I am happy to update the Member when it is concluded.

Mr Agnew: Last week, the Committee received a presentation from SmartGridIreland. Will the Minister give an update on progress for the pilot scheme for a smart grid?

Mrs Foster: I am pleased to say that the Member and I are both great supporters of SmartGridIreland. There are huge opportunities in respect of SmartGridIreland.

I have been down with the promoters on occasions to learn of their progress. The Member will know that they have to work with the Utility Regulator to ensure that they can progress. However, I urge all sides to be as creative and innovative in respect of SmartGridIreland as they can, because it can help not only with fuel poverty but with energy efficiency as well.

3.30 pm

Credit Unions

6. **Ms J McCann** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the introduction of legislation at Westminster to give credit unions greater lending powers. (AQO 1230/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Legislation to enable Northern Ireland credit unions to apply to undertake additional financial services was laid at Westminster in November 2011. Under that legislation, during the three-month pre-commencement period prior to the transfer of regulatory responsibility to the Financial Services Authority on 31 March, credit unions may apply to vary their permissions on transfer to conduct additional regulated activities. Following transfer, credit union members will benefit from increased consumer protection through automatic access to the financial services compensation scheme and the Financial Ombudsman Service.

Committee Business

Education Maintenance Allowance

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to expedite the finalisation and implementation of an effective and cross-departmental strategy for young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) and the ongoing review of education maintenance allowance (EMA), in order to address the issues of record levels of youth unemployment and increasing disengagement with mainstream education; and to make the necessary improvements to ensure that EMA is targeted at those in greatest need. — [Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning).]

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I welcome the opportunity to respond to this extremely important motion and debate. Key aspects of the motion include its reference to those who are not in employment, education or training, the so-called NEETs; the problems of youth unemployment; and the means by which we can encourage young people to engage with education and training, in particular through using the education maintenance allowance. I will examine all those aspects in some detail.

First, however, it would be useful to set out why those issues are important. From a liberal perspective, this starts with individual opportunity: every person deserves support and encouragement to develop to their full potential. It is important for society that each person be allowed to develop and participate in the economy. Among our young people aged 16 to 24, 21% fall into the category of NEET in its broadest sense. Within that, a wide range of interventions are required. Some people encounter barriers that prevent them from accessing education and training or entering the workforce; for others, the problem is simply a lack of opportunities, due to our economy's current situation.

I want to focus on the latter first. Youth unemployment is one of the major issues to face our society today, and Members from all parties recognise that. It is important to emphasise that this is not just about young people who have slipped between the cracks of provision and are not in education, employment or training: the recent recession has hit our young people particularly hard. Between November 2007 and November 2011, there was a 155% increase in the number of under-25s out of work, the biggest increase of all UK regions. We have programmes already in place to help to address that issue. For example, my Department guarantees a training place to all unemployed 16- and 17-year-olds, through the Training for Success and programme-led apprenticeship programmes.

Training for Success provides training for young people who have not yet found full-time employment. It is designed to enable them to progress to higher-level training, further education or employment. It is delivered through two strands, the first of which is Skills for your Life, which addresses the personal and development needs of young people who have disengaged from learning and/or have significant obstacles to learning. The second strand is Skills for Work, which helps young people to gain skills

and a vocation-related qualification at level 1 to enable them to gain employment or to progress to higher-level training. Programme-led apprenticeships offer young people the opportunity to work towards a level 2 apprenticeship framework in a chosen skill level, setting them on the path to career success. In 2010-11, expenditure on those programmes amounted to £27 million, and there are some 8,000 young people on the schemes.

For 18- to 24-year-olds, the main programme of support is Steps to Work. By September 2011, over 40% of participants being assisted by that programme were under 25. Almost 6,000 people — approximately 30% of the 20,000-plus young people under 25 who completed the programme — have found work. The programme offers a wide range of provision, including work experience placements and subsidised employment and training for nationally recognised vocational qualifications. Specific provision for unemployed graduates is also available through the graduate acceleration programme strand of Steps to Work. Furthermore, I recently introduced a short-term variant of the waged Step Ahead strand of provision, known as Step Ahead 2012, which is targeted at three groups. One such group is young people aged 18 to 24, who make up over 70% of all applicants. We are being significantly assisted in our efforts on the issue through support from the European social fund to create training opportunities for 4,500 NEET young people between 2007 and 2013.

The problems we face today are not unique to Northern Ireland. They have prompted initiatives across Great Britain, with additional measures in Scotland and Wales. In Great Britain, the Government recently announced a new youth contract, an initiative that will invest £940 million in new measures over the next three years to help young people to progress in the labour market. The contract provides for increased time with personal advisers, weekly job search reviews, 100,000 work placements over the next three years, a new wage incentive to encourage employers to offer jobs and a new programme targeted at the most persistent young people who are not in education, employment or training. In addition to youth contract measures, Wales has put in place the Jobs Growth Wales programme, a £75 million scheme designed to create 4,000 jobs a year for young people. Scotland has introduced the Community Jobs Scotland scheme, whereby organisations are offered a grant of up to £6,000 for each job created. That scheme will create 2,000 jobs over the next three years and represents an additional investment of £12.4 million.

Youth unemployment must now be a top priority for the Northern Ireland Executive, and I will certainly welcome the Assembly's support on that. Judging by the comments from Members from all parties, I believe that I have that support, and I trust that those comments will reflect the approach of the respective Ministers of each party when the issue comes to the Executive. Measures are needed to help young people to compete on a more equal basis with older, more experienced workers in a difficult labour market. Young people fall into the trap of not being able to get a job without experience and not being able to get experience without a job.

We need to create opportunities designed to keep young people actively and meaningfully engaged in preparation for the economic recovery. Any new measures would be additional to what is currently offered and would carry a

skills premium to benefit the development of our economy more generally. Consequently, I have developed detailed proposals to extend the support available to our young people. I have circulated them to Executive colleagues, and they should be considered by the Executive shortly. Ultimately, our ability to implement new provision will depend on the resources made available to my Department. We simply need to invest in additional support if we are to respond appropriately to the needs of the young unemployed. Others have already done so, and we clearly need to do so too. Once Executive agreement is secured, I will, of course, make a full statement to the Assembly.

We also need to address the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training and face wider barriers. My Department is leading on the creation of an interdepartmental strategy, Pathways to Success, which will set out how we intend to do that. The strategy will contain two sets of integrated measures designed as the Executive's overall approach. One set will focus on prevention and will set out actions to stop young people ending up in the NEET category in the first place. A major aspect of that strand lies with the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The other aspect will focus on re-engagement and will cover actions to re-engage young people who are already in the NEET category and are most at risk of remaining there.

In those two themes, we will provide strategic ministerial leadership through the ministerial subcommittee for children and young people, which will also allow for better co-ordination and stakeholder engagement, deliver a dedicated pilot programme to address any gaps in current interventions aimed at prevention and re-engagement and work closely with the NEET strategy forum to support the work it has already begun on how to draw out the best practice models. We will encourage that through an innovation and collaboration support fund to ensure that outputs contribute positively to the progression of young people towards and within education, employment and training. Subject to Executive agreement, I hope to publish the strategy in April and intend to make a statement to the Assembly in detail on that policy.

The motion also raises the issue of the education maintenance allowance. EMA was specifically designed to encourage young people to stay on at school or college after the age of 16. Findings from a recent review demonstrate that a large number of young people will stay on at school or education irrespective of whether the allowance is paid. In this challenging economic climate, we need to ensure that any funding support is directed towards those who need it most and where it will ultimately have the most meaningful impact. On 12 September 2011, the Executive agreed that the Department of Education and my Department should undertake an urgent review of education maintenance allowance. My Department and the Department of Education are committed to the retention of EMA, and I am determined that young people from lower-income families, to whom the allowances make a real difference, continue to be assisted to stay on in education and training. However, the allowances could be better targeted. My Department and the Department of Education are considering options for the future of the EMA scheme. Once joint ministerial agreement has been secured on the options to be taken forward, they will be presented to the Executive as soon as is practically possible. That will, in turn, be followed by a full

public consultation. Any proposals to change the current provision of EMA in Northern Ireland will also be subject to the appropriate equality considerations.

A non-means-tested EMA, sometimes referred to as the training allowance, is paid to participants on the Training for Success programme, which guarantees a training place for 16- to 17-year-olds, including those who have disengaged from formal training. Northern Ireland is the only part of the United Kingdom that offers this non-means-tested EMA. It was implemented as part of a package of financial support for 16- to 19-year-old unwaged trainees on government training programmes in order to give them the same advantage as their peers in full-time education and to help young people from families dependent on means-tested benefits. The allowance is not subject to review. The conditions for payments are very specific in terms of the structure of the programme and the qualifications gained. The means by which we pay it are closely linked to UK-wide social security and child benefit legislation. The restrictions of the legislation and parity issues would seem to prevent the Department providing a non-means-tested allowance to young people on programmes other than those funded under the 1950 Act. I stress that seeking to support those on pre-vocational schemes through the non-means-tested EMA is much more than simply seeking to amend the 1950 legislation.

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

I have heard Members' comments regarding their desire to expand the means-tested EMA provision to pre-vocational training, and particular references have been made to the Give and Take scheme run by Include Youth, which I certainly join other Members in commending. The means-tested EMA was designed with a specific purpose of keeping persons in full-time school or FE provision. There is a minimum time commitment of 15 hours a week. There is no doubt that this support can and should be better targeted. Any expansion of the scheme in the manner that Members suggest needs to be governed by affordability issues. There is already upward pressure on the existing EMA budget due to the economic downturn. The forthcoming review of EMA and any additional savings realised from it are already linked to the baselines of departmental budgets. However, if Members are prepared to be more radical about the nature of EMA reform, further savings can be found. I would certainly like to see those savings redirected to other vehicles to support young people. It may be more appropriate to reinvest such savings in new schemes or projects within the broad ambit of NEETS than to simply seek to expand the EMA eligibility criteria much beyond the original intent in order to address wider social policy goals, perhaps in a less efficient manner.

Mr B McCrea: I do not want to interrupt your flow, but a specific issue has been raised that, I think, is unfair. Young people in a pre-vocational education system, who are doing the right thing and are the most vulnerable people in our society, are not getting that, even though everybody else gets it if they go to school or an FE college. Surely there must be a way of dealing with that particular anomaly.

Dr Farry: I thank the Committee Chair for that intervention. I will reiterate what I have said so that Members understand. We can certainly look at the means-tested EMA, but we have to be radical with the reforms if we are to generate additional resources that could be reinvested in respect of

the needs of young people, particularly the young people whom the Chair has identified. There are two ways in which we can do that. We could expand the eligibility criteria and the range of programmes that EMA covers. I suggest that that would be a major departure from the UK Government's idea of what the EMA was originally devised many years ago to achieve. We also have to ask ourselves what the implications are for affordability, the range of situations in which that would be funded and the efficiency of the spend on it. Equally, we could take the money from EMA savings and reinvest it in new programmes that may be outside the context of EMA. So, EMA may not be the vehicle by which we achieve those goals. However, that is a debate that we have to have. I certainly encourage the Committee to look at those options in more detail. It is important to stress that we are in a tight budgetary situation, but I accept Members' sincerity in putting the idea forward. However, it equally means that, if we do that, we have to do less elsewhere on a fixed budget. That is the reality in which we operate. This is a very important debate, and it is one that we will return to in the near future.

3.45 pm

Mr Buchanan: It is clear from the debate that Members are fully aware of the importance and urgency of the issue. It is the responsibility of the Committee for Employment and Learning to ensure that the recommendations made in the previous Committee's inquiry report are implemented.

The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training continues to rise, and we have heard that around the House today. Record youth unemployment is a disincentive to the young people who are failing to engage with formal education. Young people today ask why they should stay at school or college to attain qualifications that do not lead to a job. Yet, unfortunately, due to legislation from the 1950s, which the Chair of the Committee cited in his opening remarks, payment of EMA can be made only to participants in the Department's Training for Success programmes and not to hard-to-reach young people in pre-vocational training organised by Include Youth. When we talk to those people, they say that they feel that that is a form of discrimination. There is certainly an equality issue there, and it needs to be looked at and tackled.

It is disappointing to hear the Minister say that we need to put more money into the issue and make the pot bigger. In reality, that is not what we need to do. We need to look at the pot and make sure that it is redirected in a way that targets those who are most vulnerable and most in need. The Minister needs to relook at his strategy. Rather than calling for money to make the pot bigger, we need to redistribute it to the folk who need it most.

Those are the issues that greatly concern the Committee, as evidenced by what Members said today. If there is one thing that we have seen today, it is that the House is united on two issues in the motion. First, young people are not simply statistics. It is important that people realise that the young people concerned are not a number; they are individuals who may have some type of learning difficulty but, with the correct programme, can get into employment. Secondly, EMA must be targeted at the most vulnerable, that is, those who are most in need. Those are the two main issues that have arisen from the debate today.

I want to focus on what some Members said in their contribution. At the commencement of the debate, the Chairman of the Committee, Basil McCrea, said that he was impressed by the young people he met who have had to overcome challenges in their life. He also said that he felt that, to address that issue, the Minister should bid for the entire amount available under the youth contract.

David McIlveen referred to a heartfelt plea that he received from a young constituent who was involved in an Include Youth scheme. He also described a Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust residential as an eye-opening experience, and he praised the dedication of that team in helping young people to deal with challenges in their life. In addition, he endorsed one of the terms of reference of the current EMA review, which stipulates that the allowance should go to the most disadvantaged.

Barry McElduff felt that the EMA incentivises young vulnerable people from low-income families to stay in full-time education. For that reason, he said that the allowance should be retained and protected and should be redistributed to those in greatest need. That theme came from all Members who spoke: EMA must be redirected to those who are in greatest need. Mr McElduff also said that the current legislation should be amended to reflect that, and he urged the Minister to include young people on pre-vocational training schemes, such as the Give and Take scheme.

Pat Ramsey referred to the 155% increase in the number of under-25s who are out of work, and he said that he felt that that figure would get even worse as a result of the current welfare reforms. He also spoke of the inquiry report of the previous Committee, the lack of progress by the Department in identifying a way forward and the lack of data for identifying the young people who are on the NEETs programme. He also advocated a collaborative approach and urged the inclusion of pre-vocational schemes in EMA funding.

Chris Lyttle felt that the NEETs strategy should be the focus of the Programme for Government. He praised the innovative work carried out by organisations such as Barnardo's, the Gerry Rogan Initiative Trust and the Prince's Trust, along with many others. He cited the findings of the inquiry report, which stated that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister should take the lead, and he called for a united educational approach.

Alastair Ross felt that EMA needs to be properly targeted at those who need it most, with a particular emphasis on basing the allowance on educational outcomes. He also said that the achievement referred to in EMA needs to be targeted. He said that it is essential that the key objects are targeted so that we know exactly what benefit those who are on EMA are receiving. That is one of the issues that we need to look at.

Phil Flanagan drew attention to the particular difficulties faced by young people in this area in trying to access transport and broadband, and he called for DEL to work with other Ministers to address the issue.

Sammy Douglas referred to the rioting that took place in the constituency of East Belfast last June, and he identified many of the rioters as those not in education, employment or training. He strongly advocated action to target resources at the most vulnerable in society, and he stated that the situation was deeply unfair because those who should get

EMA first are those who are being denied. He went on to say that there is a problem with the legislation and that it needs to be addressed urgently. I feel that Sammy's comments should be taken forward, in a sense. It is not about talk; we can talk around the issue all day, but action is needed. Perhaps it is sometimes a difficulty or a fault in the Assembly that we talk about issues but do not always take the action that we should. I think that Sammy is dead on about this issue; we need to take action rather than talk about it. I hope that some action will be taken on this matter.

Mrs Overend: I agree with what the Member says about needing to take action, but does he agree that we need to take preventative action? It is important to address those who are already NEETs, but it is equally important that we have preventative action and a task force to work on the issue.

Mr Buchanan: Absolutely. That is a very good point. Preventative action needs to be taken to reduce the number of people not in education, employment or training. That is the way forward.

Sandra Overend said that there were severe consequences for young people NEET, and she felt that the Minister should identify the areas most likely to produce them.

Colum Eastwood spoke about the prospect of a lost generation. He welcomed the youth contract funding to address EMA and said that it was the responsibility of every Department to tackle poverty.

Jim Allister believed that it was not just a tragedy for the current generation but had implications for the next generation's work ethic. He said that EMA sounded right but referred to the PricewaterhouseCoopers review, which did not reveal how many recipients of EMA had achieved qualifications because DEL said that it had no mechanism for tracking them. Obviously, that made it impossible to tell how well EMA was working. He also spoke about the significant slippage on concluding the EMA review.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Draw your remarks to a close.

Mr Buchanan: The Committee calls for the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr Buchanan: — to take account of the concerns raised by Members.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to expedite the finalisation and implementation of an effective and cross-departmental strategy for young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) and the ongoing review of education maintenance allowance (EMA), in order to address the issues of record levels of youth unemployment and increasing disengagement with mainstream education; and to make the necessary improvements to ensure that EMA is targeted at those in greatest need.

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

Private Members' Business

Car Insurance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. Two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List. Amendment No 1 has been tabled by the proposers of the motion. The motion and amendment No 1 will be proposed and wound together, with 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind. The proposer of amendment No 2 will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to wind. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

I want Members to be clear that there will not be an additional 15 minutes for this debate, as amendment No 1 will be moved and wound at the same time as the motion.

Mr McQuillan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the soaring cost of insurance in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to intervene to ensure that the payment of compensation claims is capped, and that cases are heard in lower courts.

I also beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Justice" and insert

"to review the level of general damages paid in whiplash-type injuries and further review the jurisdiction in which cases are heard to ensure that court and legal costs are kept to a minimum."

The motion has been tabled largely because of the soaring cost of car insurance in Northern Ireland and the various widely reported exceptions from practice in the rest of the United Kingdom. I know people of all ages, especially young people, who have been quoted exorbitant prices for insurance, many in excess of £3,000 per annum. I have a couple of young people from Coleraine High School with me today in the Public Gallery, and they are directly affected.

In the current market, people can purchase a car for a fraction of its price previously but are left out of the market when it comes to purchasing car insurance. That is a sorry state of affairs in Northern Ireland, as many are wholly reliant on a car to get from A to B, especially those in rural constituencies such as mine. In fact, a travel survey found that, between 2008 and 2010, 81% of journeys in Northern Ireland were made by car. Coupled with the soaring cost of fuel and road tax, the price of insurance means that car owners in Northern Ireland are being discriminated against and are paying over the odds compared with other parts of the United Kingdom.

Throughout the terrorist campaign, insurers blamed the Troubles for the high cost of car insurance in Northern Ireland. However, we have emerged from those dark hours, and the cost of car insurance continues to soar, leaving many people out of pocket and frozen out of the market. The Consumer Council found that, historically,

car users in Northern Ireland paid £300 more than their UK counterparts. In March 2009, the Consumer Council published a research report, "Quote... Unquote". The report found that car owners were paying more than their British counterparts in Great Britain.

It found that car owners here were paying 84% more in insurance premiums compared to those in other parts of the UK, although the Office of Fair Trading put that figure at 11%. Differences were also found between low-income areas, especially rural areas, where a car is essential, and more affluent areas in Northern Ireland. The report was debated in the previous Assembly. It contained numerous reasons why it costs more to insure a car in Northern Ireland.

4.00 pm

In 2011, the Consumer Council embarked upon a campaign to see that the Office of Fair Trading investigated the variations in the cost of insurance in the UK. In September of the same year, the Office of Fair Trading called for evidence from the private motor insurance market, and it reported in December 2011. The UK private motor insurance industry was worth some £9.4 billion in 2010. The investigation essentially backed up the report by the Consumer Council in Northern Ireland, finding variations between different parts of the UK. The investigation also found that insurance premiums rose during the period 2009-2011 by around 12%.

One reason for the difference between the cost of insurance premiums in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the UK is the difference in the awards for personal injury claims. Those injured in a car accident in Northern Ireland who claim for whiplash, for example, are likely to receive a higher settlement than if the accident took place in England. The settlement figures are set out in guidelines set by the Department of Justice. The guidelines set a minimum and a maximum settlement figure for the judge overseeing a case. That is something that the Minister of Justice must review to ensure parity with the rest of the United Kingdom and to drive down the cost of insurance.

Furthermore, cases of accident claims are heard in higher courts in Northern Ireland compared to those in the rest of the UK, therefore pushing up legal costs, which are reflected in insurance premiums.

The absence of a pre-action protocol in Northern Ireland contributes to the high costs of claims awarded. The protocol, which exists in England and Wales, describes the behaviour that a court expects of the parties prior to the start of proceedings in which a claimant claims damages valued at no more than £10,000 as a result of a personal injury sustained in a road traffic accident. The protocol is contained in the Civil Procedure Rules 1998, as referred to in the amendment proposed by the Ulster Unionist Party.

To be clear, we are prepared to accept the Ulster Unionist Party amendment on this occasion, because this is something on which we do not want to divide the House. There is very little between my amendment and the Ulster Unionist amendment.

Mr Beggs: If the Member is accepting our amendment, is he withdrawing his own amendment? I understand that both cannot apply.

Mr McQuillan: Yes. I will withdraw our amendment to accept the Ulster Unionist Party amendment.

Members will note the amendment to the original wording. The amendment was put forward to clarify matters. For example, someone claiming for whiplash injuries should not be entitled to receive as much as someone who may be left paralysed for life. The amendment, therefore, seeks to ensure fairness in all cases and takes into account those who are seriously injured in accidents and genuinely entitled to higher levels of compensation.

Mr A Maginness: I just want to clarify the situation. You are accepting the Ulster Unionist amendment. Your own amendment suggests that you are unhappy with capping, which was the original substance of your motion. Are you now saying that you are reverting to that original position and wish to cap personal injury claims awarded in the courts in Northern Ireland?

Mr McQuillan: What we are saying is that we do not want to have any unfair treatment. There is a difference between somebody who has whiplash and somebody who is paralysed. We want to make sure that somebody who is paralysed in an accident gets fair compensation but that somebody who has whiplash gets the minimum amount of compensation.

Mr A Maginness: I am really not trying to be mischievous here. I want to clarify the position. Are you saying that, in all cases that relate to personal injuries, your position and your party's position is to cap damages, no matter what courts cases are held in? This is a crucial issue, and I would like that clarified.

Mr McQuillan: We are not saying that. In the original motion we said that, but we proposed an amendment to the motion —

Mr A Maginness: I am sorry to intervene again, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, my understanding of the Ulster Unionist amendment is that it includes the capping of personal injury claims. If that is not the position, I am quite happy to sit down and not intervene further. I just want that clarified.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If I could just intervene at this stage, it is probably best that we debate the amendments as they are at present, and then the winding-up speech can be used to make clear the positions of the parties.

Mr McQuillan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will carry on.

I believe that the devolved powers that rest with the House and, most importantly, with the Minister of Justice can bring about changes to bring Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the United Kingdom and play a part in seeking an end to the variation in the overall cost of car insurance premiums in Northern Ireland compared with those in the rest of the UK.

As well as the proposed changes to legislation that would play a part in reducing premiums, there is an onus on the customer to shop around. That was highlighted in the report by the Office of Fair Trading. People in Great Britain are more likely to shop around for insurance than citizens in Northern Ireland. The savings that shopping around can generate can be extensive. Not only can shopping around generate savings, it can ensure competition among insurance providers, in the knowledge that they cannot and will not be taken for granted.

I, therefore, commend to the House the motion as amended by the Ulster Unionist Party. I look forward to the debate and to the Minister's response, which will, I hope, indicate that he is willing to act.

Mr Beggs: I beg to move amendment No. 2: Leave out all after "capped" and insert

“; furthermore calls on the Minister to introduce an efficient protocol for low-value personal injury claims such as that contained in the Civil Procedure Rules 1998 for England and Wales, and to enable cases to be heard in lower courts, where appropriate.”

I thank the Member for bringing this important matter to the Chamber and for accepting the amendment in my name and that of my colleague. I also thank the Assembly's library and research services for providing some very useful background information and the Consumer Council, which carried out a very worthwhile campaign to highlight difficulties with the insurance industry in Northern Ireland and how we might go about improving it for consumers. Its intervention has resulted in the Office of Fair Trading becoming interested in the subject.

My interest in injury compensation was sparked largely by the 2010 Public Accounts Committee report on injury compensation. One of its recommendations, recommendation 4, stated:

“The Committee recommends that the Department of Finance and Personnel consults with the Northern Ireland Court Service to determine how more effective arrangements might be put in place to reflect the views of key stakeholders in future decisions on scale fees and compensation.”

For Members' information, at present, as I understand it, the Judicial Studies Board gives guidance to courts on examples of compensation levels and the County Court Rules Committee agrees the level of fees. From what I can see, the difficulty with both those bodies is that they consist entirely of members of the legal profession. There is a need to involve the wider community and those affected by the issue. So that very important recommendation from the Public Accounts Committee is relevant to this matter.

Capping is a very sensitive issue. I have not said what level the cap should be set at. That is an issue for mature debate in the Chamber and for a wide stakeholder group to determine. However, we have to understand that there is an outcome for whatever level the cap is set at. If it is too low, the victim is not fully compensated as he should be. If it is too high, insurance costs can be very high. That is a contributory factor for us; our compensations levels are approximately twice those in England and Wales. We have to understand that, when young people have difficulty getting insurance and people in rural communities who rely on private transport because there is not an adequate public transport service have difficulty keeping a car on the road legally, those are the consequences of misjudging the appropriate balance.

So it is important that there is a widespread debate among all the stakeholders and not just those in the legal profession. To a degree, there is a danger of there being a conflict of interest for those within the legal profession,

because, ultimately, their colleagues will benefit from the higher levels. That is an important issue.

I am a parent of three young drivers, and this is a relevant issue for me, my family and my neighbours.

Mr Allister: I want to be sure that I clearly understand the Member. The motion as it is now to be amended quite clearly extends way beyond road traffic accidents. It covers all compensation claims, including the man who falls off the roof because of a dereliction of statutory duty on the part of his employer. Is the Member seriously saying to the House that, rather than having a Judicial Studies Board, made up with people with experience of damages, set a guideline, a politician should cap the level of general damages that such a person should have? Is he seriously saying that a politician, such as the Minister, should cap the damages for a man who falls off a roof as much as those for a man who suffers a whiplash injury in a road traffic accident? Is that seriously where he wants to take us?

Mr Beggs: In 2010, the Public Accounts Committee called for a range of key stakeholders to be involved in the process, rather than just those involved in the legal profession. In that regard, I think that it is relevant. I did not indicate whether damages should be capped at a high level or at a low level. We have to understand that there will be an outcome if damages are excessive or if they are low. There ought to be a mature discussion about that and an understanding of the issue.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I want to pursue my point a bit further. I will give way later on.

One of the issues is that, according to evidence from the Association of British Insurers, about 40% of road traffic claims get to court in Northern Ireland, whereas only 3·5% of such claims get to court in England and Wales. There is a clear reference to the issue in a report by the Office of Fair Trading. It states:

"Differences in the legal processes appear to be leading to higher legal costs in NI in comparison with GB. In particular, the absence of a compulsory pre-action protocol may well have the effect of making litigation more prevalent in NI than in GB as the applicable procedures do not appear to provide the same incentive to settle cases quickly."

As I understand it, there is guidance on pre-action protocol in Northern Ireland. However, it is compulsory only in the High Court — not the County Court — and is largely ignored. That is perhaps why more cases go to court. More solicitors and barristers then draw on funds, from which they get affluent lifestyles, thereby raising insurance in Northern Ireland to excessive levels for everyone, including younger people and rural people.

There is a call for the Minister to intervene, and he can do so on a variety of levels. If necessary, he can legislate, go elsewhere to seek legislation or lobby in order to contribute to the debate. I notice that the Secretary of State for Justice in England got involved in an impact assessment of the extension of the system for dealing with low-value road traffic accidents and personal injuries claims, which he signed off on in February 2011. He highlighted the fact that

there was an issue with legal costs, in that the cost of a civil claim was often disproportionate compared with the value of the claim. What we are talking about is smaller claims; I would not wish this to apply to every claim. However, it is clear that a disproportionate amount of cost is related to the legal side of an accident compared with that related to the injury that may have been inflicted.

A pre-action protocol has many benefits for everyone in the community, except probably barristers. I notice in the research paper that the protocol has the following aims:

"Better and earlier exchange of information;

Better pre-action investigation by both sides;

Placing the parties in a position where they may be able to settle cases fairly and early without litigation;

Enabling proceedings to proceed according to the court's timetable and efficiently, if litigation becomes necessary".

Remember: at any stage in the process, people can turn down the move to the next stage if they accept responsibility and settle. However, they can go to court if all the various stages in the process fail.

Another aim of the protocol is:

"The promotion of an overall 'cards on the table' approach to litigation in the interest in keeping the amount invested by participants in terms of money, time, anxiety and stress to a minimum".

So it has many benefits for everyone.

I notice that the protocol has provided much faster justice, with cases being finalised in a much shorter period than is the case in our system. Speedy justice is good justice, particularly when proper procedures are involved and appropriate compensation levels are set. A process is required to improve the system here to get better value for victims and those who need to pay for insurance and to ensure that many people are not excluded from getting insurance because of prohibitive prices. It is important that we improve the system in Northern Ireland.

The motion asks the Minister to help move the process forward. Why is a system that is seen to be working well in England and Wales not being incorporated into the system in Northern Ireland? It is asking the Minister to intervene. As I indicated, he can do so in a variety of manners, whatever is appropriate.

4.15 pm

I do not claim to be an absolute expert in the law, but there is a problem and there needs to be improvements to benefit all our community. There are excessive legal fees. The fees for cases heard in the County Court are limited to £15,000, but that limit is going up to £30,000. It is only in that category that we are talking about the pre-action protocol becoming compulsory. Good practice should be followed by all those involved to benefit the citizens of Northern Ireland, those who are victims, those who are seeking insurance and the entire community.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh muid ag tabhairt tacaíochta do rún an

DUP. Although the proposer of the motion said that he may be withdrawing his amendment, we feel that it is the more appropriate amendment to take forward.

There is absolutely no doubt that people in the North of Ireland pay higher insurance premiums than many other people who live in comparable places, be it in England, Scotland, Wales or parts of the Twenty-six Counties. However, the precise reason for that is unclear.

The motion from the DUP makes the case that high premiums are simply down to compensation awards and court costs. On different days, you get different reasons for the high premiums. From living in Derry, I know that people who have a BT48 address will pay higher insurance rates than those with a BT47 address. Those postcodes are divided by the river. That happens in other places in the North, as the research pack points out. So the higher rates are not down to compensation awards, and they are not down to the cost of professionals. Indeed, the last page of the information pack states that the legal costs in the North in a single year amounted to £1 million. When you take account of the amount of money collected in insurance premiums, £1 million would not have a massive impact on how an insurance company sets its premium. That is why we are in favour of a review or of asking the Minister or the Justice Department to look at the particular aspects of the debate they can have an influence or an impact on.

Recently, the Justice Committee has taken an interest in the issue. However, it was pointed out to us at our Committee meeting last week that representatives of the Association of British Insurers made a presentation to the Environment Committee, and a number of questions were tabled which they are to get back to the Committee on. That is a better approach.

The Consumer Council has obviously done a lot of work on this, and we should be trying to get a cross-Committee or a cross-sectoral approach so that we can identify precisely — indeed, nearly scientifically — why premium costs are higher in the North, instead of focusing on a particular aspect and perhaps creating a false picture. Nothing I have heard from the proposers of the motion and the two amendments suggests that insurance companies are saying that, if the compensation system in the North was different and the awards to legal firms were different, your premium costs would come down automatically.

In many ways, a situation could be created where people would be denied their right to pursue compensation to whatever level is appropriate, and they would have no sense that they could be achieving something. You could ask the Minister to bring in legislation; he could bring it in, compensation could be capped and a draconian law could be brought in whereby people do not get any legal representation to ensure that we do not have any legal costs. Yet, we could find, in a year's time, that insurance companies have not in any way dropped their premiums. So there are a number of factors that contribute to our premiums being higher. I agree that they are higher; it is unfair. However, the Assembly's approach to the issue must be that, whatever we finally come to present to the public, people will see that it is not only logical but will compel insurance companies to lower premiums. I am not suggesting a pig in a poke, but we should not have a populist approach. You may see headline figures, and not

many people will defend the high fees that some lawyers obtain for a variety of reasons. We should not, however, use that as a reason to say that, if we could do away with or cap legal costs or compensation, somehow that would reduce —

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for giving way. I also thank him for his remarks, which clearly highlight that car insurance is an inter-departmental issue. From what I have heard, it crosses at least the Departments of Justice, Environment and maybe even Enterprise, Trade and Investment when it comes to regulation. I support entirely the thrust of his argument.

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

Mr McCartney: I appreciate that. We all have stories, and mine highlights how insurance companies work. Someone told me recently, and I confirmed it with a broker, that they received a letter from an insurance company giving them a quote for, say, £400. They then phoned the broker, who quoted £500 from the same company. When they went back to the broker, the broker said, "That is the way they work. They are nearly trying to move us to the side. They do not want any —

Mr McClarty: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will, indeed.

Mr McClarty: Will the Member not acknowledge that there are fraudulent claims? I have heard numerous stories of people owning an old banger, filling it with family members and getting somebody to tail-end them with another old banger, resulting in 10 whiplash claims, which, obviously, at £1,500 or £3,000 a time —

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

Mr McClarty: — impacts on the insurance companies.

Mr McCartney: That may be the case, but I am sure that it happens in London, too, so why are premiums not higher there? The idea that that sort of practice happens only in the North of Ireland is wrong.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mr McCartney: We have to tell the insurance companies to do it right and do it fair.

Mr A Maginness: I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Bar, and I have specialised in personal injury claims.

The argument about insurance costs in Northern Ireland has been going on for, perhaps, decades. In the 1980s, the big cry was to abolish juries. The argument was that, if you abolished juries, you would bring down the cost of trials and level of claims in Northern Ireland, and we would all live happily ever after because of lower premiums. Of course, that never happened despite the fact that we abolished juries.

To some extent, I echo what Mr McCartney said. If we could have a guarantee —

Mr McClarty: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Just give me a moment, please. If the insurance companies guaranteed some sort of pro rata

reduction in their premiums and should all those great changes take place, I might be more convinced of the various propositions that were put forward in a good-intentioned but very misguided way by Mr Beggs and Mr McQuillan.

The problem is that, if you say that claims and awards are higher here and introduce a capping system, you are saying to the judges that you do not trust them and that you do not think that our people should get the levels of compensation that they do. I defy anybody in the House to cap the level of compensation that a quadriplegic, or anybody else suffering a catastrophic injury, should receive here.

The nature of the amendment that was tabled and accepted for debate is that all claims for personal injuries would be affected by a capping system, although the intention was perhaps to confine that to traffic accidents. However, it does not matter, because the fact is that the proposed amendment would mean everybody suffering as a result of capping.

I am not even certain that capping is constitutional. It certainly seems to me to defy article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees a fair trial. I am not certain that there can be a limit on the amount of compensation that somebody should receive, although I may be incorrect about that. However, there is an argument —

Mr Campbell: The Member is concentrating to a considerable extent on the capping element of the motion; I understand that. Would it make it easier for him and his party to support the motion if the Assembly were to accept my party's amendment, which removes the capping element?

Mr A Maginness: Yes. In fact, originally, when members of my party came into the Chamber, our intention was to support the DUP amendment because it gets rid of the capping element, which, although well intentioned, is misguided, as I have said.

It is a complex problem, and there are no easy answers. Lawyers blame insurance companies, and insurance companies blame lawyers and the legal system.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No; I cannot. The issue is complex. My party put forward an amendment, which was not accepted by the Speaker, to set up an Ad Hoc Committee of the House. That would be the most sensible way forward because the issue involves different Departments, such as the Department of the Environment, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, and the Department of Justice, among others. Therefore, it would be sensible to set up an Ad Hoc Committee to examine the issue.

There is, certainly, abuse with regard to whiplash injuries — we all know that — and it may be that some limitations on them would be acceptable. However, a general prohibition or capping of damages would cause injustice to people; there is no doubt in my mind about that.

We are told that legal costs are higher here; that is unproven. The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) does not come to that conclusion in its report; however, it says that the issue has been raised. The report will not be finished until later in 2012, and we look forward to it. With the change in the County Court jurisdiction, most cases that involve

personal injuries will be heard in the County Court because the limit has gone up from £15,000 to £30,000. Only the most serious and substantial cases will be heard in the High Court. Therefore, in one fell swoop, cases are being heard in the lower court.

An erroneous argument is being put forward that moving smaller-value road-traffic cases to the Small Claims Court would prove to be a saving. The danger is that damage-only claims can also involve personal injuries, and a larger claim could be dependent on how a case is dealt with in the Small Claims Court. That is *res judicata* because a decision by the Small Claims Court would bind a higher court, whether the High Court or the County Court. There are inherent dangers in that.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that the motion has been brought to the court — the House, rather. [*Laughter.*] It means that we can have another go at discussing this important issue.

I must say that I am confused as to what is on offer now; a motion has been withdrawn due to an amendment from the same party. That party has decided to accept a further amendment, which reintroduces the thrust of its original proposal. Frankly, I am at a loss. However, before my party decides how it will vote, particularly on the DUP amendment, I will wait and hear what the Member who makes the winding-up speech has to say.

If the problem could be cured simply by capping compensation payments, I am sure that we would all go for it. That would be an easy answer, and we could all go home. However, it is not that simple because it would penalise genuine claimants; it has to. Where would the cap be set? Mr Maginness made that point. It simply would not be equitable. For that reason, at present, I do not see how my party could support what is on offer. However, we will see.

In case anybody wonders, I am mentioned in the OFT report as a provider of motor insurance. I sold the business five years ago. It is touching that somebody still thinks that I provide their motor insurance. That indicates something about the level of shopping around that is done. I note that the OFT report, unlike the previous Consumer Council report that triggered our last discussion on the issue, confirms that the average difference in premiums is about 11%.

I will not repeat what I said about the Consumer Council report. Let us just say that there is a bit of a difference between 84% and 11%. A miracle has happened in a year and a half.

4.30 pm

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. I recognise that he is not a great fan of the Consumer Council, because he has said that before. However, some of its research has produced some interesting figures. I commend the Consumer Council on the job that it does. It tells us that there are over one million vehicles on the roads in Northern Ireland and 35,000 uninsured drivers. Does the Member, and those who have spoken on this issue before in relation to legal costs etc, not accept that that is also a big contributing factor to the high cost of insurance here in Northern Ireland?

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

Mr Lunn: Of course it is. There is a major problem with uninsured drivers here, as there is in other jurisdictions. We are all paying for it. However, the Consumer Council report — just to finish on it — consulted only one provider that, as we have heard before, does virtually no business in Northern Ireland. At least the OFT consulted a wide range of interests. It came up with figures that indicate that we are now not the most expensive motor insurance region in these islands. The north-west of England and the midlands have higher premium levels than us; that is in the report.

Car insurance premiums are on the rise across the UK; it is not unique to any region. The UK is going down the same road as the USA in fostering a claims industry, with the various dubious practices of claims management companies; the selling by insurance companies of personal details for what are sometimes known as referral fees; the payments of fees to insurers and — I regret to say — in some cases, brokers if they will refer their clients to particular car hire companies; and so on. Those practices add millions to the claims cost, and, at the end of the day, everybody is paying for it. Government — I probably mean the Westminster Government — should look at the situation urgently, perhaps in respect of data protection and the unauthorised disclosure of clients' personal details.

The simplest claims, which used to be settled on a knock-for-knock basis with the payment of an excess to the innocent party, perhaps to cover the cost of car hire, are now escalated into something major. People are leeching off the industry.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: No. Sorry, I do not have time.

We are all paying for it, because insurers have to cover the cost. The answer is not a capping of payments. Perhaps part of the answer would be to find some system that allowed payouts only when people are genuinely injured; that would be a start. Currently, whiplash claims seem to result from the most minor incidents in which neither vehicle is damaged. In fact, in my time in the business, I saw one in which the injured person was not even in the vehicle; there are plenty of those too.

I do not particularly blame the orthodox legal profession — Mr Maginness will be pleased to know — as it has a duty to represent its clients. However, the branch of that profession that advertises extensively touting for business and purchases business has questions to answer, as do the medical experts who examine clients who patently have nothing wrong with them but issue a non-conclusive verdict, leaving the insurance company with very little option but to negotiate a settlement.

In Northern Ireland, we have a higher incidence of claims and historically higher payouts, which cannot be rectified by a simple capping. However, there are things that can be done. Other Members have referred to measures in respect of fraud, simplifying the settlement of claims —

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

Mr Lunn: — eliminating uninsured driving, and road safety. I hope that the House will proceed on this issue in a methodical way and that we come back to it someday in the future.

Mr S Anderson: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this very important debate. I commend my two colleagues for bringing it to the House. I, like many others, have an interest in this issue, not only as a member of the Justice Committee but as a driver and a father of children who are drivers. Even a number of years ago when my own children required their first car insurance, the premiums quoted were way above the then GB prices. One of the reasons given was the effect of the Troubles. Today, it is not so easy to use that excuse, so other reasons have to be found.

As most Members will already know, especially if they have children or grandchildren, the price of insurance for young people is almost as high as that of their first car. The ever-rising cost of motor insurance premiums in Northern Ireland is a major concern. Something needs to be done quickly, and we in the Assembly must see what we can do to tackle the issue.

Although the Minister of Justice is responding today, the issue is complex and will require a cross-departmental approach. The Department of the Environment (DOE), for example, has a key role to play in road safety. I feel strongly about that, but I do not have time to go into it today. As my colleague the Lord Morrow highlighted in his intervention, uninsured drivers are another big issue. The high premiums contribute in no small way to that situation, but there is a need to clamp down on those who drive without insurance. A member of my family was the victim of an uninsured driver. She suffered a very serious injury. I would be very interested to know what audit checks are made on vehicles that enter Northern Ireland and whether they are properly insured.

The issues that are raised in the motion draw attention to the impact of our claims culture. It is simply not fair or right that drivers are being penalised as a result of huge compensation payouts. The report of the Office of Fair Trading has confirmed that, although premiums have been rising sharply across the United Kingdom, premiums in Northern Ireland are 11% higher than those in the rest of the UK. It is even worse in rural areas, where drivers pay between 30% and 70% more than drivers in rural areas of GB.

The Westminster Government have expressed their serious concerns about the matter in light of the OFT report. The Transport Secretary said recently that he will come down like a ton of bricks on organisations that are found to be colluding on the price of premiums. There has been a lot of debate so far. The motion and amendment clearly identify some areas in which we really need to see reform and where savings could be made.

I fully accept that people can be very seriously injured and scarred for life as a result of car accidents. The current DOE TV ads are a stark reminder of that. It is important that those who need to be compensated are compensated adequately and efficiently for their injuries. However, it seems that the industry has grown out of a culture that encourages people to make claims in the confidence that, without too much effort on their part, they will obtain a reasonable level of compensation.

I would like to know the extent to which the current litigation arrangements are regulated. I am concerned that they are not properly regulated. Medical reporting on cases needs to be more closely monitored, as does the employment of lawyers in the setting of fees. Our compensation system is

far more costly than that in GB. The Association of British Insurers (ABI) says that the legal costs have risen by some 30% since a fundamental Government review a decade ago. That figure is a very conservative one. Coupled with that, the awards of personal injury damages are also higher than those elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

There is surely justification for some sort of a limit on common claims, such as those for whiplash-type injuries. From speaking to those who are employed in the insurance industry, I understand that most companies will settle out of court for that type of injury for anything up to £5,000. We should be looking at ways of settling cases out of court, but substantial compensation for less-serious injuries appears to be too easily obtained without having to justify it in court.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr S Anderson: I am almost finished; I do not have much time.

As a general rule, personal injury claims should be heard in the lower courts, as is the case in England and Wales. A small claims court would be much more cost-effective than the higher court.

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

Mr S Anderson: We might even wish to go further and encourage negotiated settlements on the basis of arrangements that would avoid courts altogether. In short, a more collective and joined-up approach needs to be undertaken to ensure that Northern Ireland drivers are treated as fairly as their fellow citizens in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I am quite confused by the motion and the amendment, but I will try my best. I congratulate those who tabled the motion. It is a very important issue, and it is not the first time that they have tried to get it onto the Order Paper.

Extortionate car insurance prices have been a massive problem here for a very long time. It has hit young people, particularly young men, hard. However, the introduction of Quinn Insurance to the market on this island marked a sea change. It opened up a whole new industry, and insurance premiums fell to a fraction of what they used to be. That was particularly the case for young people. That was due to the foresight of the senior management team in Quinn Insurance at that time. Some people in the Chamber may not like what I will now say: the use of solicitors, barristers and the legal profession was avoided wherever possible and a proper offer of a fair rate of compensation was made promptly to claimants. That resulted in a massive reduction in the overheads of the insurance company. Immediately prior to Quinn Insurance's entrance to administration, it was making a clear profit of €1 million a day. Ironically, the only aspect of the company that was losing money was that involved in the provision of professional indemnity insurance for solicitors in England.

On a separate note, Quinn Insurance employs a huge number of people in my constituency, so I am well informed of its tactics, but in the interests of consumer choice, many other insurers are available. Time and again, we see adverts on TV, in newspapers and in many other forums offering low-cost car insurance.

Mr Lunn: I can understand the Member's loyalty to Quinn Insurance, but does he not accept that, no matter what way you dress it up, the company went out of business because it was insolvent? In other words, it was not charging enough for its insurance products.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I think Quinn Insurance is still in business, albeit under a different trading name. As I said, the only part of the business that was losing money was that involved in the provision of professional indemnity insurance for solicitors in England, but I do not want to get into that debate.

The adverts that we see on TV for car insurance often exclude this part of Ireland, and we have to ask ourselves why that is. As other Members said, there are several potential reasons why car insurance is much higher here than in Britain and, obviously, one aspect of that is the legal system. However, other factors exist and we need to look at them as well. They include factors such as our historically poor roads infrastructure, the higher cost of second-hand cars and a massive over-reliance on private cars in rural areas, predominantly among young people. We have seen massive progress in road safety and a great fall in the numbers of people involved in accidents, but that has not been reflected at all in premiums.

We must also realise that the car insurance market here is very small. We do not benefit from the economies of scale that would undoubtedly come from a larger market. We must assess the potential for greater flexibility within the car insurance market, both with Britain and on the rest of this island. There are also issues with people's failure to shop around. However, the incessant and often irritating advertising by some price comparison websites is surely changing that habit.

This is a cross-departmental issue, and although I welcome the motion, we may well have missed a trick by not having a motion that refers to a solution and encompasses all the possible factors, but once again, I thank those who tabled the motion.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree with the most recent publication of the Consumer Council, which states that pre-action protocol should be carefully investigated because of the potential to make savings in the legal system and through a more efficient system? The publication supports what was stated in the report by the Office of Fair Trading. Does the Member accept that pre-action protocol can bring savings to our legal costs and reduce insurance costs?

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

Mr Flanagan: I will hardly need it, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, but I thank the Member for his intervention and I appreciate what he is trying to say. Far be it from me to disagree with the Consumer Council on a matter that is pertinent to consumer rights. Such a route should be explored if it has the potential to save consumers money. However, this issue is wider than the impact on consumers. We often talk here about economic issues, and the soaring price of car insurance is having a seriously detrimental impact on our small businesses. That is another reason why urgent action needs to be taken on this matter.

Mr Hamilton: I will begin by trying to tidy up some of the confusion. There are that many motions, amendments and accepted amendments, there is more competitive tension over the motions and proposed amendments here than perhaps there is in the insurance market in Northern Ireland. Members on this side will back their amendment when it comes to the vote. I hope that that tidies up some of the confusion that there was earlier.

It is a well-held belief, and has been so for a number of years, that the cost of insurance in Northern Ireland is excessively high. That sometimes takes on the feel of an urban legend, but we now have authoritative evidence that that is the case. The OFT report is valuable, if in no other way, in that it highlights the fact that premiums here are, on average, 11% higher than those in the rest of the United Kingdom, and that the cost is 30% to 70% higher for rural dwellers. Given Northern Ireland's rurality and dependence on cars in rural areas, that is an even graver statistic than the 11% hike.

4.45 pm

The Environment Committee had several sessions on the issue a fortnight ago. I chaired those sessions, which lasted for about three-and-a-half or four hours. I could say that those were three-and-a-half to four hours of my life that I will never get back, but the sessions taught me that the issue is a cross-departmental problem. Although there is an understandable focus in the motion on matters that pertain to the Minister of Justice's purview, there are also issues that pertain to other Departments. We cannot lose sight of that when taking the issue forward.

The cost —

Mr Poots: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes, I will.

Mr Poots: On that issue, and having been in another Department, I know that road deaths dropped by around 50% in 2010 and that that trend continued in 2011. I also know that major and serious accidents dropped by around one third. Does the Member not find it a little incongruous for insurance premiums to remain high despite the risk factor having diminished so greatly?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You have an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his intervention; he is absolutely right. The number of road deaths in Northern Ireland has, thankfully, fallen to a record low, and the number of other accidents is also falling.

I return to Mr Maginness's point. I tend to agree with him. Previously, we were told that the Troubles were the reason why we had high premiums in this country. We were told that we just had to get used to the fact that all the civil unrest meant we had high premiums. I do not believe the insurance companies. I do not believe that if we were to systematically eliminate all the problems it would result in lower premiums for drivers in Northern Ireland. That is because it would appear that there is always another excuse. The insurance companies put forward an argument that we have more accidents here, despite the good work that the Minister and his colleagues took forward in the past. They also point to the cost of compensation —

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: Just bear with me a second. They point to the cost of compensation in the legal process, but my understanding is that most cases do not get to court anyway. There is an argument that we should look at taking cases to lower courts. However, the cost that that might burden claimants with means that it may not always be in their best interests. As we criticise the legal process, in some ways we should be grateful that there is an absence of a no-win no-fee culture in Northern Ireland. It is not part of the law here, and thank goodness for that.

In its evidence, the ABI put forward the cost of the legal process here. That is why I think that, at least and as the amended motion would require, we should examine the process. We should examine the issue with some of the others, including those that Mr Poots raised. One of those is uninsured drivers, which may be one for both the Department of the Environment and the Department of Justice to deal with. We are something like the fifth or sixth worst region in the UK for uninsured drivers, and that adds an estimated £30 to every premium.

Another issue that came out in the evidence sessions was claims handling and the associated referral fees. Although an insurance premium may include the cost of a courtesy car, there is an additional cost for the referral fee. That all adds up. There are costs built into the system that should not be there and that are often covered by the initial insurance premium. It is estimated that that adds £2 billion to the cost of insurance every year in England and Wales. That is a stark figure. Ms Ritchie secured an adjournment debate in the House of Commons on car insurance in Northern Ireland, and, in response to her, Mark Hoban said that the insurance industry in the United Kingdom lost £1.8 billion last year. Therefore, that is £2 billion of additional and, in many cases, unnecessary costs and £1.8 billion of a loss. Those are not insignificant figures.

The insurance industry tells us that we have a competitive market in Northern Ireland, but that is entirely different from having a market that is as competitive as it should be. The abject absence of a significant number of insurance companies in Northern Ireland undoubtedly has an impact on the cost of premiums. Before I came into the Chamber, I ran a quote through for myself on one of those cost comparison websites, and I found that there were more companies that did not want to insure me than did. Perhaps they realised who I was and did not want me anywhere near them, but those who did not are significant names in the financial services market, including banks such as Santander, organisations such as the Co-operative and insurance companies such as Swinton Insurance. Those companies do not do any business in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hamilton: I am sorry; I do not have the time. That is coupled with the fact that there is a culture here of not shopping around. Only 54% of people here shop around for premiums, compared with 73% in Great Britain.

We need a multi-departmental approach. Perhaps the Minister can take the issue back to his colleagues in the Executive. Mr Maginness talked about establishing an Ad Hoc Committee of the Assembly, and although he was unable to bring that forward in an amendment, there may be

other means by which we could do that. This matter touches on at least three, if not four, Departments, and there is clearly cross-party and cross-constituency interest in the issue. This is not the last that the House has heard of it.

Mr Hussey: I will begin by declaring that I worked for an insurance company for over 25 years, and I am still here to tell the tale. I also declare that my insurance was due for renewal on Saturday, but I paid it on Thursday, so I am safe enough. Like the Member who spoke previously, I attempted to find various prices, and, being a lot younger than him, obviously, my costs were quite high as well. Unlike some Members, I am a confirmed bachelor, so I have no children to worry about and no worries about putting them on my insurance, but the cost was still quite high.

The discussions about the costs of motor insurance in Northern Ireland have been ongoing for many years. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there were a very limited number of motor insurance providers in Northern Ireland. For that reason, motor insurance costs were relatively higher than today in real terms in relation to the rest of the United Kingdom. It was certainly a very restricted market.

Once an award was made for personal injuries caused in a road traffic accident, the standard was set. Other courts awarded similar settlements, and it became practice that awards made in Northern Ireland courts were higher than those made elsewhere in the United Kingdom. On 'UTV Live' in January 2012 — I am sure that we all watched it — we were advised that compensation for a severe whiplash injury can be between £17,000 and £35,000 in Northern Ireland, but in England and Wales it is much lower, varying between £7,000 and £13,000. I should also declare that I have been involved in several accidents. I was in a car that was rammed by a drunk driver, and I am still suffering for that to this very day. In fact, my back injury will never improve, so I know all about the types of injuries that can be inflicted.

The Office of Fair Trading, in its December 2011 report — a document which, I am sure, will be referred to regularly throughout the remainder of the debate — outlines the cost of insurance claims as a result of compensation levels and the legal process. The OFT says that it has received evidence that compensation levels are higher in Northern Ireland than in Britain. As well as referring to the guidelines, the OFT says that it has received information from some insurers that the amounts of compensation paid are considerably higher. A second aspect of that is that there are differences in the legal process that could lead to higher costs; specifically, the report states:

“the absence of a compulsory pre-action protocol”.

Clearly in our amendment, we seek to create a situation where compensation is capped, and, in an attempt to reduce legal costs, we seek a pre-action protocol whereby low-value personal injury claims can be resolved in line with the protocols that already exist in England and Wales. Legal costs can spiral out of control, and, obviously, insurance companies pick up the tab for both parties concerned. However, as is the case with all insurance business, the objective is to make a profit, and if there is a high cost ratio for the insurer, it will pass the increase onto the customer.

I will also, at this stage, refer briefly to the Motor Insurers' Bureau and the costs that are associated with those drivers who are not insured. Those claims for third-party injury are

also paid by insurance companies through a fund, which is paid for by way of a percentage of insurance premiums. When certain individuals do not insure their cars, it creates a hidden cost that has to be funded from somewhere. Those who pay their insurance are contributing to the cost of uninsured drivers. That is an issue for another day. I believe that uninsured drivers should pay hefty fines and risk the loss of their licence for several years; but I am digressing from the subject.

I support the amendment as proposed by my colleagues.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The confusion has eased as the debate has gone on, and I thank Mr Hamilton for bringing some clarity to it. As most Members have said, insurance in this part of Ireland is much more expensive than in other parts. The Office of Fair Trading said that insurance premiums paid by consumers are, on average, 11% higher and that insurance quotes for consumers in the rural areas of the North are 40% to 70% higher than those for consumers in the rest of Ireland. It gives a number of reasons for that, one being that compensation levels for personal injury claims are higher; another that differences in legal processes appear to lead to higher legal costs. In addition, some statistics show that a higher number of accidents also has an impact.

Putting a cap on payments of compensation claims would restrict access to adequate compensation for those who have been bereaved or severely injured as a result of road traffic accidents. Placing a cap could also lead to legal challenge, as has been experienced in the US, where a number of states have introduced a cap on general damages.

On the point that cases should be held in lower courts, it is important that legal claims are dealt with by an appropriate court. As anyone who is unfortunate enough to have been involved in an accident will know, preparing the claim for compensation is a complicated exercise that requires a complete assessment of the facts against a legal framework and, importantly, the assessment of medical injuries, both current and future, arising from an accident. I do not agree that if you reduce the legal costs, motor insurance will come down.

Mr Beggs: If you do not reduce it, it will continue to rise even faster.

Mr Lynch: I am not sure about that, but I will read out some statistics. Eighty per cent of all county court claims for personal injuries settled for less than £5,000. That shows that it is not the case that claimants are receiving vast amounts of compensation. From 2000 to 2009, there has been a 23% reduction in the number of claims registered with the compensation recovery unit. That shows a decrease in the number of claims being made, and that is during a period that has witnessed major hikes in insurance.

Finally, and most welcome, is the fact, which the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety mentioned, that there has been a 33% reduction in the number of casualties on our roads. That is to be welcomed. That also supports the suggestion that there has been a reduction in claims, but no corresponding reduction in premiums has occurred during that time. In my opinion, placing caps on payments of compensation and hearing cases in lower courts would not bring lower premiums. I know people in my own area who have had their premiums increased significantly, as

does my colleague Mr Flanagan. When they shopped around, they found much better value. In fact, some of them found quotes that were much lower than what they had paid previously. If we had more time to shop around, we could haggle and get better value. I agree with my colleague Raymond McCartney that an interdepartmental approach to the issue is needed.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I welcome the opportunity to engage in the debate, given its importance for our whole society. I am concerned about the cost of insurance premiums, and it is clear that the majority of the House is too. However, it is not necessarily clear that the issues that are identified in the motion and in the amendment are the only issues that are of concern regarding the level of insurance premiums in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the real reason why insurance premiums are at the level that they are is fairly complex.

Remember, the Office of Fair Trading identified three specific issues regarding the cost of insurance in Northern Ireland. The first was that consumers in Northern Ireland are less likely to shop around. The second was that we have more accidents per capita than elsewhere in the UK. For example, in 2010, Northern Ireland had 315 reported road traffic collisions per 100,000 of the population compared with 263 in England, 228 in Wales and 197 in Scotland. The third point was suggested to be differences between our legal system and that of England and Wales.

It is also important to note that OFT put forward some evidence in respect of the first two — in one case, a survey and, in the other, statistical evidence — but it did not produce any empirical evidence relating to the issues around the legal system. Notably, it did identify as requiring further examination the provision of issues such as third-party vehicle repairs and credit-hire replacement vehicles on some sort of tied contract and not the civil justice system for Northern Ireland.

5.00 pm

It is clear that the issues identified by the OFT in respect of the insurance industry and the number of accidents are not matters for my Department alone, as was said by a number of Members. However, the DOJ is willing to play its part, and also —

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he agree that there is a case for a cross-departmental approach to the issue of rising insurance premiums and a need for greater competition in Northern Ireland? Does he agree that there is a need for an Ad Hoc Committee of the Assembly to work directly and cross-departmentally to probe the reasons for higher insurance costs throughout Northern Ireland and thereby work with the OFT to drive down insurance costs?

Mr Ford: I shall be cautious about agreeing with the middle part of Ms Ritchie's comments, lest my colleague Trevor Lunn has a go at me. However, I certainly agree with her on the complexity of the way that this issue is handled. There is a need for something of a cross-departmental look, and I see merits in the concept of an Ad Hoc Committee of the Assembly, on which point she has probably stolen one of my best finishing lines.

As a member of the Environment Committee for the duration of the Assembly until I became Minister of Justice,

I recognise that the work that was done there around road safety is a key part of the process that affects insurance issues. We should note the fact that the motion does not refer specifically to motor insurance, although we seem largely to be debating motor insurance. I am concerned about issues that would improve the civil justice system in general.

Let me comment on some of the points raised by Members who referred specifically to me or to my Department. In proposing the motion, Mr McQuillan talked about the compensation tariff being set by the Department of Justice. Well, no; it is not. There is a role, as others said, for the judiciary and for legal committees, but there is no specific role for the Minister. Therefore, I have to be careful in my response to any call for the Minister to set limits. He also referred to the court level at which cases are taken. Most Members will be aware of our proposals to increase the jurisdiction of the County Court from £15,000 to £30,000, which will come into play later this year. He and others also referred to the protocols in England and Wales, to which I will refer later.

In the context of a debate in which there were proposals for a capping level, Mr Beggs, interestingly, expressed concern about the capping level and raised an interesting question from Jim Allister about whether this was or was not a matter for the Minister. With respect, I suggest that it is not a matter for the Minister, as was shown shortly afterwards when Alban Maginness pointed out that there were serious issues about ECHR compliance. Our seeking to establish capping levels may directly contravene article 6.

Raymond McCartney was the first to ask — others agreed with his question — whether we would expect insurance premiums to go down if other matters changed. Indeed, from comments by other Members, it appears that there is a certain doubt around the Chamber as to whether that would be the case. That is because, as Alban Maginness pointed out, when juries were abolished, there was no significant change. It is probably fair to say that, to some extent, judges kept to the existing compensation levels that were set by juries but have not increased them in the years since juries were abolished, in the way that they have been greatly increased in other jurisdictions. I am prepared to take an intervention if either of the lawyers on each side of me wants to respond to that.

The real issue is how we ensure that people are treated fairly. Capping sounds like a dangerously blunt instrument, a point that was made by Trevor Lunn when he said that the matter is not as simple as capping. There are issues around restrictive practices and some of the ways in which claims are handled. We seem to have reached the point where the OFT report has attained a certain consensus in the House, although significant reservations have been expressed around the Consumer Council report that preceded it and seemed to produce some figures that, although quoted in the press as recently as Saturday last, unfortunately seem to have been rejected by the OFT's rather more detailed work.

Mr Anderson referred to the complexity of the issue across Departments and to the role of the DOE in road safety. I think that he was the first Member specifically to raise the potential of small claims court involvement, although I noticed that Seán Lynch seemed to be against that. As mentioned during the debate, there were serious reasons

for small claims courts not being involved in taking action involving road traffic collisions. A particular perceived danger was that, even if applied for a relatively low claim for damage to a vehicle, it might well be seen to establish a legal precedent for something much more significant in the way of personal injury. That is why that was not adopted in Northern Ireland. It is clearly an issue that can be discussed, but I do not think that we should suggest that there is in any way a consensus at this point. There certainly was no consensus when that position was established some years ago.

There was a further interesting exchange between Simon Hamilton and Edwin Poots. I am not sure whether Mr Poots was speaking as the current Health Minister or former Environment Minister when he pointed out that the number of road deaths has gone down significantly in recent years, as has the number of road traffic collisions, yet premiums for car insurance have remained high and have, to some extent, increased. Clearly, issues there suggest that simplistic solutions will not meet the needs of this society.

Ross Hussey, like his party colleagues, referred to the pre-action protocol that exists for personal injury litigation in England and Wales. Pre-action protocols have also existed in Northern Ireland since 2008 and have been issued by the Chief Justice for personal injury and clinical negligence cases in the High Court. Whether there would be a benefit in having similar directions in the County Court is under examination and may well be taken forward in the near future. The strong likelihood is that we will have new protocols that will be tied in with the increase in the County Court financial limit to £30,000 later in the year. That would be the obvious point at which to introduce such protocols.

Clearly, there are significant concerns about the number of claims being made and compensation levels. I will quote from the House of Commons debate that has already been referred to. The debate was initiated by Margaret Ritchie, who has decided to leave just at the point at which I wish to quote her. She stated:

“the number of claims reported to the compensation recovery unit fell by 23% in the decade up to 2009. In short, the trend is clear: although accidents and claims are decreasing, the cost of insurance is increasing.”

Margaret, I am glad that you are back in the Chamber. Margaret's comment was followed by an intervention from my colleague Naomi Long, who pointed out that:

“compensation levels did not increase but insurance premiums did, so it cannot be argued that that was what led to increased premiums.”

It is, as a number of Members said, a complex issue. It is not simply a matter of saying that it is over to the Minister of Justice.

Some of the wisest words were spoken by Phil Flanagan, when he said that he was confused. I was a bit worried when Seán Lynch, towards the end of the debate, said that he was no longer confused. I am reluctant to intervene in an internal dispute in Fermanagh Sinn Féin, but, on that issue, I am on the side of Phil Flanagan. I believe that the position is, to some extent, confused by the wording of the motion and the two amendments.

Undoubtedly, there were nods throughout the House when Members spoke about the need for Departments to work on a cross-departmental basis. Indeed, I think that there were nods around the House at the suggestion that an Ad Hoc Committee might be an appropriate way forward. I am happy to take the debate back to the Department of Justice in so far as it relates to that Department, which is very little, to communicate with other Ministers about the content of the debate and encourage them also to engage.

The setting up of an Ad Hoc Committee is something on which Alban Maginness might need to table a specific motion. However, I believe that, at this stage, the passing of the motion, amendment No 1 or amendment No 2 would merely add to the confusion, whereas we are all sure of the general tenor of the direction needed. I am certainly prepared to respond on that basis, though not exactly in the words in which the motion or the amendments are expressed.

Mr Kinahan: If everyone is confused, I will try my best not to add to the confusion. However, it is a harder task to make a winding-up speech on this debate than on any other. I declare an interest in that I have two young children who have just started to drive and two more who will follow in the next few years. They are at the beginning of the insurance and driving world.

We have gained one thing from today's debate, which is that we agree that we have to try to find a way to reduce insurance costs. I am pleased to hear that the Minister is willing to do his bit and that perhaps an Ad Hoc Committee, as suggested by Margaret Ritchie, is a suitable idea. I had a differently worded version of that suggestion in my notes. We all know where we are trying to go on the matter. We managed to confuse ourselves with the wording of the motion, our amendment and then a DUP amendment that would have changed the wording about capping, but, having listened to everyone here, we feel as a party that we can drop our amendment to allow the voting to be clearer. I hope that that does not confuse everyone.

I wanted to make one point that no one else seems to have explored. We have looked at many ways to reduce costs, particularly through efficient protocols, but most of us homed in on the legal side. Most of us agree that it is a complex and cross-departmental matter. However, I spoke to some brokers last week who say that it is hard for them to make their decisions until they have the right data on how payments and costs arise. They told me that they need to know how much is spent on repairing damage to cars and hiring replacement cars and how much is brought into this through the costs of injury and subsequent changes to life. There are also legal costs and referral fees. It gets more and more complicated, and we know that extra costs are being added. As the Minister and others said, it will be hard to change the system to achieve a lowering of costs, but we should strive for that.

An efficient protocol is one way forward, and I am extremely pleased that the Minister is considering that. I think that you said that you are working at a level of £30,000 and below. Although today's debate has been muddled, it has got us there. We have all spoken and agreed, and I think that we have seen the House at its best. Although muddled and betwixt and between, we got there. I am not going to go into what everyone has said. We have put across the idea of

an efficient protocol. We know that there is a chance of an Ad Hoc Committee and that the Minister will push for that. We need to communicate with all Departments to pull this complex issue together.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Can I clarify, Danny, that you are withdrawing the amendment?

Mr Kinahan: I am withdrawing the amendment.

Amendment No 2, by leave, withdrawn.

Mr Campbell: I know that the hour is late and there is another debate to follow, so I will be brief. My colleague Mr McQuillan introduced the debate and talked about the numerous cases that we have all heard about in which car costs, particularly for young people, exceed the cost of insuring them. That has been an extremely restricting problem, particularly in rural areas, where people so depend on private car ownership.

Mr Roy Beggs referred to excessive legal fees, which are a problem in cases in which claims result from road traffic accidents. Mr McCartney talked about differences in adjoining postcode areas, and we are all aware of considerable differences in the cost of premiums.

5.15 pm

Alban Maginness talked about the issue having gone on for decades. I do not know whether that was an indication of the length of time that he has been involved in politics or whether he has been interested in this issue for what seems like decades.

Mr Trevor Lunn also talked about a time period, but the period that he talked about related to the fact that he was mentioned in an OFT report, even though he sold his business five years ago. He also referred to higher payouts in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the UK.

Mr Sydney Anderson talked about the rationale of the Troubles being a considerable factor in claims throughout that period and about uninsured drivers, which came up in the debate again and again. Mr Flanagan talked about the issue being a problem for some time and referred to rural dependency on private car ownership.

Mr Simon Hamilton said that he simply does not believe the insurance companies. Hold the front page on that one. I do not think anybody else believes them either. That was a straightforward statement, and, unfortunately, it is part of the reason why we are having the debate here today. He also referred to the issue, as did the Minister, of not shopping around. I will refer to that in my concluding remarks.

Mr Ross Hussey referred to his experience of accidents causing injury. We are all personally aware or are aware of close family members who are in the same position.

Mr Lynch talked about 80% of County Court claims being for relatively small amounts. The problem is that we do not know the sheer volume of the very small claims. Some Members also mentioned the whole whiplash issue. There seems to be a preponderance of claims on that score.

In summing up, the Minister quoted from the OFT report. The first issue was the lesser likelihood of shopping around in Northern Ireland, which is a factor, but it sounds anomalous

when there is supposedly a very high dependence on value for money in Northern Ireland. We always seem to get a name for being quite keen to get value for money, yet we are less likely to shop around. So, if one thing comes out of the debate today and it is that people will be more likely to shop around, we will have done a service. I am aware of a constituent who reliably and dependably went to their local broker year on year for the past 10 or 12 years simply renewing their premium, but, a couple of months ago, they decided to shop around and got a quote that was less than half their previous quote. When they went back to their local broker, lo and behold, within 30 seconds of being put on hold, they were able to get a premium quote that was slightly lower than the 50% cheaper one that they could get by going elsewhere. I suppose that is an example of what we should ask people to do more of.

The Minister also referred to the fact that we have more accidents here, although more recent indications are that that is changing, and to the difference in legal systems. He also referred to what he termed "complex issues". We can all agree that there are definitely complex issues.

In summing up, Mr Kinahan said that he did not want to add to the confusion, and he did not. I think that we are now in the position where we are content, if the House is content, to move with our amendment to the original motion. Hopefully, it will retain the unanimous support of the House.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the soaring cost of insurance in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to review the level of general damages paid in whiplash-type injuries and further review the jurisdiction in which cases are heard to ensure that court and legal costs are kept to a minimum.

Home Heating Oil

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes to do so.

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes that home heating oil has the most variable prices of any heating fuel; further notes that a growing number of households have no choice but to purchase 20-litre drums of oil that are significantly more expensive per litre than buying in bulk; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to introduce legislation as soon as possible to regulate the local home heating oil industry.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an rún a mholadh, agus tá áthas orm é a thabhairt faoi bhráid an Tionóil.

I am happy to bring the motion before the House for what I hope will be a constructive debate. I welcome the Minister and thank her for taking the time to listen to the debate, and I look forward to a positive resolution.

The home heating oil industry in the North is very lucrative, and estimates of its value range somewhat. The lowest estimate that I have seen puts it at some £385 million a year, while others estimate it as being as high as £766 million a year. It is, therefore, a massive, unregulated, problematic industry. Oil is the main source of heat for some 68% of our families, and that figure is much higher in rural areas. Oil is 70% more expensive than natural gas. Due to the massive dominance of the home heating oil industry, the Office of Fair Trading, in a recent report, which, in fairness, focused primarily on what happened on the island of Britain, said that it was an oddity of the market here that the most common heating fuel — heating oil — is unregulated, while the less common — natural gas — is regulated. That report and the Enterprise Minister's response also claimed that competition was working well. Those claims were made primarily due to the fact that there are apparently 300 suppliers of home heating oil and at least 10 suppliers in each postcode area. I find it difficult to find out how someone can stand over those claims. First, how can it be claimed that competition is working well, when there is a massive price differential, depending on where you live? Sometimes the differential can be as much as £80 on a 900-litre fill. Secondly, massive areas are serviced by a single supplier. I know that some MLAs will provide information from their constituency where that is the case.

The fact is that competition is not working in the home heating oil market. We are talking about an industry where there is blatant market failure. The majority of the pricing element is not made up by local distributors but much higher up the supply chain. Although we may have no direct control over that price, there needs to be much greater transparency for consumers. There is a widespread perception of profiteering in the home heating oil industry,

but, due to a lack of regulation and price transparency, that cannot be identified.

Oil is much cheaper here than it is in Britain, but that is due to basic economics and the economies of scale that come with bulk purchases. However, can anyone stand up and say that consumers here fully benefit from bulk buying? In her response to the OFT report, the Minister urged householders to plan ahead. As someone who has personal experience of this, as I know many other MLAs on this side of the House do, I say to the Minister that it is difficult to plan ahead when oil is so expensive and many people's incomes are so desperately low. Competition is working only for those who can afford to purchase large quantities of oil at a time. It is completely failing everyone else, particularly those most in need, vulnerable people and rural dwellers, who are often completely dependent on oil to heat their home.

I turn now to the problem of the use of small drums of oil that, on average, cost £19.58 or £2,700 per annum if it is the only source of home heating oil. That compares badly with larger fills of oil. Take 500-litre fills, for example. An average of 5.5 fills of that quantity are needed at an average cost of £1,732 a year. That is a difference of some £1,000. That is £1,000 extra profit that someone somewhere is making. Furthermore, it looks much worse when you consider that it costs £595 to heat an average home for a year with natural gas.

From what I can see, part of the problem, unfortunately, lies with the fact that those in highly paid positions in the Civil Service are completely out of touch with reality. They have no idea what ordinary people have to live through and, therefore, dismiss the notion of introducing regulation as pointless. I appeal to the Minister to listen to the concerns that MLAs from all parties will bring to her today about the high price of oil. As a constituency MLA, I am sure that those concerns have been raised with her directly.

The argument has been put forward that regulation will add to consumers' bills. That will need to be looked at instead of using it as an excuse to rule out legislation. It may incur an initial cost for consumers, but the other benefits would likely outweigh those costs. The Consumer Council has carried out sterling work, as have other advocacy groups, in calling for regulation and outlining the reasons behind such a move very well. It claims that the current policy to regulate gas, which has 16% of the market, and not regulate oil, which has nearly 70% of the market share, is counterintuitive. Regulation would provide much greater consumer protection, encourage greater competition in the market, ensure that consumers pay a fair price and aid transparency and confidence in the market. Regulation would ensure that companies invest in the industry to keep it competitive and to increase energy efficiency. It is sheer madness that gas and electricity suppliers must provide grants to consumers to increase their energy efficiency, and yet the oil industry, with an annual income of £360 million, is exempt from such schemes. Regulation would also guarantee a certain standard of customer service and reliable equipment, as well as the servicing of boilers.

The cost of crude oil cannot be influenced by an intervention from the Assembly. However, regulation would provide consumers with reassurance that the price that they pay is reasonable. Consumers plainly see that prices do not drop in line with wholesale prices anywhere near as quickly

as they rise. Regulation is needed to ensure that savings in the wholesale market are passed on to consumers and that profiteering at any level in the supply chain is identified quickly and dealt with appropriately. We need regulation to ensure that that can happen. Regulation would also ensure that standards are met and that boilers are fitted properly and are adequately efficient, saving consumers more money.

National Energy Action strongly advocates a position where regulation should include health and safety issues as well as investigations into pricing structures. The OFT report that I mentioned earlier focused solely on competition and did not take into account the added benefits that regulation would bring. The reluctance of the Oil Federation to enter into meaningful talks with the Consumer Council as the representative body for consumers and agree a code of practice voluntarily, despite repeated attempts to do so by the Consumer Council, is a serious problem. We cannot allow those talks, which have been going on for over a year, to continue without any progress. It appears that the industry is completely unwilling to move; therefore we, as an Assembly, need to move it. Those are the primary reasons why we need regulation.

I look forward to a productive debate on this important topic. I cannot see a situation where my party would support the Alliance Party's amendment, as we feel that it does not go far enough and would, ultimately, result in little change for consumers.

Mr Lunn: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"with concern, Northern Ireland's over-reliance on our unregulated home heating oil market; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage further with the Office of Fair Trading, the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator, whilst also encouraging pre-payment schemes operated by local councils, with a view to addressing consumer concerns."

I feel that the amendment more accurately reflects the problem, and, in so far as Governments can influence the situation, it points towards actions that may, to a limited extent, alleviate the problem. The Alliance Party cannot support the motion as, frankly, it is unrealistic, and it is not clear what the Minister can do beyond what the Consumer Council already does. For once, I applaud the Consumer Council — it is a fine organisation. I understand that it contacts every supplier three times a week to check prices, which are then published online to allow customers to compare. Unfortunately, oil prices are volatile, and suppliers can only realistically sell at a price that reflects the price at which they purchased their current supplies. That can lead to anomalies: if the wholesale price is dropping, individual suppliers may have to maintain their retail price for oil already purchased, whereas another supplier, perhaps with less storage capacity, will have replenished his stock at a lower wholesale price. Of course, the converse is true if the wholesale price is rising. However, that confirms that it is worthwhile to shop around and purchase, if you can afford to, in the summer months when prices tend to be lower or at other times when, due to many factors, particularly world events, there may be an opportunity.

For a variety of reasons, I do not believe that there is a role for a regulatory regime in this market. The industry

is completely different from the electricity or natural gas industries. It is not dominated by two or three major interests. Mr Flanagan acknowledged that there are about 300 suppliers, the result of which is a very healthy level of competition.

5.30 pm

The profit margins are low, but, even so, the competitive environment is strong. For example, I checked the prices as of 2 February. The average price in Northern Ireland for 500 litres was £313 on that day. That varied from £300, available if you bought the oil online, to £335 in some areas of the north coast. Some people might think that that small range of prices, barely 10%, is an indication of some sort of pricing agreement or price fixing, but I think that the opposite is the case. Profit margins are so tight that even the suppliers who compete most aggressively have little room for manoeuvre. They have the same problem with basic costs, storage, transportation and insurance, which is hugely expensive. In fact, Mr Deputy Speaker, if anybody thinks that there is a problem with car insurance in this country, they want to try to insure an oil tanker. It is hideously expensive, and there is a very limited market prepared to do it. That is to say nothing of road tax and all the rest.

There may be a case for the Department, the OFT, the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator to conduct an investigation, and our amendment suggests that, if only to see whether there is any evidence of price fixing or profiteering from fluctuating world prices. Frankly, I doubt it. That is an accusation frequently levelled at the gas industry, but one that is not generally backed up by similar investigations. I will say it again: suppliers can sell only at a price relative to their purchase costs. However, we feel that an investigation led by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is perhaps worthwhile, just to nail down the facts. Indeed, the OFT investigation that we discussed a couple of hours ago did at least bring some clarity to the situation around insurance.

The motion goes on to make the point that a lot of households have no choice but to purchase their heating oil in 20-litre drums or similar small quantities. Let me say clearly that I have enormous sympathy for anybody who finds themselves in that position. Seventy percent of our homes rely on oil to heat them properly, with others relying on coal, for which there is perhaps a similar problem and anomaly in price. A considerable number of people within that 70% do not have the ability to buy in bulk due to their financial circumstances. They may not have a bank account or the facility to use a prepayment method, which is normally based on a standing order.

I am not clear as to why the proposers have chosen to highlight the cost of a 20-litre drum. It is obviously more expensive to supply oil by that method, just as it is possible to produce economies of scale and supply, say, 1,000 litres at a lower cost per litre than when supplying 300 litres. The delivery cost is the same in both cases. There is bound to be a differential. I understand that the difference between the unit cost of those two quantities, between 1,000 litres and 300 litres, means that, at the moment, there is a 15% better deal if you buy the bigger quantity. I have not tried to work out what the differential would be for a 20-litre drum, but it must be massive. As I said, I have nothing but

sympathy for anybody who has to rely on that particular form of purchase.

The question is not around regulating the price, which would probably make it impossible to supply small quantities, but around what can be done to remove the need for households to purchase in those quantities to begin with. It would be nice, for instance, if a system of self-service were in place to allow the refilling of such drums by the customer. However, I fear that there would be health and safety and environmental considerations that would rule that out and make it unrealistic. Therefore, we advocate that the prepayment schemes run by some local councils be further encouraged. I understand that at least five local councils currently operate those schemes. That is in the terms of our amendment.

We also suggest that there may be other innovative ways to try to make it easier for people to buy a slightly bigger amount of oil and benefit from the economies of scale. I suggest that the Department could perhaps engage with the banks, the Post Office, the oil companies and charities to ensure that every option for prepayment is explored and to seek to provide innovative solutions. The social protection fund was mentioned earlier today. That is another avenue.

What is really needed is for people to be able to buy, perhaps by means of a loan, their first fill of oil, and then to be able to build up, by a prepayment method, in time for the next fill. If we can get them started, we might be halfway towards some sort of solution. The Department for Social Development (DSD) and the credit unions may have a part to play. There are options that are worth exploring, and that is why I would like the Department to conduct an investigation of its own.

It is an absolute disgrace that, in 2012, in one of the richest countries in the world, some people still cannot heat their homes. However, price regulation will not solve that problem, and we, therefore, offer our amendment to the House as an alternative to the motion.

Mr Newton: I support the amendment from Trevor Lunn of the Alliance Party. The natural concern for any MLA is to do what he or she can to alleviate the problems of constituents coming into the constituency office. The problem of fuel poverty, with its associations with debt, is undoubtedly a major concern for all MLAs.

When the Office of Fair Trading made its presentation to the Enterprise, Trade and Investment (ETI) Committee, there was a lot of interest from Committee members and a fair amount of discussion on the issues that the OFT report raised. What there was not was a definitive Committee position on how the identified problem of the 20-litre oil drums could be solved. However, the report indicated that, in the Northern Ireland energy market, there is competitiveness among oil suppliers. There was no evidence at all of either a cartel or of a price-fixing operation as a result of oil suppliers getting together. There was no evidence whatsoever of that.

Obviously, we are all concerned when consumers have only one energy choice and do not have the option of changing their home heating energy supplier, and that is to be regretted.

The OFT report was presented in, I think, the latter part of last year. I do not remember Mr Flanagan raising in Committee many of the points that he has raised today,

but that is a matter for him to determine. The OFT report confirmed that there was genuine competition in the oil market, that most consumers had the choice of at least 10 suppliers in their immediate area and that 90% of the cost of oil, as Trevor Lunn mentioned, is outside the costs of distributors. I remember from a previous spell on the ETI Committee a discussion on the energy market in which we heard how a tanker could leave a port full of oil and how that oil could, in fact, be bought on four different occasions as the tanker sailed to its destination port to discharge its supply, such was the competition in the energy market.

The report also confirms that retail and wholesale prices in Northern Ireland have been consistently lower than those in other parts of the UK. However, that should not take away from all our concerns for our own constituents.

One thing I want to say is this: in preaching the case for regulation, Sinn Féin needs to understand that regulation does not come free; it does not come without a cost. Someone has to pay for it at the end of the day. Indeed, I join Trevor Lunn in expressing concern about people buying high-cost 20-litre drums. Those drums are designed for emergency supply only, not regular supply. The problem, then, becomes one of debt, not regulation.

Mr Nesbitt: The Ulster Unionist Party will be supporting the amendment. We happily call on the Minister to further engage with the Office of Fair Trading, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland and the regulator to see what more can be done. The bottom line is that we need to reduce the risk to those in fuel poverty, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable. It would not be overly emotive to say that people in this country die during cold snaps because they cannot afford the energy they require to heat their homes to a level that keeps them alive.

I understand that reducing fuel poverty was a target that went unmet in the last mandate. Indeed, I believe that household fuel poverty rose from 36% to 44%. Since this mandate began in May, we have seen Power NI's electricity prices rise by 18.6%, which happened last summer, forcing even more families into fuel poverty. That is not necessarily the fault of the House or the Executive; there are global forces at work here. However, it is a definition of the problem that we are trying to tackle on behalf of our citizens — citizens who are paying over £500 for 900 litres of home heating oil. As many Members referenced, the price per litre of a 20-litre drum is quite punitive. Think back to last winter when we did not have just one cold snap but a series of them: I think that we can assume that many of the most vulnerable were not buying one but a series of relatively expensive 20-litre drums at a huge cost to themselves, not just financially.

I believe that we need to consider the involvement of the regulator. However, we must remember that the chief function of a regulator is, effectively, as a substitute for competition. Compared with the electricity and gas markets, the home heating oil sector is relatively competitive, certainly at the retail or distribution level. So if the regulator were to become involved, it would have to do so in a manner that was entirely focused on the consumer and on being consumer-friendly. As I understand it, the office of the regulator already operates with an annual budget of £7 million, paid for by licensees in the oil and gas sectors. We are not keen to see a similar levy on home heating oil

retailers, because that would inevitably mean that the price would be passed on to the consumer.

I note that in the autumn ahead of the Conservative Party conference, the Prime Minister complained that the top six energy companies in England were too powerful and too influential. We may look enviously at that position because we do not have enough competition, particularly in gas and electricity. Since I was elected, I have asked many times, privately and publicly, whether the consumer is better off since electricity was privatised 20 years ago, on the basis that privatisation should drive down price and drive up service. The best answer I have been given is that the consumer has a better security of supply. However, I wonder whether that would have happened anyway over the past 20 years, as new technologies were introduced.

As for the home heating oil industry with some 300 suppliers, we rest in a position where there is still a lack of clarity and a lack of transparency. That needs to be addressed, and the best way to do so initially would be for the Minister to engage in further talks with the relevant bodies, as the amendment suggests. Beyond that, I suggest that we need imaginative solutions such as brokering, which would allow people in defined geographical areas to make bulk purchases.

I also look forward to the outcome of the pay-as-you-go pilot scheme. The Minister for Social Development, when questioned by me in the House the other day, was unable to say who would own the unused oil in oil tanks. I am happy to see that he has responded to a question for written answer to inform me that the Department for Social Development is working with the Housing Executive and two private sector companies: Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services. He says that Carillion will monitor oil levels, buy the oil, own the unused oil and contain the risk in the event of theft.

5.45 pm

Mr Flanagan: I do not want to stand up in a second consecutive debate and say that I am confused, but I am confused. In its 12-point pledge in December 2011, one of the Ulster Unionist Party's key policies was the regulation of the home heating oil industry. Will the Member explain what has changed since December 2011 when that commitment was party policy?

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

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank Mr Flanagan for raising the issue. I said that we need to consider the involvement of the regulator, but not at any cost. Let me be clear again: the regulator has an operating budget of £7 million per annum, which is paid for by licensees in the gas and electricity sectors. If we incorporate oil, and we can see the wisdom of looking at that, we do not want every retailer and distributor to be charged a levy that would automatically be put onto the price of oil, which would force more people into fuel poverty.

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

Ms Ritchie: In supporting the motion, we must be aware of rising fuel poverty and its pernicious impact on many people throughout Northern Ireland. We must also recognise

that we are debating this issue on the day that Phoenix Gas decided not to comply with the decision of the Utility Regulator on gas prices, which could plunge people into further fuel poverty and render them unable to buy fuel.

It is also worth noting the large number of households throughout Northern Ireland that use home heating oil; more use home heating oil than other forms of fuel. I suppose that is because only certain parts of Northern Ireland have had the natural gas network extended to them. I hope that in the fullness of time the Minister will use her influence to ensure that the natural gas network is extended to most areas so that that opportunity is available to the consumer.

I have written to you on several occasions about that matter and about the need to provide some form of regulatory system for home heating oil. There is no doubt that this winter has been much milder than the last one, but oil prices continue to soar and place an intolerable burden on household finances.

Over 68% of homes in Northern Ireland use home heating oil to heat their homes; that percentage increases in rural areas. In my own constituency of South Down, the percentage is 82%. It is worth noting, and we all experience this, that 900 litres of home heating oil now costs well over £500. Gas and electricity customers benefit from a regulatory framework, and home heating oil customers should benefit from something similar. It is unacceptable that the most common form of home heating in Northern Ireland does not have that regulator. Although oil prices are determined by global markets, there is no oil regulator in Northern Ireland, which means that there is no governmental control over our chief heating form.

Oil prices are determined on the global market and oil is imported through the ports. There are only four importers in Northern Ireland; three at Belfast port and one at Derry port. Is there a possibility of looking at the price charged to the distributor who collects the oil after it has been refined by the importer and distributes it to other people in the chain? Could that be examined to drive down the price of home heating oil for the consumer?

The SDLP believes that the regulation of home heating oil would ensure fairness and transparency in the market. It would also restore consumers' faith in the market and in what they are paying for. Levels of fuel poverty are rising, and fuel poverty is determined by the level of income that people receive, by fuel prices and by energy efficiency.

Although the Government can control energy efficiency through DSD initiatives and cavity wall and loft insulations, it is, perhaps, more difficult at the moment to control fuel prices. Considering that the biggest amount of fuel, used by the largest group, is home heating oil, that area needs to be looked at. It is impossible to regulate incomes throughout the private sector. Therefore, the area of home heating oil needs to be looked at for the most vulnerable people.

There is a duty of care on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to introduce an oil regulator and to regulate for vulnerable groups. There is an onus on the Executive and wider Assembly to ensure the health of our people and protect them from cold and damp living conditions. We should not be placing our people in a position where they have to heat or eat.

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

Ms Ritchie: In supporting the proposal for regulation, I urge the Minister to look at the whole area of the importation of oil to see whether some form of regulation could be brought in around the port area.

Mr Frew: I support the amendment. It is worded better than the motion and brings forward a much more holistic approach. However, it could have gone further in addressing the whole problem around fuel poverty and by including not just one Minister but the whole Executive.

Let's face it: fuel poverty is probably one of the biggest challenges in our lifetime. It is probably one of the biggest issues, if not the biggest, that we as politicians will have to face in our careers. At the minute, it seems that it will get worse rather than better, so we have to be very careful how we tackle it. We cannot drift off at a tangent in one direction and forget about the rest. So, it is very important, when we talk about all aspects of fuel poverty, to keep it as holistic as possible and to include all elements of the problem in order to resolve it and ease the pressure on the population that we serve.

When we talk about fuel poverty, let us remember that it is not only about the price of energy, which is a severe pressure on our people; it is also about the wages and incomes of our people and the energy inefficiencies of their houses and buildings. To put that in perspective, I received information only today that we in Northern Ireland pay slightly less for our fuel than the average price in the UK. That tells me that the other elements of fuel poverty are as much, if not more, to blame than the price of fuel. Do not get me wrong: the price of fuel is crippling, terrible and needs to be addressed. However, it is not just heating oil. Electricity prices rose last year.

Mr F McCann: I am just reading the motion that my colleagues have tabled. I understand that home heating oil may be cheaper here than in other jurisdictions, but the point that they are making is that the people who deliver and sell the oil are taking advantage of people by selling 20-litre drums, which are dearer per litre. Therefore, although some people may be able to buy 500 or 1,000 litres of oil, others, who cannot afford it, are being forced to pay higher prices. That point is also being made in the motion.

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

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I can read the wording of the motion. However, let us be very clear. As has been mentioned, there are around 300 oil distributors in Northern Ireland. Every one of them is a business in its own right. The people who own those businesses are trying to make a living for themselves, their workers and their families. If they could solve the problem, they would. People may be forced to buy a 20-litre drum of oil. However, that is not the oil companies' fault.

We have to be extremely careful in how we portray the oil industry in Northern Ireland. Those businesses provide income to families. They provide jobs. It is extremely important that Sinn Féin does not tar the entire oil industry. Certain terminology is being used in the debate. I am sure that we will hear it in tomorrow's news. I have seen it in print that the industry is accused of being some kind of

cartel because it fixes prices and makes it more difficult for people to buy oil. That is a serious allegation to make about a private sector industry that tries its best in these difficult times. Remember that those people also have to put fuel in their vehicles in order to distribute oil. Therefore, let us not take away from the fact that those people also find it difficult in these economic times.

It is easy to blame one aspect for the entire problem. We, as elected Members, and the Government must think about the issue holistically. We cannot go blaming one sector for fuel poverty, or anything like that. We must ensure that we focus our minds on the entire problem in order to fix it. When we talk about regulating the industry, we must be extremely careful that we do not send a message out to people that by regulating oil companies and distributors, we will bring prices down. Quite simply, that is untrue. In fact, if anything, if we regulate the industry and make it more bureaucratic, that could put prices up.

I know that the Consumer Council has lobbied hard on fuel poverty. It does a lot of good work. However, it seems to be fixated on that issue alone. It needs to take a step back and look at the issue more objectively. A problem exists. It needs to be looked at holistically. I brought a motion on winter fuel payments to the House.

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

Mr Frew: The Assembly and the Executive must look at fuel poverty much more seriously — not just one aspect of it, but the entire issue.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat. My party's focus in the debate is on fuel poverty, not on oil companies or a particular section or player in that field. We can see what has been said by Age NI and National Energy Action (NEA) — groups that represent older people who are suffering from fuel poverty and which are charged with dealing with the issue. They say that regulation is needed. They are not the only ones to say that. As my colleague has already mentioned, the Ulster Unionist Party has said that there is a need for regulation because of exorbitant oil prices, and Nigel Dodds has also said that in Westminster. Therefore, I fail to see why the Assembly does not have the courage to look at the issue in greater detail.

Had the Alliance Party's amendment made more reference to discussions on regulation, perhaps my party would have supported it. However, because that is absent, we cannot support it.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that if prices were regulated, it would also bring transparency to the industry and could provide an industry standard that does not currently exist? A perfect example is that the OFT report is based on the responses of two oil suppliers in Northern Ireland. That is because there is no transparency and, indeed, because the industry as a whole refuses to engage.

Mr McKay: The Member makes an important point. Certainly, we learned from the OFT's presentation that little work has been done in that regard. The Consumer Council has done a lot of work — fair play to it. However, that work should have been done by DETI, politicians, Ministers and

the Executive. All of that work should have been done and should be done.

6.00 pm

We should not run away from the issue. Age NI has voiced concern at the high dependency on oil and the fact that oil here can be 70% more expensive than gas. As regards the variance in price between here and Britain, there is not an over-reliance on oil in Britain; there is much more of an over-reliance here. Only 7% of homes in Britain use home heating oil, compared with 68% here. We are not comparing like with like. There is only a minor rural market for home heating oil in Britain; that is not the case here. There is greater dependence on and demand for home heating oil here, and that has an effect on unit cost and the price per litre. Consumers still require assurance that the cost to them is as low as possible. I urge Members to think about that before they vote on the motion.

It is a serious issue. Members of the parties opposite have said that fuel poverty is a serious issue and we need to get to grips with it. We will not do that by adopting a motion with what is, with all due respect, a wishy-washy amendment that does nothing of any substance. We need to put forward something that demonstrates to the public that we are serious about fuel poverty and that we will look at the issues around oil companies and ensure that families' incomes are protected. That is an important point. We should not run away from the issue; we should support the motion. We should ask the Minister to bring forward proposals for regulation as soon as possible and consider all the factors that will have an impact.

As I highlighted, Members of every party have said, at one time or another, that we need regulation of home heating oil. We have seen seismic increases in oil prices in recent years. Members of the public, consumers and older people are crying out for protections. Those who are charged with looking at the issue of fuel poverty have said that we need regulation and we need it now. Let us not rush into it, but let us consider the issues. Let us ensure that we adopt the motion rather than leaving the Chamber after a hard day's work with a wishy-washy motion —

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he explain how he thinks regulating the industry will bring the price down? Look at the regulated industries in Northern Ireland, namely the electricity and gas markets. Prices in both those industries have increased greatly over the past year. We are talking about a 20-odd per cent increase in electricity prices and increases in gas prices of 40% in greater Belfast and of more than 30% in the 10 towns.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention. Five hundred and eighty million pounds was spent on home heating oil here in 2010. Not one penny of that went back into communities to deal with fuel poverty or address any of the problems that we have talked about today.

We are not talking only about the regulation of price; we are also talking about the issues that Mr Agnew raised. There should not be any confusion. The motion is not about a specific type of regulation; it is about all types of regulation of the oil industry. Let us not be totally specific in that regard. We need to look at this. Only last year in

Westminster, of all places, the DUP MP for North Belfast raised the possible regulation of the home heating oil industry and the exorbitant prices that households are charged. I understand why he raised that, coming from a constituency such as North Belfast. There are parts of all our constituencies where the issue greatly affects people who are vulnerable and those on a low income. As I said, we cannot run away from the issue. Fuel poverty is a big issue, and, if we are serious about tackling it, we need to support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the amendment. There is no doubt that Northern Ireland is over-reliant on home heating oil as the main choice of heating. Almost 70% of the population rely on oil for their main source of heating. Unfortunately, many struggle to heat their home and pay their bills. Regrettably, many have recently slipped into fuel poverty, with households spending more than 10% of their income on heating their home. As over 90% of the cost of home heating oil is subject to the world price of crude oil, it is, unfortunately, beyond the control of the Assembly and the Executive to have a major influence on the price of home heating oil. However, realistic measures can be prioritised to help to alleviate fuel poverty.

Home heating oil in Northern Ireland is currently cheaper than anywhere else in the UK or, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, where it is 20p a litre more expensive for 900 litres. It is vital that there is a competitive market for prices to remain competitive. I checked an oil comparison website at the end of last week, and there was a difference of 3p a litre for 900 litres among 40 companies throughout Northern Ireland. Competition is healthy in Northern Ireland, which has the largest number of suppliers in any region of the UK. People should be encouraged to shop around when purchasing oil to ensure that they get better value for money from their oil distributors. Prepayment schemes from companies should be encouraged. Council initiatives have proved effective in helping those who struggle to pay bills. Belfast City Council's Be Warm scheme is a good example.

Fuel efficiency measures are another realistic way to reduce the cost of heating homes. It is a cross-departmental issue. Much positive work has already been done by the Minister for Social Development to tackle fuel poverty. I trust that that work will continue. Schemes such as the warm homes scheme and the boiler replacement scheme are practical and realistic fuel efficiency measures. The commitment to double glazing by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is another positive measure.

We need to ensure that Northern Ireland moves away from its long-term over-reliance on home heating oil. We need to continue to look at alternative energy sources. The extension of the gas network will give greater choice to users here, as have other developments in the rest of the UK. In my constituency of North Down, there was good news last week that the gas network will be extended to Millisle, which will give residents and businesses there greater choice and better value.

The news last week that gas price tariffs for Belfast users may drop by 10% from April is welcome news and shows the potential benefits of more people moving to gas. There should be greater use of existing gas supply systems, especially in the greater Belfast area, where there is a relatively low uptake by domestic and commercial users.

That issue was highlighted by Lord Whitty during his evidence session at the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in December 2011. An incentive scheme to encourage users to switch from oil to gas would help to address the issue.

Mr Copeland: The Northern Ireland house condition survey, which was conducted by the Housing Executive in 2009, showed that 44% of households were in fuel poverty and 13% were in extreme fuel poverty, which equates to spending at least 20% of their income on heat and light. Since then, as we all know, Northern Ireland has suffered two of the coldest winters on record and experienced significant increases in energy prices and the effects of an increasingly deep economic downturn. Therefore, it can be expected that that figure has risen considerably since 2009.

Northern Ireland outstrips its UK counterparts in the size and scale of the problem of fuel poverty. It has higher energy bills than England, Scotland and Wales, and the majority of households here use heating oil to heat their home and will typically have an annual combined oil and electricity bill in excess of £2,000. The cost of heating oil in Northern Ireland rose by 63% in the past two years. The size and scale of the fuel poverty problem in Northern Ireland is real and growing. It is an extremely complex problem, and single measures alone, such as the regulation of the home heating oil industry, will not totally solve it. With an almost 70% reliance on oil, Northern Ireland is predisposed to the problems of fuel poverty, given the world economic condition. That is key to the problem, and it includes issues such as the installation of meters, the financial outlay for a fill of oil and the unregulated nature of the oil industry, all of which require attention.

The most evident difficulty with fuel is price volatility. The Consumer Council's oil price survey showed that the average price of 900 litres of oil increased from £358.78 in December 2009 to £547.18 in December 2011. That is a huge leap. Fuel prices in Northern Ireland respond to fluctuating wholesale prices that are set internationally and dictated by the oil companies that supply Northern Ireland. There are questions about why, for example, some of the most expensive oil is found at the closest points to the areas of importation. Local distributors have no control over many of those prices, and the price moves —

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. I have listened to the Member, and it is almost as though he is arguing against the position that he and his party colleagues have adopted. Certainly until recently, the principle of regulation was your party's position. So, given that 16% of consumers use gas and there is a regulator for that industry, why do we not follow regulation through to its logical conclusion? For the 68% of the population that uses oil, why should there not also be a regulator, given that regulation seems to work to the benefit of gas consumers?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added.

Mr Copeland: How long, sir?

Mr Speaker: You have a minute added on to your time.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Member for his intervention. I also thank the Chair for giving me that.

There are differences in the way in which the gas and oil industries operate. For example, the gas industry is split between supply and distribution. Once fitted, pipes are a fixed capital outlay, whereas the oil industry has ongoing costs, including the tankers that many companies have. The oil industry is quite heavily regulated in how the stuff is transported and held and through the licences required to store it. So, we are not against regulation; we are saying that regulation in some way needs to be considered.

It comes back to the basic premise of all this. There is a common theme between the motion and the amendment: both call on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to do something. We are essentially calling on her to recognise that there is a concern surrounding the issue and that regulation may be one of a raft of considerations that she needs to pay attention to.

Local distributors have no control over price movements. The price moves daily, and, as we know, it is affected by global oil price movements. In recent years, currency speculation and movements in currency have played a role in oil price movements. Again, those have a high impact on wholesale and retail prices.

Regulation, along with other measures, may significantly ease fuel poverty in this Province. Those measures include maximising benefit uptake; winter fuel payments; the expansion of the warm homes scheme; the adoption, perhaps, of the Kirklees method of approaching the warm homes scheme; energy brokering; and incentivising households to switch to natural gas. The recent Office of Fair Trading report on the oil distribution business in Northern Ireland stated that it is an oddity that, with our large dependence on oil as a fuel in Northern Ireland, we had not resorted to regulation as yet. That alone gives us cause to at least examine the issue. Both on price and the insulation standards, oil should be examined alongside an energy company obligation or levy for fuel-poor initiatives, as is the case with electricity and gas. However, consideration must be given to the cost of regulation falling on the consumer. If it does not fall on the consumer, it will fall on someone.

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

Mr Copeland: Oh Lord. *[Laughter.]* I have given the House a fairly clear indication of my and our position on the issue, and I thank you for your perseverance.

Mr G Robinson: In recent months, my constituency office has been inundated with requests for heating systems in Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes to be transferred to forms of heating other than oil. I am sure that many Members will have experienced the same requests, which have their roots in the high cost of home heating oil. Indeed, as my colleague Paul Frew mentioned, we need to look at the causes of all forms of poverty, such as electricity prices, heating etc.

There is no doubt that the most vulnerable — pensioners and low-income families — suffer most from the high cost of heating their homes. However, help is being given to those groups and individuals. It is a fact that many of those people can only afford to heat their home by using the small drums of oil for which they pay a much higher price a litre. In short, they get much less heat for their pound. It must also be remembered that the Executive have given an additional amount of approximately £100 to those most in need of

keeping their home warm. They are playing their part in tackling fuel poverty. Any attempt to address the issue must come from the Executive as a whole and not from just one Minister. I hope that the Members who tabled the motion are not trying to play political games with a serious subject. I congratulate the Executive on what they have done, but we are not finished with the topic. There will be discussions for many years to come on the best way to address fuel poverty. Addressing just one area of fuel poverty will not solve the overall problem. It is the duty of the Assembly to address all the causes of fuel poverty and to help to find a solution.

6.15 pm

Regulating the home heating oil industry will not solve the problem, especially when over 90% of respondents to a recent survey were content with and understood pricing. In my local Limavady Borough Council area, people are helped to budget through oil stamps and other prepayment schemes. Those must be welcomed and encouraged. However, regulation alone will not change the difficulties experienced by those in fuel poverty. The Members who tabled the motion are misguided in their approach to solving fuel poverty. Therefore, they must support the amendment.

Mr Agnew: Much has been made of the report by the Office of Fair Trading. The report makes an important contribution to the subject, but I, for one, have a few issues with it. As I mentioned in my earlier intervention, only two oil suppliers in Northern Ireland responded to the Office of Fair Trading's study. That highlights the problem with the transparency of the industry here. Another problem with the report was that it examined only competition and price issues. It did not examine the service or, as I said, the issue of transparency. Ultimately, the conclusion of the report was a recommendation for the UK as a whole that did not address Northern Ireland's specific issues. Although there may be no need to regulate the home heating oil industry in England, Scotland and Wales — it has been pointed out that they are much less reliant on oil than we are — the Office of Fair Trading did not specifically report on Northern Ireland. As mentioned, when it did specifically refer to Northern Ireland, it reported that, given our reliance on oil for heating fuel, it was an oddity that the market here was not regulated. So there was a hint in the report, but the conclusions were not specific to Northern Ireland and are, therefore, not specifically relevant.

There has been a lot of focus on price and rightly so. Fuel poverty has been mentioned on a number of occasions, and I have spoken in a number of debates on that issue. It is a key issue for me and my party. However, price is not the only factor. Service and transparency are two areas in which the regulator could intervene and make a substantial difference. When I was a student, like many others, I lived in various houses. I lived in houses that had oil and houses that had gas. If I had a problem with my gas boiler, I rang the company involved, and, in no time, someone was out to ensure that there were no health and safety issues. That was a great service, but you do not get that with oil. Indeed, on the many occasions when my oil boiler has been airlocked, I had to bring in a plumber. I am aware that some distributors unlock oil systems, but not all of them do that. That is the type of benefit that regulation could give. It could provide an industry standard across the board that would ensure that all customers receive an adequate level

of service and servicing so that they have efficient and safe boilers.

I touched on the issue of transparency. It has been highlighted that there are up to 300 oil distributors in Northern Ireland, yet only two responded to the Office of Fair Trading. There is speculation about how the price of home heating oil is set, whether it is set in a fair manner and whether there is any price fixing. I am not making any accusations that price fixing is happening, but we do not have transparency, and, therefore, we cannot give consumers confidence in that. It has been pointed out that 90% of the costs are beyond the control of the distributors.

Mr Frew: The report of the Office of Fair Trading, which was published in October 2011, states:

"As regards heating oil, and as set out in Chapter 4, the OFT has not, in the course of its study and on the basis of the evidence seen to date, found reasonable grounds for suspecting the presence of any feature or features of the heating oil retail distribution market in the UK that may prevent, restrict or distort competition in connection with the supply or acquisition of domestic heating oil in the UK or part of the UK."

That seems very plain to me.

Mr Speaker: On this occasion, I cannot afford to give the Member an extra minute, because he would be eating into the Minister's time.

Mr Agnew: No problem, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for eating up my time.

As I said, I made no accusation that there is price fixing, but there is not consumer confidence. Given the example of last winter, when the price of heating oil rose by up to 50%, yet the wholesale price rose by only 10%, questions need to be asked and transparency is required.

I support the motion, and, touching briefly on the amendment, I think that it is absolutely key that —

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, the Member's time is up.

Mr Agnew: I cannot support the amendment. I support the motion. The Assembly needs to take action in the interests of consumers.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the debate and the opportunity to respond to the motion and the amendment. There is no doubt that energy prices, including those for oil, present a real challenge to homes and businesses — it is important that we remember that it is to both — in Northern Ireland. The challenge is all the more pressing in the current economic climate, as families and businesses are already facing real difficulties in making ends meet.

As Economy Minister, I am very aware of rising unemployment, and I appreciate the concerns that have been raised across the House about the cost of home heating oil, especially for those on a low income. However, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment does not have a statutory remit for the Northern Ireland oil supply chain, which stretches back through the rest of the United Kingdom into Europe and, indeed, further afield. In the United Kingdom, we have an open market for the supply of

petroleum products, and the oil sector operates in a highly competitive global market under national and European laws.

The UK Government policy framework for competition, which is regulated by the Office of Fair Trading and the Competition Commission, is an open market. The UK Government do not have a role in controlling prices, although there are safeguards in place to ensure that competition is fair and consumers are protected, nor do they have any plans to economically regulate the oil market in Great Britain. The Republic of Ireland and, indeed, most European countries also do not regulate the oil industry. In any event, neither the Northern Ireland Executive nor the United Kingdom Government can control the price of crude oil. I think that that has been accepted in the Chamber today. We cannot control the price of refined petroleum imports, which are set by international commodity markets.

I want to turn to the volatility in the price of oil. It is important to note that a significant element of the price we pay for heating oil is based on what is called the Rotterdam jet kerosene spot market, which is used as a reference point for the wholesale price of home heating oil. Retail prices across the United Kingdom, as well as in the Irish Republic and Europe, move broadly in line with the spot prices. The traded wholesale price of jet kerosene closely follows the traded price of the crude oil from which it derives plus an additional refining margin. It has also been noted that retail oil prices tend to be more volatile than those for gas or electricity. That is to be expected, as they track closely the trends of the Rotterdam jet kerosene spot market, which is subject to daily price movements and follows crude oil prices.

The Office of Fair Trading found that, over time, more than 90% of the variation in heating oil prices was explained by movements in crude oil prices. That is compounded by terminals across the United Kingdom holding stock based on just-in-time delivery to control operating costs. So, if there is a huge spike, we will obviously get caught in it because people are not holding stocks of oil. That impacts on the price during periods of high demand, as was the case last winter, when a significant amount of the annual volume of Northern Ireland's home heating oil moved through the four terminals in a five-week period. The terminals here tried to hold additional stock over the winter period and will absorb that additional cost and not pass it on to the market.

The price of crude and kerosene has continued to rise over the past few years, which has increased the cost of a range of products. For example, the close-of-day price for kerosene on 4 January 2011 was quoted on Bloomberg at \$840 per metric ton, and that rose to \$1,008 per metric ton on 3 January 2012. That is an indication of how things have changed. Taken from the Consumer Council's website, the average fill for 500 litres for the same period saw a rise from £188 to £199. That trend is also reflected across the United Kingdom and, indeed, in many European markets.

As I stated before, the GB and NI oil distribution sector is considered to be competitive and transparent on price. I know that that view is not shared across the Chamber. Some Members indicated that the Northern Ireland Oil Federation has not engaged with the Consumer Council. That is not true. The federation has met the Consumer Council a number of times, and, indeed, I understand, to address that call for more transparency, it has made offers to let the Consumer Council have sight of and go through

its accounts. I have already told the chief executive of the Consumer Council that she needs to engage on that issue to deal with the concerns that have been raised in the Chamber. That offer by the Oil Federation should be taken up.

Regulation of the NI heating oil industry would be a significant departure in policy, not just from the rest of the United Kingdom but from the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, from most European Union countries. In any event, regulation of kerosene distributors is likely to have little impact on the retail price, and that point was noted by industry analysts and the Office of Fair Trading. It is important to remember that 90% of the price is set by crude oil.

The OFT off-grid energy market study, which was published in October 2011, found that the heating oil market in the UK was functioning well for consumers and that Northern Ireland consumers can choose from almost 300 local distributors, a point that many Members made. It suggested that targeted assistance to the most vulnerable is more appropriate and that measures should be addressed at the markets more widely. When Members quote from reports, they should put the quotation into the context of the paragraph from which it is taken. Right around the Chamber, I heard quoted the part from the OFT report that says:

"We recognise that it is an oddity of the NI market that the most common household heating fuel, heating oil, is unregulated while electricity and gas, which are much less common, are regulated."

That is absolutely right. It then goes on to say:

"We also recognise that regulation allows for other interventions, not just price control. For example initiatives to address fuel poverty or raise standards of conduct with respect to doorstep sales"

— a point that Mr Agnew made —

"can be implemented by way of licence conditions. However, these issues do not of themselves amount to a case for sector-specific regulation."

So it is a bit misleading for Members to quote from a document if they do not quote the whole paragraph. It then goes on to say:

"Consumer law offers significant protection from unfair trading – we discuss this in the next section."

It is important that Members set out the whole context of quotations.

The Office of Fair Trading report, of which we have heard much in the debate, found no evidence of competition problems that would require either enforcement of the Competition Act or intervention to regulate prices in the UK heating oil market. We have heard that consumers can choose the best price from at least 10 suppliers in each postcode area across NI, and, in recent years, wholesale heating oil prices have been lower in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK.

6.30 pm

Organisations such as the Consumer Council were keen to ensure that the focus of the OFT study remained on

the distribution sector. I am aware of comments that the OFT had not reviewed the actions of refineries and larger wholesale importers, but the fact is that the OFT was not asked to do so.

Concerns have also been expressed about the price variation across Northern Ireland distributors, and it was suggested that that showed that the market was not functioning competitively. The case is, in fact, the direct opposite. I think that it demonstrates that large and small distributors, with different costs and overheads, need to compete for business, as is normal practice in a healthy market.

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I will if you let me finish this point. I was rather confused by Sinn Féin's press release, which was issued before today's debate. It talks about huge price variations across Northern Ireland but goes on to say that cartels fix the price. Which is it? Are cartels fixing the price, or are there large variations across Northern Ireland? I am confused. Which is the Sinn Féin policy on the oil industry? I would like to hear whoever sums up on the party's behalf state which is the case, because it is important that we understand its position.

Mr Agnew: Minister, you referred to competition working and to the variation in price, but do you agree that it does not work for all and that not every consumer has access to multiple suppliers?

Mrs Foster: Mr Agnew will probably not agree with me, but I do not think that regulation would fix that. There are other ways to deal with that issue. I agree with Mr Lunn's assertion that this is not about a regulation deficit; we are dealing with a debt problem that, regrettably, faces people across Northern Ireland. That is where the issue of the 20-litre drums of oil arises. The oil industry is not at fault for offering those as an alternative. The suppliers are providing a service which, regrettably, is needed at this time.

In January, the oil price watch on the Consumer Council's website reflected a range in published data of £26 for 900 litres. In September 2011, the Republic's National Consumer Agency showed a similar differential of €33 for 1,000 litres across the companies that it surveyed. They welcomed that as clear evidence of meeting their key objective of having a transparent and healthy market.

Before I run out of time, I want to answer some of the questions asked. Mr Flanagan said that he did not think that it would cost that much to bring in regulation. It is likely that the regulator would incur costs of up to £1 million to monitor the activities of around 300 distributors and oil importers. In addition, there would be administrative costs for the Department and probably for the Consumer Council. The local industry, which employs around 10,000, would incur costs to meet the regulatory requirements with which they would have to comply. All of those costs — every single part of them — would be borne by the consumer. Members may not want to speak about that, but they cannot shy away from it. They may think that regulation is the answer; the panacea for all the ills that we face. In reality, that is not the case.

We must, as a number of Members pointed out, think about wider solutions to the problems that we face. There are huge debt problems, which is why, at departmental level, we have invested more in debt advice and are working with

the Department for Social Development on energy efficiency schemes. The Minister for Social Development is also working on energy-brokering schemes. Mr Nesbitt mentioned the scheme involving Kingspan and Carillion. I laughed when he chided me for not knowing the answer to the question. I may not know all the detail or minutiae of every single —

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: Let me finish the point, first. I may not know the detail or minutiae of every single Department, but at least I know what is in my party manifesto.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for giving way. I was chiding Mr McCausland, the Minister for Social Development.

Mrs Foster: If I recall correctly, the question of who would own the oil was asked of me at Question Time.

In any event, I think that there is an issue, and I am not shying away from that. I welcome the debate, which has been useful in allowing us to talk about the issues around regulation. I genuinely hope to find out what Mr McKay meant when he talked about not just price regulation but other elements of regulation. I would welcome hearing his thoughts on that. I am not quite clear as to what else he is talking about regulating. I have certainly referred to licence conditions. Mr Agnew spoke about the level of service that needs to be achieved. The level of service is a simple issue: if you do not like the service that you are getting from one distributor, you can move to another.

It has been a useful debate. I look forward to the winding-up speeches and the continuance of the debate on how we solve not only the problems of fuel poverty but the wider issues that we face.

Ms Lo: I thank all the Members who took part in the debate. The main theme was the fact that the price of oil is pushing many families into fuel poverty. Mr Flanagan said that competition is not working in Northern Ireland, and we need a greater level of transparency. That was mentioned by a number of MLAs. He said that regulation will bring greater consumer protection. Many Members mentioned that issue and said that consumer confidence is needed.

In proposing the amendment, Trevor Lunn said that the motion is unrealistic and that it is worthwhile for consumers to shop around to get a better price. There are about 300 oil distribution companies here, so we have a competitive environment, as was mentioned by many MLAs. He said that there is bound to be a differential on a 20-litre drum of oil, because people are buying a smaller quantity. Economies of scale mean that a bigger quantity would be cheaper. He was talking about more options.

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Lo: No, I am sorry; I have only five minutes. We need to look at other options. Robin Newton said that the issue was a major concern for many MLAs, with constituents knocking on doors about fuel poverty, which many MLAs also mentioned. He spoke about the OFT report and said that there is market competitiveness in Northern Ireland and no evidence of price fixing. He said that 90% of the cost of oil is outside the control of local distributors, which many MLAs also mentioned. Retail and wholesale prices for home heating oil are, in fact, lower in Northern Ireland than in other parts of

the UK. Again, many MLAs quoted that OFT finding. He said that regulation has a cost, which many MLAs mentioned. He said that a 20-litre drum of oil is meant to be for emergency purposes, not to be bought regularly.

Mike Nesbitt spoke about the risk to elderly and vulnerable people. Many MLAs mentioned fuel poverty. He said that people are buying a series of 20-litre drums, which is punitive and expensive for families. He said that, if there were regulation, the focus should be on consumers and making services more consumer-friendly and that the price of regulation should not be passed on to consumers. He supported our amendment and said that there is a lack of clarity and transparency and that the Minister needs to engage with the industry.

Margaret Ritchie urged the Minister to look at regulation and said that, given the fullness of time, natural gas should be extended to more areas in Northern Ireland. She said that DETI has a duty of care to protect consumers, and it is horrible that people are faced with the dilemma of heating or eating.

Paul Frew mentioned fuel poverty. He said that the regulation of the oil industry would not bring prices down, and that it is unrealistic. It may be the opposite: we need to look at all aspects of the causes of fuel poverty and not just blame the fuel industry.

Daithí McKay said that he could not support the amendment.

Mr Speaker: Your time is almost up.

Ms Lo: Gordon Dunne also mentioned fuel poverty and said we needed to take realistic measures to tackle it.

Ms J McCann: Some very valid points were made by all Members who contributed to the debate. As everyone said, the issue is common to all our constituents. It is a very important matter, particularly to families on low incomes, the elderly and the sick, who are the people who suffer most from fuel poverty.

When he opened the debate, my colleague Phil Flanagan said that competition was only working for those who can buy in large quantities. A number of Members said that. It is very important to remember that, although it is possible to get a 900-litre fill of oil, there are people who cannot afford to pay for that all in one go, and therefore have to get smaller drums. That is where the huge cost is, particularly for those on a low income or the elderly.

When we talk about the regulation of the oil industry, we are not just talking about the price of the oil but the service, boilers being properly fitted and other benefits. In proposing the amendment, Trevor Lunn said that the amount of suppliers and the competition that it brings is justification for opposing regulation, but I would say that —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: Yes.

Mr F McCann: You mentioned what Trevor Lunn said. He actually said that it is understandable that people will be charged extra for asking for a 20-litre refill. We need to think of those people most in need. We should be asking the oil companies to ensure that the 20-litre refills are as cheap

as possible rather than supporting the additional money charged that he talked about.

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for that intervention. I agree; and I will say again that the regulation of oil would not just be about the price but about fitting prepay meters, for example, in people's homes so that they can prepay for their oil. It would also mean that people could budget better. We listen to people saying that they are in debt, but they could budget for oil in that way.

Robin Newton said that he did not support the regulation but that he had a major concern about constituents who are in or are facing fuel poverty. He mentioned the cost of regulation, but I believe that there would be longer-term benefits of that cost in what it would give to constituents and families.

Mike Nesbitt did not support the idea of regulation in the motion, and talked about fuel poverty and energy brokering. I suggest to him that we could use the purchasing power of the government estate to broker a better price if the industry was regulated. My colleague Phil Flanagan pointed out that the Ulster Unionist Party had supported the regulation of the oil industry in one of its proposals to tackle fuel poverty.

Margaret Ritchie commented on how she has consistently written to the Minister about the regulation of home heating oil. She made a very important point when she said that we should look at the distributors of oil instead of looking at all the separate suppliers. That was a very valid point, because the fact that there are too many suppliers and not that many larger distributors has been used as a reason not to regulate. Therefore, I think that that was important.

She also made the point that some people have to choose between eating and heating. That was particularly true of elderly people several years ago when we saw a huge increase in energy prices. All of us witnessed constituents coming into our offices in 2008-09 saying that they were actually forced to choose between heating their homes and eating. Therefore, that was a very valid point.

6.45 pm

Paul Frew also talked about fuel poverty, and most Members mentioned the importance of trying to get to grips with that whole issue and of how we can make a difference to it. He said that energy efficiency was important in fuel poverty. Regulation of the oil industry could bring it into line with the electricity and gas industries and could help with energy efficiency measures. Again, it is important to see the whole issue.

Mr Speaker: Order. There are a number of conversations going on across and around the Chamber, especially between Back-Benchers. If Back-Benchers need to talk, they really should do it outside. It shows total discourtesy to the Member who has the Floor. *[Interruption.]*

Order. Allow the Member to be heard.

Ms J McCann: I am starting to get a wee bit paranoid.

I do not think that anyone touched on social tariffs, but they have been mentioned in the Chamber before. That is a very important issue. We have electricity and gas regulators, and, if we also had an oil regulator, it would be much easier for us to try to push forward social tariffs for low-income

families, particularly those with young children, the elderly and people who are disabled.

Daithí McKay said that there was a need for regulation and that many different groups are calling for it. He also said that it would bring transparency across the industry. He cited how Age Concern outlined the situation, and he also mentioned how the Consumer Council suggested bringing forward proposals. He said that a total of £580 million was spent on oil in the North of Ireland in 2010. That is a huge amount of money, but none of it goes back into the community. Some of the money from gas and electricity suppliers goes back in to communities through metering, and they also donate money to charities, for instance. Maybe if the oil industry were regulated, the situation would be different.

Gordon Dunne mentioned that the price of heating oil was outside the control of the Assembly and the Executive. He cited fuel efficiency measures, but, again, I will say that, if the industry were regulated, we would have a better sense of working with the oil companies to make such efficiency measures happen.

Michael Copeland said that the cost of heating oil had risen by 63% in the past two years. I think he said that he agreed that regulation needed to be considered, but he said that it was not the be-all and end-all. I do not think that anybody in today's debate was trying to say that it was the only thing that needed to happen or that it was the be-all and end-all in trying to combat fuel poverty. However, it was discussed as one method that could be looked at.

George Robinson said that some vulnerable households have to buy small drums of oil because they cannot buy a big fill of oil in one go, which means that they are getting a lot less heat for their money. That is very true.

Steven Agnew said that only two suppliers replied to the Office of Fair Trading. I think that that was a good point. He made the very important point that, if something actually happens to your electricity meter or Phoenix Gas meter, the supplier will come out and fix it. However, if something happens to your boiler, you have to fix it yourself. People just do not have the money to do that. That would be another benefit from regulation that would not be just about price fixing. It would also be about having your boiler serviced and the transparency that is involved in that.

The Minister talked about fuel poverty, and she mentioned that 90% of the price of oil is determined by the crude oil prices. That might be the case, but the hikes in gas and electricity are put at the door of the rise in crude oil prices as well.

If we could look at social tariffs and energy-efficient schemes, and if we could have all of those thoughts of regulation, I think most people would see that that would be beneficial in the long term.

When we had the big freeze in December 2010, the increase in the cost of oil was 10 times that endured by gas customers. If you are saying that the price of oil is determined by the price of crude oil, which, in effect, it is, why did oil go up so much compared with gas and electricity?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms J McCann: I ask Members to support the motion. I think it is beneficial for everyone in the long term.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 50; Noes 28.

AYES

Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr W Clarke, Mr Flanagan, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Flanagan and Mr McKay.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern, Northern Ireland's over-reliance on our unregulated home heating oil market; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage further with the Office of Fair Trading, the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator, whilst also encouraging pre-payment schemes operated by local councils, with a view to addressing consumer concerns.

Adjourned at 7.03 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 February 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Rates (Amendment) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Rates (Amendment) Bill [NIA 2/11-15] do now pass.

Before providing an overview of the Bill's content, I would like to take the opportunity briefly to thank Members for the almost unanimous support shown for the Bill's passage through the Assembly. I would also like to thank, once again, the Finance and Personnel Committee for all the work undertaken to date on the consideration of the underpinning policies. I fully acknowledge that, without that assistance, we would not be where we are today. I also thank the Chair and the members of the Finance and Personnel Committee for their considered evidence taking and detailed scrutiny of the policies underpinning the Bill. The Committee staff also provided an invaluable role in progressing that work and liaising with my officials. I very much hope that what has been a productive working relationship between my Department and the Committee will continue as the associated subordinate legislation progresses through the House.

I also extend my thanks to the Speaker's Office and the Bill Office particularly for the assistance and support provided to my officials. This has all played no small part in the smooth running of all the Bill's stages through the Assembly. It is greatly appreciated by my Department and officials and is to be commended. I also thank the officials in my Department who worked very hard on the Bill. Some comments were made about slow progress. However, given the detail and quality of the work and the effort that went into the consultation document, even those who were not happy with the content of the document itself did not complain about how thorough the work for it had been. I know that officials worked long hours on this, and I thank them for that.

Subject to continued Assembly support, I hope that we will be in a position to have the package of commercial rating measures in place for April, thereby ensuring that much-needed support can be provided to small businesses. As I said in earlier debates on the Bill, I, along with many other Members, would have preferred it if it had been possible for the Bill to progress by normal means; unfortunately, that would have meant that the support for ratepayers that is to be funded through the large retail levy would not be in place for the new rating year, which begins in April 2012. In ensuring that help can be made available within months

rather than at this time next year, I thank Members for the support that has been shown for both the accelerated passage of the Bill and its content.

Although I will not go over the old ground that was covered at Second Stage, suffice it to say that the Executive and I consider that the measures that are being provided for are vital during this period of economic downturn. While many small businesses are struggling, many of our largest retailers showed healthy returns over the Christmas period. The key measures in the Bill will ensure that steps are taken not only to provide support to small businesses but to brighten up and revitalise the core shopping areas in our towns, city centres and out-of-town stores. Let none of us doubt that these are genuine measures that the Executive have brought forward to help out vulnerable small businesses and to breathe life back into our towns and city centres. This is a genuine attempt by the main parties in the Assembly to address the problems that we continue to see day and daily affecting our constituents.

The commercial rating package is also intended to complement and supplement the work that my ministerial colleagues are taking forward. That work is aimed at helping businesses, and it includes the work that DEL and DETI are taking forward on training and employment and DSD is taking forward on regeneration. The Bill and any associated subordinate legislation should not be viewed in isolation; rather, they should be viewed as part of the wider package of measures that the Executive are taking forward.

This is important legislation that goes some way to addressing the imbalance in the commercial rating system at this time of economic downturn. The Bill will ensure that around £5 million is made available through the large retail levy to provide assistance to approximately 8,300 additional small businesses. Both those measures are time-bound to end in March 2015. Through the expansion of the small business rate relief scheme, the Executive hope to further encourage the right conditions for a sustained recovery.

The Bill also contains important measures aimed at improving the run-down and vacant parts of our towns and city centres and shopping areas. Ratepayers will be afforded the opportunity to brighten up window displays of vacant units without incurring full occupied rates. A one-year concession will also be introduced that will afford 50% relief for the first year of occupation of empty retail units that have been vacant for at least a year.

Clauses 4 and 5 make amendments that will take effect during the next revaluation exercise, which is scheduled for 2015. That clarifies the legislation and ensures that it

reflects current custom and practice. All other things being equal, that should not adversely affect the amount that ratepayers will otherwise pay.

Those are the main measures being taken forward through the Bill, and I look forward to Members' support in ensuring that it clears its Final Stage. The debates on the Rates (Amendment) Bill have been interesting and constructive, and I hope that there is more of that to come. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr D Bradley (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ar son an Choiste Airgeadais agus Pearsanra, cuirim fáilte roimh an chuid dheiridh den Bhille Rátaí (Leasú). Aithním go bhfeicfidh imeacht an Bhille tríd an Tionól na míosúir atá ann a chur i gcrích go tráthúil ar an chéad lá d'Aibreán 2012; agus go rachaidh siad cuid den bhealach leis an ualach rómhór rátaí atá ar ghnólachtaí beaga a mhaolú in am seo na géarchéime eacnamaíochta.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I welcome the Final Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill, recognising that its passage will lead to a timely implementation of the measures on 1 April 2012 and will go some way to reducing the disproportionate rating burden on small businesses in this exceptionally difficult economic climate.

The Department of Finance and Personnel originally briefed the Committee on the consultation proposals on the large retail levy on 8 June 2011, advising that it intended to seek accelerated passage for the Rates (Amendment) Bill.

D'aithin an Coiste ón tús an phráinn a bhí le tacaíocht a chur ar fáil do ghnólachtaí beaga. Agus tar éis tréimhse comhairliúcháin agus scrúdain ar na moltaí polasaí, bhí an Coiste sásta tacú leis an Aire agus é ag iarraidh cead ón Tionól dlús a chur le himeacht an Bhille tríd an Tionól. Thuig an Coiste leis gur míosúir ghearr-théarmacha iad seo agus go dtiocfaidh deireadh leo ar 31 Márta 2015.

The Committee recognised from the outset the urgent need for an intervention and, following a period of consultation and scrutiny of the policy proposals, agreed that it was content to support the Minister in seeking approval for the Bill to proceed by accelerated passage. The Committee was also mindful that these are short-term measures that will end on 31 March 2015.

The Chair addressed the detailed provisions of the Bill at Second Stage and Consideration Stage. I will take this opportunity, in his absence, to highlight the key provisions as well as the ongoing work that the Committee will be concerned with as a result of the Bill.

The Committee undertook significant evidence-gathering exercises in relation to the proposals and made recommendations to the Department, the majority of which were accepted. The Committee published those recommendations on 7 December 2011 as part of its report.

The primary purpose of the Bill is to implement a levy on the largest retail premises to fund an expansion of the small business rate relief scheme. The intention of the scheme is to alleviate the impact of the rates burden on small businesses and, in turn, help to support their growth and sustainability. There was a generally positive response during the consultation to the aim of supporting small

businesses through this current downturn, including that from the large retailers. There was widespread recognition of the pressures faced by smaller businesses and the overall contribution that they make to the wider economy.

The implementation of the levy and the targeting of the large retail sector alone was probably the most contentious aspect of the Department's proposals. The Committee heard from large retailers and representative organisations about the negative impact of the levy on their businesses. Following the evidence from stakeholders, the Committee recommended that the funding burden should be spread more equitably and identified options for increasing the number of large business sectors that would fund the expanded rate relief scheme. However, DFP did not favour extending the scope of the levy, arguing that it would create uncertainty and not align well with other important Executive policies.

In addition to the main provisions of the Bill, I note the later ministerial amendments tabled at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. The Committee was briefed by the Minister on 11 January on a proposed ministerial amendment to provide for a continuation of empty property relief. The Chairperson confirmed the Committee's support for that amendment at Consideration Stage and acknowledged that members supported the measure, which will apply for 2012-13 only and is intended to get empty shops back into use.

10.45 am

I also note the amendment tabled at Further Consideration Stage to provide clarification on the 50% relief on long-term empty retail premises where the property is first occupied during the 2012-13 rating year. The amendment also seeks to clarify the definition of retail and prevents relief being awarded to properties that were last used for e-commercial distribution. The Committee did not have sight of those amendments when it last met. It has not, therefore, taken a position.

In supporting the implementation of the Bill, the Committee continues to be mindful of the recommendations that it made with regard to the ongoing work to be taken forward by the Department. The Department is to carry out an evaluation of the existing small business rate relief scheme. It will make any necessary changes to the scheme in time for rates bills in 2012-13. Similarly, with regard to ministerial amendments, it will be important that there is an evaluation of the effectiveness of measures relating to empty property relief and an assessment of uptake and the extent of any displacement and of whether the Bill is proving effective in getting empty shops back into business.

The Committee has stated consistently the need to ensure that there should be no delay in implementing the 2015 rate revaluation and that all necessary preparatory work is carried out well in advance. The future work that surrounds the Bill is essential both to provide for the effective implementation of its provisions and to ensure that they will be required on a temporary basis only. The Committee will continue to engage with the Department in monitoring the outcome of that work.

The Committee is grateful for the insights and opinions of those who responded to its evidence-gathering exercise. They were invaluable in informing the recommendations

brought forth by the Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I thank DFP officials for their positive engagement and the timely assistance that they provided to the Committee throughout the development of proposals. I also want to acknowledge Committee members for giving their time to consider in detail the policy proposals that lie behind the Bill.

Chomh maith leis sin, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom buíochas an Choiste a chur in iúl do Chléireach an Choiste agus dá fhoireann; ba mhór an chabhair a thug siad do bhaill an Choiste agus iad i mbun fiadhnais a bhailiú agus tuairisc ar an Bhille a ullmhú.

I also want to place on record Committee members' thanks for the help, assistance and diligence of the Committee Clerk and his staff in ensuring that all necessary arrangements were made for the hearing of evidence and for their work in preparing the detailed and comprehensive report on the Bill.

A Cheann Comhairle, ar son an Choiste Airgeadais agus Pearsanra, molaim cuid dheiridh an Bhille go foirmiúil.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support formally the Bill's Final Stage.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to its Final Stage. I appreciate that an awful lot of work has gone into it. I do not want to regurgitate absolutely everything that Mr Bradley said because my Irish definitely could not be interpreted. This speech, probably, would have been half as long. However, I want to discuss some aspects of the Bill.

Yesterday evening, I had occasion to speak with a gentleman who retired from owning a small shop. Unfortunately, he has been out of business for just over a year. A small business is now keen on and looking at his shop. That small business indicated to him that what pushed it over the edge to decide to take up his offer is that this legislation will allow it to come in and try the business for a year. Ultimately, it will mean that he will not have to pay a percentage of the rates this year, which is a plus for him. That shop is on a high street in south Antrim. So, I can tell you that that is one thing that I feel will really be of some benefit.

Some of the evidence that was brought forward to the Committee on other aspects of the Bill has been mentioned. The Committee took on board the representations that were made, some of which were on the large retailer levy. There was a step back from the 20% position on that to the 15% position. I welcome that because I appreciate that not all the large retailers make large profits. Some might, but one or two are having difficulty. The Committee took that on board, recognising that there is concern about it.

The extension of rate relief for small businesses with a rate valuation of £5,001 to £10,000 will bring an awful lot more businesses under the umbrella of the 20% reduction. That will be nothing but positive in helping them towards being sustainable. However, I am not talking about those businesses making large profits. Some people out there believe that all these businesses make large profits, but some are actually just washing their face and barely existing. This relief will allow them not only to stay open but to keep more people off the dole queue. That has to be recognised. I appreciate that there is a time factor and that this will be in place only until 2015, which is when the new rating valuation will have been completed.

I took comfort from the Minister's comments yesterday that he will check and observe how the Bill works through to ensure that it ticks all the boxes and that, if there are areas about which he has concern, he will bring it back. I support the Bill, and I hope and pray that it will go through. The economy deserves it. Small retailers and our town centres will benefit from it. The SMEs that our economy really relies on will take advantage of it, and it will at least help them through what is an extremely difficult economic time.

Mr Cree: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Final Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill. The stages of the Bill have come thick and fast due to accelerated passage. However, I am satisfied that I have had some opportunity to highlight points that the Ulster Unionist Party wanted to raise, and I have sought clarification from the Minister on several issues.

The fact that amendments were tabled by the Minister at both Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage proves that the Bill was very much a work in progress as it passed through the House. If we are totally honest, we must say that it could have done with the increased scrutiny and timescale afforded to the normal passage of a Bill. However, as has been mentioned, it was necessary to have the Bill completed in time for the incoming financial year. We accepted the accelerated passage of the Bill in the circumstances. Indeed, the Minister informed the Finance Committee of his intentions in person. However, I reiterate that it is not the ideal position to be in. I seek reassurances from the Minister that, in future, he will do all that he can to bring legislation before the House in adequate time for normal passage.

The Ulster Unionist Party is fully behind the rationale for the Bill, and we will support it today. The Bill will have a positive effect on small and medium-sized businesses and will help to rejuvenate town and city centres, which are struggling. However, as I said previously, the Minister needs to consider carefully the power in clause 1 that enables his Department by order subject to affirmative resolution to modify the definitions in paragraph (3). The Ulster Unionist Party believes that that gives the Minister the ability to broaden the levy in the future beyond the large retail stores to which it solely applies as things stand.

Making the levy applicable to utility companies was considered by the Finance Committee. It is an example of how paragraph (4) could come into play. If there is a way of disallowing utility companies from passing on the cost of the levy to the consumer, it must be explored. That is just one example of what the Ulster Unionist Party thinks that the Minister should look at.

I hope that the Rates (Amendment) Bill will help to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy through the promotion of small and medium-sized businesses. I also stress that it should be considered as a suite of policies to do so.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the Bill as it reaches its Final Stage. Over the past number of months and, more specifically, within the past several weeks, Members have had the opportunity to inspect and evaluate the principles and practicalities of the Bill. It has been interesting to witness the developments and changes that have been evident in the Bill since its inception in the summer of last year.

As was said, the Bill will primarily provide for extended rate relief for small businesses, which will be achieved through a supplementary regional rate to be levied on selected large retailers. In its motivation, as opposed to its method, we cannot question the intent of the Bill, which is to alleviate economic pressures in a timely manner, hence the added requirement for accelerated passage. Some of the most significant developments to arise from the Bill are the conditions that have been added to the legislation following wider consultation on the proposals and input from the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The addition of the revised rating criteria for unoccupied properties will ensure that vacant properties that wish to use their window displays for non-commercial and non-political purposes can continue to benefit from the 50% reduction in their rates bill. Furthermore, the primary amendment tabled by the Minister last week and subsequently supported by the House will enhance the revised criteria by providing a temporary rate reduction of 50% for new owners of retail premises that were previously unoccupied for one year. It has been particularly encouraging to see the Minister realise just how much those vacant units impact on our town centre and city centre economies. In that regard, I warmly support the proposals that have been laid out in the legislation, which should serve to stimulate and revive our waning high streets. Although primarily aimed at enticing businesses to fill vacant units, thus creating new jobs and investment opportunities, the additional proposals also give a renewed impetus and incentive to town and city shopping precincts that hope to become more attractive to consumers by promoting civic pride and economic growth.

I am confident that the majority of Members, particularly those who have contributed to the debate over the past number of weeks, will welcome and support the Bill. As was touched on, the overriding principle in all of this should not simply be what is best for our economy but what will help to regenerate our townscapes and cityscapes. It is on those grounds that I lend my support to the Bill in its Final Stage. I appreciate the efforts of the Minister to balance opinion and for his foresight in this instance, and I take comfort in knowing that the provisions will be kept under annual review to ensure that they are as effective as it is hoped they might be.

Mr Givan: I welcome the opportunity to make a few comments at Final Stage. I commend the Minister for the way in which he has taken the legislation through the House. He encountered some resistance from some of the larger retailers, but he responded. There has been a reflection of that in the final outcome of the levy to be applied. Ultimately, he stayed the course and delivered legislation that will be good for our economy. Credit should go to him for the way in which he has taken it forward.

When I worked for the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), we campaigned on the extension of the small business rate relief. I recall having meetings with the then Finance Minister, Nigel Dodds, at which we argued for such a scheme to be brought in. At that point, in the previous term of the Assembly, the Executive responded, and a small business rate relief scheme was brought in. It is the envy of those across the water in England.

11.00 am

I know that the Federation of Small Businesses ran a campaign in England using a postcard showing Northern

Ireland with the legend "Wish You Were Here" because of the rate relief scheme that this Executive had introduced and because of the automatic nature of that relief. You do not need to apply for the relief to be granted; it is an automatic reduction. We know that when you need to apply, the uptake is not always the same, and the Executive have taken the approach that it should be an automatic scheme. I think that what we are doing in Northern Ireland is an example that the rest of the United Kingdom can look to as a way of introducing a similar scheme.

A couple of particular points are to be welcomed. In my constituency, and in a number of areas in core urban centres, not just Lisburn, there have been derelict, vacant properties. The 50% reduction in rates for the first year of occupancy, where a property has been vacant for a year, is a very valuable tool for attracting people to come back to our town centres.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for giving way.

Obviously, many constituencies have suffered greatly over the past couple of years with the economic downturn, and what the Minister proposes will be broadly welcomed. Does the Member recognise that, of itself, this is not a solution? It is something that can lead to a solution if others join in. Will he join with me in urging local councils and the local business community to be innovative in getting new businesses started? This measure creates the opportunity: it is a seed that will allow others to germinate.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for that contribution and he makes a valid point. The Executive are taking forward an initiative to rejuvenate our core urban centres, but we appeal to the business community as well. People will come to us and say: "Rates is one issue, but rent is another." Landlords need to be looking at what they charge and come up with different methods for attracting people back into core centres. Local councils can be involved in that as well. They can play their part in providing a stable financial environment when they set rates. I declare an interest: I am pleased that Lisburn Borough Council has struck, for the seventh consecutive year, a rate below the level of inflation. The Executive played their part by freezing the rates last term and they did the same this term, and councils also must keep an eye on the financial burdens that they put on their ratepayers, and particularly on the business community.

The 50% reduction scheme is welcome, and the opportunity for shops to revitalise their front windows without being penalised is also beneficial. Where there are a number of vacant properties, it is not beneficial to those still operating to have the neighbouring ones ending up in a very derelict condition. Therefore, if there are ways to improve the situation without penalising the vacant properties, those are to be welcomed. This initiative, combined with others by councils and the local business community, will be a major step forward in trying to tackle the problems of our core urban centres.

I support the motion.

Mr Wilson: I thank all the Members who have taken part in the debate and have been supportive of the Bill, not just in the Final Stage, but throughout the process. We have now reached the end and Final Stage of what will be an important measure.

However, I take the point that the Member for Lagan Valley raised. This is not some kind of panacea for dealing with all the ills that the retail community faces in Northern Ireland. It is one part of what the Executive seek to do to help businesses. As I said in my earlier comments, it is only part of a range of measures that are being carried out by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD). The rating measures add to a lot of the work done by the Executive.

An important point was made by Mr Poots. The Executive cannot carry the whole of the local economy through their actions. Indeed, if our talk of rebalancing the economy is to mean anything, there is a need for those in the public sector, the private sector and particularly retail to look for innovative ways of improving footfall in town centres, of attracting people into shops and of being more competitive. There is a big role for the private sector to play, and the attitude that is sometimes abroad in Northern Ireland that the Executive can do something to cure all ills worries me. The Executive cannot do that, and we would not want an economy that is so totally dependent on what government does that the private sector does not carry some of the burden. As I said, if we are to talk about rebalancing the economy, there must be an effort by, and innovation and new thinking in, the private sector. It must also be prepared to take risks.

I want to turn to what Members said. Mr Bradley spoke on behalf of the Committee, and I thank him for his support. He mentioned a number of issues, including extending the scope of the scheme. I explained in previous debates why some of the Committee's suggestions — its desire to extend the scheme to hotels, banks, utilities and manufacturing businesses — were ruled out. There is no point in the Executive's contradicting one policy with another that does the opposite.

Mr Bradley also talked about the ministerial amendments at Further Consideration Stage. However, as those amendments arose from the Bill's Consideration Stage, there was not time to discuss them with the Committee. They were technical amendments, and I hope that I explained why they were necessary. Mr Bradley also mentioned the revaluation exercise, and I share the Committee's view on that. The scheme is a temporary measure, and I hope that the uneven playing field that was created over the long period in which there was no revaluation in Northern Ireland will be sorted out through the revaluation exercise that should be in place by 2015. Therefore, such temporary measures should no longer be needed to create an even playing field.

Mr Girvan rightly pointed out that we listened to those who expressed views during the consultation. The size of the levy was dropped from 20% to 15%, and we introduced provisions for the dressing of shop windows and for 50% rate relief on empty properties for the first year that they are occupied. That indicates that the consultation process was genuine and that we have listened. As I know he always has his ear to the ground, I am glad that he has reported favourable responses to the provisions in the Bill and has indicated that people are talking about doing what we aimed to achieve through the Bill.

Mr Cree returned to the point that he has made on a number of occasions about accelerated passage and the opportunity to raise points. He has had every opportunity to raise any points that he wanted to raise and did so in an effective manner. He talked about the Bill being a work in progress as it went through the Assembly. However, any Bill is a work in progress, and it does not matter whether accelerated passage is used or whether it goes through the normal Committee Stage. The point of scrutiny, however it takes place, is to allow for something that is put forward to be reshaped or amended if necessary. The amendments that I tabled during the Bill's accelerated passage were what Members would expect. Indeed, I hope that Mr Cree will accept that I listened during the debates; hence the changes that were made.

Mr Cree said that he would have liked more of an opportunity to raise particular points. However, I note that — I am not too sure which parts of the Bill he found to be unsatisfactory — he did not propose any amendments, as other Members did. The Member for North Antrim took that opportunity, but Mr Cree did not propose any amendments during the passage of the Bill. If he had concerns, he certainly had the opportunity to raise them and to make amendments. The fact that they were not made shows that he was just having a little poke because he did not like the accelerated passage process. I do not think that he can claim that he was, in any way, disadvantaged in raising points or making amendments during the process.

Mr Cree talked about the power in clause 1(4) to broaden the levy and said that he hoped that I would take the opportunity over the coming year to look at broadening it to include other sectors. I want to make it clear that that power does not enable us to broaden the levy to other sectors; that would be ultra vires. It allows us to make changes to the valuation limit, for example, but we cannot broaden the levy to include other sectors that have not been included in the Bill.

Judith Cochrane referred to the significance of the wider provisions of the Bill. She is quite right. The window-dressing measures and the 50% rate relief for the first year of occupation of empty properties will have quite a significant impact on getting a bit of life into shopping areas. Mr Givan mentioned the impact that the Bill would have on his constituency and said that it was not purely an answer in itself. I have accepted that.

We have come to the Final Stage of the Bill. I hope that the Assembly will recognise that it is an important measure, one of many that the Executive are seeking to introduce to deal with the current economic downturn. It has been somewhat controversial. I think that a lot of the froth and bubble that there was around the time of its introduction will prove to be just that. We will not see massive disinvestment as a result of the Bill. We will not see businesses folding or massive redundancies as a result of it. I believe that most of the large businesses that will be affected by the Bill will be able to absorb the rate increases, and once a revaluation comes out in three years' time, the situation will be regularised once again.

I believe that we have done something in responding to a particular sector of the economy, and I trust that the Assembly will give the Bill its full support.

Mr Speaker: Before I proceed to the Question, I advise Members that section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 applies to the Bill. Therefore, the Bill requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Amendment) Bill [NIA 2/11-15] do now pass.

11.15 am

Private Members' Business

Housing: Surety Bonds

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

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of housing developments where roads and footpaths remain unfinished and sewerage systems have not been completed to a satisfactory standard, despite developers having entered into surety bonds under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980, the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and any preceding legislation; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to carry out a review of the bond system in relation to roads, footpaths and sewerage systems in new developments and to review when a bond can be invoked by the relevant authority to address this ongoing problem.

The genesis of the motion lies in complaints that I have received from residents living in new and, in some cases, not-so-new housing developments in my constituency. I have no doubt that those experiences will resonate with other Members. Although some blame for the current situation may lie with the financial crisis, in a number of cases, the developers have been reluctant to complete the work. We need to remember that the purchasers bought houses in good faith and for their value, and they relied on surety bonds in respect of roads, footways and sewerage systems.

Essentially, a surety bond is a guaranteed agreement between the developer and the appropriate statutory body that the developer will build sewers, roads and footways to a specified standard, which that body agrees to adopt. The agreement is guaranteed by a third party, usually a financial institution, for an amount that will cover the cost of the work. Should the developer not carry out the work, the statutory body has the power to enforce the bond, carry out the works to provide roads, footways and/or sewerage systems and recover the costs from the surety. That system means that money is available for the developers to carry out the work, and the public end up with roads maintained out of the public purse.

The agreement for a drainage system to be adopted by a future date is made under article 161 of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. Its roads and footways counterpart is made under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980. Those agreements are registered in the statutory charges register at the Land Registry and not removed from it until the statutory body has issued the relevant final certificate.

I will not go into the detail of the process of reductions in bond surety and the technicalities required because my time is limited. However, having read the developers' packs and other guidance issued by the relevant bodies, I am

clear that, throughout the respective processes, the onus is on the developer to keep things moving. The Minister acknowledged that fact in answers to my questions for written answer about the adoption of sewerage systems. Fundamentally, that is where the problem lies, and a greater role should be given to other key parties, such as the statutory agencies and residents.

In the Strangford constituency alone, 63 road bonds are in place for houses that have been occupied for more than a year. I will give a few examples along with the dates of the bonds: for Teal Rocks in Newtownards, the dates are 1995, 1996, 1998 and 2003; for Lansdowne Road in Newtownards, 1998 and 2001; and for Bramble Wood on Old Shore Road, Newtownards, the bond dates from 1992, which is some 20 years ago. For Castle Lane in Comber, the bond is from 2002; Spinners Court in Comber, 2001; Bartleys Wood in Ballywalter, 1995 and 2005; and the bond for Briar Park, Ballywalter dates from 1996. Bonds for Portview Heights, Portavogie are dated 1993 and 1997; and Long Island Drive, Kircubbin has bonds from 1996, 1998 and 2002.

You will recall, Mr Speaker, that a road cannot be adopted until the sewerage system has been adopted, so some of those may be due to problems in complying with those bonds. It simply cannot be acceptable to have to wait 20 years with no road adoption, and I am sure that that is reflected across Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, the information provided by the Minister, which he obtained from Northern Ireland Water, was not as detailed. I was informed that 322 agreements were in place throughout Northern Ireland, but the figures for Strangford alone could not be provided. I was disturbed that the Minister could not tell me which bonds had been in place for more than one year, three years and five years. Surely, such figures should be easily at hand to ensure the proper management of the system. A resolution needs to be found for those many householders who wait endlessly for action.

Although there are enforcement powers in the respective legislation, there is an apparent reluctance to use them, perhaps for fear of the damage that it would do to developers' credit ratings or possibly because of the absence of information on what bonds exist.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Miss M McIlveen: I really do not have a lot of time.

A number of possibilities could be considered: the introduction of a mechanism by residents to mandate the statutory authorities to act; a more tightly regulated system to ensure that residents' rights are more highly respected; and notification to Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water when a request to open insolvency proceedings is lodged against developers or when an order is made against them.

Section 180 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 in the Irish Republic empowers residents to compel the local authority to adopt where that has not happened after seven years. Such a change would have assisted enormously my constituents in New Court, Portavogie. Built 13 years ago, and despite surety bonds, that development's roads, footways, sewers and pumping station are yet to be adopted. There is a problem, in that the longer the bond lies, the less it meets the value of work needed to make the

roads, footways and sewerage systems of adoptable standard. That is not the fault of purchasers of such properties, who buy them on the strength of the bonds being in place. Giving that power to residents is appropriate. A period of five or seven years is not an unreasonable length of time to give a developer to complete the appropriate phase of work to which the bonds apply. It is sometimes suggested that purchasing solicitors should retain a portion of the purchase price until the adoption process is complete. However, not all have done or will do that. In any event, that would be a belt-and-braces approach to what is currently the Department's responsibility. The Department is a party to the agreement, not the purchasers or their solicitors.

That leads me to my second suggestion: a more tightly regulated system. To introduce that, however, resources would need to be put in place. It was evident from the answers to my questions to the Minister that there is a paucity of information, particularly on sewerage systems, and that considerable work that must be paid for is needed in that area. However, such information is vital to ensure the smooth running of the service. The lack of information is what prevents proper regulation of the process, and it should not simply be developer-driven. A review could and should assess and address weaknesses in the current system and, hopefully, create a focus on ensuring that the work is carried out.

The third suggested change relates to developers who have been or are in the process of entering receivership, administration or, in the case of individuals or partnerships, bankruptcy. At present, there is no requirement to inform Roads Service or Northern Ireland Water of that, and there may be a considerable delay before those bodies are made aware of such proceedings. Again, a minor amendment to legislation might resolve that. As I said, bond agreements are registered on the statutory charges register and are therefore available to anyone who would properly have carried out the appropriate search prior to bringing insolvency proceedings. To require notification would not impose any unreasonable burden but would assist the statutory bodies and, in turn, the residents.

There may be other suggestions. I would be grateful if, in carrying out any review as requested by the motion, the Minister consider what I propose. Although I appreciate that tighter regulation may require the injection of resources, which may not, in the short term, be something that the Minister considers a budgetary priority, proposals that give residents the right to mandate the relevant statutory agencies to enforce the bonds, and their seeking legislative changes in respect of notifying bond-holding bodies of insolvency proceedings or decisions, are reasonable. Confidence needs to be re-established in the system. Residents who are suffering from a flawed system need protection. As more problems are exposed, a do-nothing approach is not appropriate. The whole system does not have to be dismantled, but changes are needed to make it fitter for purpose.

That concludes my remarks on the motion. However, I put on record that I understand that the Regional Development Committee is launching an inquiry into the issue. I look forward to its findings and to contributing to the debate.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I welcome the opportunity to speak today

as Chair of the Committee for Regional Development, both to advise the House of the Committee's inquiry into the matter and to express my, and the Committee's, deep concern at the number of housing developments in which roads, footpaths and sewerage systems have not been completed to a satisfactory level. Although we empathise with the developers who have found themselves victims of the current economic climate, as a Committee we deplore those who do not give an undertaking in the form of a secured surety bond to ensure that such amenities are fit for purpose.

I advise the House that the Committee for Regional Development takes the matter very seriously, and has, just this week, begun an inquiry into unadopted roads in Northern Ireland. For the purposes of the inquiry, we have defined an unadopted road as one in which a street planning function has been exercised, a bond has been placed under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 and the Department is not satisfied that the street has been sewered, levelled, paved, channelled, made good and lighted to a satisfactory level.

In order to ensure that the roads are not left in a substandard condition and to protect purchasers of properties in such developments, developers are legally obliged to provide a security bond before work commences on a development. In the event that such roads are not completed, the Department has the power to call upon the bond in order to bring them up to an adoptable level. However, with the number of roads currently unadopted in Northern Ireland, the Committee is extremely concerned that the legislative processes are not being implemented effectively in order to eradicate the problem.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: I have not really got time to give way. I apologise to the Member.

An added difficulty is that the security for those bonds has, in many cases, reverted to the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), making the process of exercising security against them even more difficult.

In addition, the Committee recently heard of a case in Northern Ireland in which a development was completed without a fit-for-purpose sewerage system. After Roads Service officials refused to accept the road and system on to the network, residents discovered that the developer did not have a security bond in place, and, furthermore, that the acting solicitor had failed to inform purchasers of the roads issue and the fact that a bond was not in place, thus leaving residents with the bill for bringing the system up to an adoptable standard. I hope that that case is an exception to the rule. However, it highlights weaknesses in the system, which, the Committee is adamant, should be uncovered and resolved. Those are major breaches of regulation, and the House must do all that it can to ensure that regulations are in place to ensure that such occurrences are avoided.

The main aims of the inquiry are to identify the extent of the problem and the costs associated with bringing such roads up to standard, and to bring a clearer definition to the process required to have a road adopted by Roads Service. The Committee seeks to identify all stakeholders in the process who have a statutory duty to inform homeowners of the situation around unadopted roads in their development.

Furthermore, the Committee's report seeks to review the current legislative processes in place in Northern Ireland to ensure that they meet all EU and other jurisdictions' standards and policy requirements and to benchmark the Northern Ireland legislative processes against those currently in place in the UK.

In effect, security bonds exist as a means of financing the completion of a road or sewerage system where a building contractor has failed in his or her duty to bring it to an adoptable standard. There are too many cases of roads being left in a state of disrepair, and the issue needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Committee for Regional Development is willing to take the lead on the matter, and I hope that the Minister, in supporting the motion —

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

Mr Spratt: — will take heed of the inquiry and allow the Committee to first report its findings to the House. The Committee for Regional Development supports the motion.

11.30 am

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I support the motion on behalf of my party. I thank the Member, Miss McIlveen, for bringing this important issue to the House. As the Chair of the Committee said, and as I know as a member of the Committee, it is an important and serious issue.

Like other Members, I can cite examples in my constituency and town where residents live in developments that are often more like building sites than places of which a resident community can be proud. This is not a recent problem associated with the collapse of the property boom, although the major contraction in the housing market has adversely affected the completion of housing developments. However, the Assembly's Research and Information Service information pack references a report carried out in England and Wales in 1972 that showed that the problem was as bad then as it is now.

Many of the people who bought new houses in these developments were young people buying their first home. We all know how excited one can get in looking forward to moving in and making a house your own place, and so on, but in many cases, purchasers overlooked issues such as roadways, footpaths and other facilities. I suppose all of this got lost in the boom years when builders constructed and sold houses as quickly as people could buy them, often without proper bonds being in place. Legal people and estate agents got on the train — I suppose you could call it the *gray train* — without fully checking products out for their clients.

To go some way to resolving the problem, buyers must become aware of all aspects of buying a house in a new development. Solicitors and estate agents must act responsibly, and, at the very least, ensure that a surety bond is in place to guarantee that work will be finished. If no bond exists, they should outline to their clients the potential pitfalls of going ahead with a purchase.

A number of weeks ago, NILGA made a presentation to the Committee for Regional Development, and, as the Chair said, the Committee agreed to hold an inquiry into unadopted sites. Indeed, there was a notice in 'The Irish News' yesterday asking the public to make submissions to

the inquiry, and I welcome the Committee's swift response to this serious issue. The inquiry should be robust and call as many stakeholders as needs be. We need a long-term solution to resolve the problem for the future.

The issue is not as straightforward as NILGA's presentation highlighted. There are two issues: dealing with current developments that are not finished and are unadopted by local authorities; and ensuring that future developments are finished to the required standards. That will mean that the authorities, including the Planning Service and Roads Service, must monitor housing developments to ensure that they are covered by an up-to-date bond for satisfactory completion of essential services and amenities.

In recognising the difficulties in raising bond-type sureties, it might be an idea to consider the range of available mechanisms, such as cash deposits, to ensure that the problem does not happen in the future. As Members said, the Minister has an important role to play in the process. I ask the House to support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the debate and the Committee for Regional Development's inquiry. For most people, including me, a house purchase is the biggest investment that they will make in their lives. For many of us, buying a new house will be a one-off experience. You may move home a number of times, not always to a new house, so to a certain extent, purchasers can be vulnerable.

I suggest that people take one piece of guidance, which is to ensure that they have good legal advice with reference to the difficulties that have been experienced with unconnected sewers. If a solicitor had not pointed out such a problem to me, I would find out what liability he or she held and would advise constituents to chase up such an issue with the Law Society, because someone should have been aware of it.

In a normal market, most developers are helpful to their purchasers. They want to have a good name and to have repeat purchasers in the future. Indeed, shortly after I got married, I bought a new house and found the developer to be very helpful. However, there are some rogue developers who scrimp and cut corners and avoid finishing roads. I suggest that the Department needs to intervene earlier when things start to go wrong to ensure that bonds are drawn down earlier.

There is a particular problem at the moment with the decline in the housing market and the fact that fewer houses are being built, which means that there is an extended period before a site is completed. There is the added problem of builders going into receivership and questions about who owns properties, and it appears that that is lengthening the time before bonds can be brought down.

Many issues flow from unadopted roads. Sewers may not be properly designed or connected, but who is responsible if there are problems? There is the issue of the roads, footpaths, finished surfaces and street lighting, which everyone would wish to have finished off. There is also the issue of councils being unable to clean streets because of rough surfaces. There is the risk of car damage, and there can be difficulties collecting bins. I have also come across the issue of it not being possible to connect new public transport routes because sizeable spine roads are incomplete. Therefore, there is a wider interest in trying to improve the situation.

In the early 2000s, I was involved in getting the Prospect area of Carrickfergus adopted, as homes were completed there several decades ago but the area was unadopted. It took me two years of lobbying before we managed, with help from Roads Service, to move the thing forward and draw down some £48,000 that was sitting in bonds to upgrade the sewers and make the necessary adjustments. Risks occur the longer time goes on, and, in that instance, there was a difficulty as some people had built walls, which affected sightlines. If the matter had been completed sooner, that problem would not have manifested itself to the same extent. In that instance, there were also issues of unadopted sewers, and sewers were flooding because there was a need for larger capacity. That happened in private property, and it was a complete nightmare for the people who lived in the area. Thankfully, the issue was resolved, but it was very stressful.

I turn now to Larne west. Hundreds of homes have been built there, yet the link road is incomplete, which means that the connection to the A2 is not there. Other pressure exists on a number of other routes. The Linn Road and Donaghy's Lane, in particular, service that large area, and the vision of green corridors, play areas and cycle networks has not been developed. Therefore, we need to look more closely at what needs to be developed following impressions given in area plans etc.

In Carrickfergus, there is also difficulty with a new spine road. I am thinking specifically of the St Andrew's Link into the Woodburn area. Ultimately, the area plan will have shown a link to Slow Field, but, again, that has not been completed. The planners allowed much development to occur. A section was developed late. One of the most concerning aspects of that road is that it is to be developer led, but some of the spine road is not included in the area plan and, therefore, cannot be developer led. Therefore, we are allowing hundreds or even thousands of houses to be built without the spine road being completed. That is an area involving planning, and it needs to be addressed.

Mr Byrne: I, like others, welcome the debate and congratulate the proposer for bringing the issue to the House. It is fair to say that it has vexed many residents and district councils for a long time, and they have felt powerless to deal with the issue.

The Planning Service grants planning permission for developments, but other statutory agencies, such as Roads Service, street lighting and the water service, also have responsibility and input into the services on those sites.

The road bonds, however, should provide the safety net in trying to resolve the problem. The sad reality is that over 3,000 unadopted roads in Northern Ireland had surety bonds in place. There is something wrong if Roads Service does not feel fit to trigger the bonds or try to get remedial action.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Byrne: Yes. I will let you in on your third attempt.

Mr D Bradley: As they say, Mr Speaker, third time lucky, and persistence sometimes pays off. I thank the Member for giving way. He will probably notice from the research that there are about 174 unadopted roads in the constituency of Newry and Armagh, which, of course, the Minister shares with me. Such a situation leads to problems with road

safety, street cleaning, refuse collection, lack of grit boxes, etc. Does the Member agree that one of the problems is that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) does not have sufficient staff to enforce the existing regulations and that, if there were an increased number of staff, a lot of those issues could be dealt with, and dealt with more speedily?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Byrne: I cannot comment directly on the number of staff that Roads Service has in relation to the issue. All I can say is that I know Roads Service staff in Omagh, and they are very good at liaising with developers and residents. The problem is the lack of joined-up legislation. The result is that, very often, Roads Service has to wait for quite a time before it can invoke or trigger the bond. There seems to be a disconnect between the roles of the local authority, Roads Service and the water service, and that causes massive frustration to residents. As other Members said, many residents have been living in estates for 10 or 20 years, but neither the roads nor sewers have been adopted. It is a chicken-and-egg situation, and it is completely unsatisfactory.

Mr Jimmy Spratt, the Chairman of the Committee, very much led the way in our seeking a Committee inquiry. For the first time, a concerted effort is being made to try to tackle the problem: the Committee will take evidence, hear what the stakeholders are saying and see what can be resolved.

I pay tribute to the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), which has carried out a lot of work on the issue, made a number of presentations to the Committee and produced an authoritative report. It is obvious that councillors are getting an earful from residents. They bring the issue to their local authority — the district council — but it is powerless to do anything about it. The only thing that residents feel very angry about, however, is the fact that, once they have been in a house in a development for only about a month, the first bill to arrive on their doorstep is the rates bill. They say, "Here I am living in a private estate, and I purchased the house in good faith. I have no adopted roads or sewers, but the first bill is from the local authority."

The Planning Service has to have a role. If it issues planning permission for a development, it has to have a follow-on role. I hope that the Minister for Regional Development, who, I think, cannot provide all of the solutions, will, perhaps, help to co-ordinate with other Departments and the district councils to make sure that we have better joined-up legislation. We may have reached the stage where the gaps in the legislation are the problem. That is where the Committee inquiry will, I hope, help to inform the Assembly and all of the stakeholders of the best way forward towards having a co-ordinated and concerted effort.

I want to refer to another group of roads. Many residents have lived for many years in estates and on roadways for which a surety bond has never been put in place. One such place is Nancys Lane in Strabane. My colleague Michaela Boyle will be aware of it. No one developer built all of the 22 houses on that road. Some were built by people who purchased an individual site.

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

Mr Byrne: The time has flown. I mention that example, because many residents on that road are victims of circumstances. They did not buy a particular house from a particular developer; they may have bought an individual house from someone who built a single dwelling. There is also a terrace of four houses, which was built about 50 years ago. I see a real problem for those houses or estates for which no surety bond has ever been put in place. I support the motion and the sentiments involved.

Mr Dickson: I, too, thank the proposer of the motion for the opportunity to debate what remains a very difficult situation, which is well known to many of us who are were councillors.

11.45 am

Substandard and unadopted roads, footpaths and sewerage systems are an increasing problem for residents across Northern Ireland. Recently, the news media drew our attention to a new development in which the sewers were not connected and the bond was not in place. In addition to new housing developments across Northern Ireland, there are historical unadopted roads across Northern Ireland, whether from the west of Larne, as Mr Beggs referenced, to an old development in Whitehead called McCrea's Brae, to a new development in Greenisland called Farm Lodge Stables and to older developments in the upper part of Jordanstown and Newtownabbey, all of which pose their own unique problems. That leads to a wide range of problems, including devaluation, hazardous road surfaces and environmental health issues.

A thorough investigation is required to evaluate the exact cost, the consequences and the scale of the problem. We know that there are 2,700 unadopted roads in Northern Ireland, but even that figure is in doubt. We do not actually know the scale of the problem.

Mr Spratt: During discussions in Committee, we learned that only 44 surety bonds are being discussed by the Department. Does the Member agree that that is a cause of concern?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you. Indeed, I agree with Mr Spratt. That gives the Committee great cause for concern. Clearly, there is a disparity between local knowledge and what the Department is telling us.

Those who live in affected housing developments are all too aware of the consequences, as they have to put up with substandard surfaces and are forced to drag bins to the nearest public road simply to get them emptied. As the Chair of the Committee said, as we discussed the issue, it became clear that a thorough review of the adoption process is needed. I am pleased that the Committee has called for an inquiry and that we are now putting that in place.

A number of key points need to be considered. First, there has to be an examination of the role of the key stakeholders in the adoption process. We are told that developers are required to consult Roads Service prior to building and to provide a guarantee bond, but that does not happen in many cases. This suggests a breakdown in communication between different agencies; therefore, it would be prudent to examine that area and look at the possibility of introducing protocols outlining the role of each agency in the adoption process and how they are to engage with one another.

Another concern is that local councils do not hold information on property management companies that are no longer in operation. It may be some months before officials become aware that an individual or company has gone into insolvency. Perhaps we need a mechanism in place to compel companies or administrators to inform local councils immediately upon insolvency.

We also need to look at our legislation. It appears that we are somewhat ahead of our counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. However, as the proposer said, we are behind the Republic of Ireland, which has statutory provisions in place empowering residents to compel a local authority to adopt a road. That raises the question of who has the power to compel Roads Service to invoke the bond. I understand that there is no mechanism to do so, and that needs to be looked at. We also need to examine the time frame for such an evocation to ensure that developments are not left in the same state for years and years and to allow for flexibility, pragmatism and common sense. For example, we would not want to see bonds invoked for half-completed developments, only to see construction resumed at a later date and road surfaces damaged.

A document that Road Service provided to the Committee stated that the underlying principle is that a sufficient bond must at all times be made available to cover the cost of outstanding works. With that rationale, the money should always be there, yet we know that it is not. Obviously, that is not the case. We need to look again at how the value of the bond is determined. Currently, it is done by the relevant authority and is based on the costs it would incur to complete the work. As noted in our discussions in Committee, costs may increase significantly in a case where the road sits uncompleted for several years.

Finally, we need to heighten awareness among buyers of the issues around adoption, as Mr Beggs suggested. Solicitors have a duty to make sure that their clients are aware of those issues. It is imperative that buyers know their responsibilities.

Unadopted roads, footpaths and sewers are another example of the continuing economic crisis we face. It is an issue that we must tackle head on, and that is why I welcome and support the motion.

I would like to take my last moments to ask the Minister to ensure that, while the Committee is conducting its inquiry, the Department will not take its foot off the pedal when dealing with these matters. This is not an excuse for the Department to do nothing.

Mr Moutray: This is an issue that I have been extremely exercised about recently, and one that has become more prevalent, particularly owing to the adverse effects of the economic downturn on the construction industry. Many developers have, unfortunately, gone into liquidation, causing major problems with developments that have been built but not finished to the required standard. Today's debate, which I welcome, draws to Members' attention the growing problem of unadopted roads and footpaths and unfinished sewerage systems in developments throughout Northern Ireland.

In the Upper Bann constituency, we are plagued with this problem, with scores of sites remaining unfinished. My office has been inundated with complaints regarding this. Although Roads Service's southern division is active

and helpful in endeavouring to complete the works by issuing article 11s as a last resort, it is an extremely slow process, and the required financial amount to complete a site is often not covered by the surety bond paid initially by the developer. Indeed, in some instances, no surety bond has been paid prior to the commencement of the development. The inconvenience caused to residents is significant, with uneven road surfaces, raised manholes, no surface for emptying bins, no grit boxes, often no street lights and, in some cases, poor sewerage systems. That is totally unacceptable to the residents, who bought their homes in good faith and, quite often, at a high price, on the understanding —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Moutray: I will.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that solicitors who were involved in such transactions without bonds in place have a responsibility, and that those who may have purchased in that situation should pursue the matter?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Moutray: I do indeed agree with the sentiments expressed by the Member.

A case in Lurgan was raised with me recently in which a constituent fell over a raised manhole and sustained a break, for which he had to receive hospital treatment. In today's society, that is unacceptable. I firmly believe that this is an issue that needs to be addressed urgently. Therefore, I agree with the motion, which:

"calls on the Minister ... to carry out a review of the bond system in relation to roads, footpaths and sewerage systems in new developments".

Furthermore, I believe that that should be done with a view to implementing more stringent and sensible rates on surety bonds prior to developers commencing a development. Continued monitoring of the situation should be carried out, with revised bond figures issued yearly, given the fluctuation in prices.

Craigavon currently sits in the top four council areas affected by this blight. Unfortunately, the invoking of a bond at present is the last resort by statutory authorities. Although I understand that a reasonable time must be given to developers, I believe that five or six years of unfinished roads, sometimes longer, is unacceptable.

In days gone by, residents were able to obtain a rates reduction. However, that was abolished some time ago. Therefore, residents are paying for services that they are, quite simply, not getting: for example, no street lighting or having to take bins to the end of the development because a bin lorry will not enter the development due to the health and safety risk. The local authorities will protect themselves, but there is no such option for the residents who have to use the development roads every day. There have been complaints about car damage because of the roads and raised manholes, all of which is an additional expense on the residents in the development, which, quite frankly, they do not need.

Ultimately, there is a wide debate to be had on whether or not the public purse should or can bear the costs of

completing developments that are found to be in this situation. I believe that there is an additional need for more stringent rules and regulations to be in place to start with, and that there should be closer collaboration between the Planning Service and Roads Service in this regard, particularly when planning applications have been approved. Unfortunately, in the past, a percentage of developers have just proceeded without adhering to the law and submitting a bond to DRD. If planning and DRD were to collaborate, that would assist in preventing such happenings and would create a joined-up approach.

In conclusion, I believe that there is a need for a standardised agreement and wording for bonds and a more consistent charging mechanism. DRD, therefore, has a duty to look at this with haste. I welcome the Committee's inquiry into this important issue, and I look forward to having an input to it.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt ar son an rúin seo inniu. I speak in favour of the motion. As elected Members, we are all acutely aware of the unadopted roads and unfinished developments in our own constituencies. Indeed, all who have spoken today have listed those. I could do the same and spend the next five or even 10 minutes listing the 150 or so examples from my constituency, but I will resist the temptation to do so.

I welcome the motion moved here today. Its remit could have been wider, but that may be covered by the inquiry in due course. Incomplete developments and ghost estates are symptomatic of the malaise in the wider economy. Many who purchased dwellings in the first phase of development, and, occasionally, in the subsequent phases, must rue their decision and must be disillusioned that something so bright and promising has turned out to be a serious disappointment. Furthermore, there is no prospect of moving elsewhere; falling house prices and negative equity have left many trapped in these situations.

Give the demographic of numerous of the new developments — many of the houses have been purchased or rented by young families — the lack of open spaces and the unfinished roadways and pavements cause their own problems. In some cases, developers have been required by law to install traffic-calming measures, but, in some areas, that simply has not happened. Children are playing on uneven and unfinished surfaces with no traffic-calming measures in place — you can make up your own mind about that. Street lights, sewerage and water services are not always up to standard in some areas. That is indeed an intolerable situation.

Damage to vehicles has been mentioned, and there have been personal injuries. Of course, local authorities cannot access developments for the purposes of street cleaning or refuse collection, causing further hardship for people there. I am thinking of a young mother who, every fortnight, has to take two bins some 700 metres up a steep incline for collection. Damage to vehicles on adopted roads due to delays in the maintenance programme or problems such as raised ironwork is another issue that Roads Service should address, although it is not relevant to the motion. The onus should not be on the injured party to follow up on that.

The motion calls for a review of the bonds system, and a review will, hopefully, relieve the situation that currently pertains in over 2,700 cases. The principle of caveat emptor is simply not good enough for people who have purchased a finished product in an unfinished environment and who have to wait many years for that to be addressed. There has been some suggestion that five to seven years would be a reasonable period, but I am not so sure about that.

It is incumbent on us to ensure that the upcoming inquiry brings together all the relevant stakeholders: the local community; residents; the development and management companies; the banks; NAMA; local authorities; DRD and other Departments; and housing associations, etc. In the short term, we want to look after the safety and security of construction sites. That should be a paramount concern. Other issues are the ongoing provision of bonds and securities for the completion of projects and, of course, engagement with local authorities. In the medium term, all access concerning roads, footways, pathways, etc, should be investigated. There must also be provision of water and sewerage services, fire hydrants and amenities such as open spaces and playgrounds. There is a need for long-term planning, and developers and others must realise that properties no longer have the value that they once had, are not selling and may need to be reconfigured.

There are design issues. Site resolution plans, or SRPs, by developers and the financial sector are essential for the satisfactory completion of outstanding works and must be encouraged and developed. Monitoring of unfinished developments must also be a priority, and it is essential that Planning Service and Roads Service are aware of the bonds, etc, that are in place and that they adequately cover the outstanding works.

I concur with the motion. I look forward to the Regional Development Committee's inquiry, and I urge all those who have an interest in the issue to make submissions to the inquiry. I support the motion.

12.00 noon

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to comment in the debate. I thank my two colleagues for bringing the motion to the Floor. It comes at an opportune time, given the very challenging housing market that we are experiencing.

The condition of many partially completed developments across the Province, including those in my constituency, remains a source of constant concern for residents, which is a point that other Members have referred to. In most towns in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, there are problems with developments that are either half-finished or only partially commenced. The problems range from those directly referred to in the motion, such as raised manhole covers, inadequate or non-existent street lighting and sewerage network inefficiencies, to growing problems with the way in which sites are left dormant, such as security fencing that is either missing, toppled or bent beyond use, topsoil heaped against residents' fences, large excavated holes filled with rainwater — I could go on.

Residents have the right to feel aggrieved at the situation, especially when we look at the circumstances in which they find themselves. Many bought properties in the developments at a premium as prices simply kept creeping up, and, with that in mind, developers were taking their

time to finish developments, given the week-on-week rise in prices at that time. The bubble has burst, and many residents now live in a development where their property is finished but a decaying building site lies a few metres away and poses a hazard to young children. I know that to be the case, because I have visited a number of them and have listened to the concerns of residents who are, indeed, right to complain bitterly about the situation.

With many buyers obviously still reluctant to enter the market, I believe that we could be looking at the problem for some months ahead, especially since many of the original developers have gone bankrupt. However, there is an increasing responsibility on Roads Service to address the outstanding issues and to ensure that residents have a safe environment in which to live. The situation at a number of locations across Newry and Armagh is far from ideal. I have been in contact with Roads Service regarding the issue of utilising road bonds in order to have works, such as street lighting installation, completed and roadways finished.

The situation is not improving with the passage of time. I have a major concern about the speed at which existing bonds and arrangements can be invoked. It seems to take for ever to get work completed when invoking a road bond. Given the economic circumstances and the large number of developments where problems exist, I fully support the motion in calling for the Regional Development Minister to look at the matter.

The Health and Safety Executive has a greater role to play. It should play a more proactive role by visiting the sites affected and ensuring that site security is maintained. There are too many half-finished developments around the Province where access is wide open, which is a huge safety concern for parents with young children. There is much room for improvement. I would welcome the Minister's views, and I would particularly like to hear how he intends to address the matter. I support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: Given that I am the Minister's Assembly Private Secretary, I am not going to speak on roads issues but on something that is very pertinent to the debate, namely environmental issues, which one or two Members touched on. I know of three areas in south Antrim that have major problems because of unfinished roads. In every case, the issue is with private roads, which I will go into in more detail in a second.

I congratulate the Members who tabled the motion and, in particular, the Committee on its inquiry. As we heard from everyone today, it is essential that we resolve the matter as quickly and as thoroughly as we can.

When I explored the problem at Bush Manor in Antrim, I, as ever, went round and round in circles before it was eventually explained to me that the developer and the planning authority had agreed to shared private roads, where there were sometimes three houses and sometimes eight houses. Those roads are not built to Roads Service standards; they do not necessarily have the right widths, depths or even drainage, and they are not covered by bonds. However, because they are outside the Roads Service design and standards, they are not a Roads Service issue. As I said, they were agreed by the planners with the developers. Therefore, the onus falls on the Minister of the Environment,

who is responsible for planning, and, to some extent, the Justice Minister.

There is no means of forcing the finishing of a development when a developer has gone bust, as the next developer who takes on a different patch will not finish private roads somewhere else. The administrator in the Bush Manor case was not interested in anything other than getting another patch finished and sold for whatever price they could get.

In Bush Manor, 349 smart and well-to-do houses were to be built, but only about 180 were finished. There were 11 private roads built to the wrong standards — 11 private but shared drives left with rough edges and holes and falling apart. There was no means for people living off those roads of getting them finished.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that, as well as getting them finished, the issue of who will maintain them arises? That may become an even bigger problem, as difficulties may arise over decades.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. Certainly, there is a difficulty with getting them finished and deciding whose role it is to maintain them. I was going to touch on that when I spoke about the legal issues and the lawyers. I will deal with that now. If the road had been finished to the right standard, most of the people living off it would have been happy to look after it. However, the road never got to the point of being finished, and the lawyers had not pointed that out to the families affected. So those people were left with an unfinished road and a much bigger bill for getting it finished as well as legal fees.

There is another downside in all these cases: the management companies were not set up until the roads were finished. In many cases, there were people with a good house on the main adopted roads that had been finished who could not sell their house because the whole development had not been finished. As the pressure due to the economic climate grew, more and more people wanted to either let or sell their house. Those people found it hard to do either, and we have been left with a major problem that we need to resolve. They also could not sublet their house, and things have got worse and worse for them. So I am pleased to see the Committee taking the issue on board.

We really need to find a system in which it is easy to pull a group of solicitors together and get them to take a case forward. That is important because, on a road with nine houses, the owners of which can all have different solicitors dealing with the matter, the cost of getting those solicitors to talk to one other, resolve the way forward and agree on finishing the road is extremely high. I ask the Minister to speak to the Justice Minister to try to find a way forward in addition to speaking to the Environment Minister.

I thank the Committee for tabling the motion. The Ulster Unionist Party fully supports it.

Mr Molloy: A Cheann Comhairle, go raibh maith agat. This is a very important and timely debate. I thank the proposer of the motion.

The economic decline has been one of the big causes of ghost estates, but the problem of roads being left unfinished

and not being adopted by Roads Service has been a major one over the years. The reluctance of Roads Service to lift bonds has also been an ongoing problem. For instance, I have a letter from the Minister saying that a bond would be invoked on 1 December 2011 in Ballyronan. However, the local division of Roads Service said that it would not invoke the bond until April because the contractor would be busy with end-of-budget wind-ups until the end of March. Therefore, the residents affected have been left without a proper road surface. Who is the boss in that situation? We have had that problem with Roads Service over the years.

I will mention one particular estate, as others have done: Gortview in Coalisland. We saw on television recently that sewers there had not been connected to any main sewer. They had simply been run out of the houses and into a manhole in a field, and the raw sewage was flowing down the field with no control. The developer then went bankrupt, and the residents are now left in a dilemma, wondering who will make the situation right. The receiver is in place but is saying that the houses are sold and are not their problem. Again, Roads Service and the Departments are not willing, at this point in time, to lift bonds to complete the work.

This is also a cross-departmental issue, because various Departments are responsible. Roads Service may be responsible for roads, water and sewerage, but the Department of the Environment and local government enforce the rules and make sure that all actions are taken to get a development correct from the start. So, it is important that the different Departments are brought in, and I welcome the DRD inquiry into the issue. However, it is also important that the inquiry is cross-departmental, as that will make sure that other aspects of building control and environmental health are covered.

Mr Boylan: I support the motion, and I think that there have been some good contributions to the debate. However, surely the Member agrees that the bonds should be enacted on a phase-by-phase basis so that the developments are finished on a phase-by-phase basis, especially the sewerage and water elements. Also, a building control officer could play a role in the environmental elements of the developments.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Member for his contribution. That is a very important point, and building control has a key role. My understanding is that building control is notified by the developer at the start of work on the development. After that, however, building control basically has to be invited in to ensure that the property is developed properly. I would like to see building control have the authority and power to go in and inspect.

In the case of Gortview in Coalisland, the sewers are connected to the houses, but it is not certain whether they are correct. However, they run out of the houses and into a manhole. Nobody is taking responsibility after that stage, and building control has no responsibility for that next stage of a development. Environmental health and the Environment Agency have a responsibility to ensure that proper discharge content is in place. It is not in place, yet no one seems to be willing to take action to make sure that it is.

We need a collective view from building control, environmental health, Roads Service and the various

agencies. Local government has an important role to play, but it needs to have the power to invoke surety bonds and to make sure that all the connections and elements are in place.

A simple example is the energy certificate. They are advertised for homes that have very high energy efficiency rates and tick all the boxes. However, no one ever inspected the houses to make sure that that energy certificate is correct. People need to know such information before they buy houses. Mr Beggs raised the issue of good, proper legal advice. That seems to be difficult to find. There seems to be a situation in which one party's solicitor will sign up on the promise of getting the other solicitor to forward the final building control certificate to them. That may not be in place, and I cannot understand how anyone can sign up to a mortgage or how a mortgage can be given without the final certificate being in place, especially as it ensures that a house has passed building control and is eligible to be lived in. So, we have a question about the legal people and how they can sign up to a mortgage and a contract or instruct a resident to buy a house and sign a contract that leaves them not knowing whether they have a main sewer or a certificate. There is also a question mark over how people do not have a final building control certificate that ensures that the house is up to standard and can be lived in, which is the situation in this case. Building control identified 38 faults in one house, some of which were important and related to health and safety issues connected to the heating, oil and insulation.

It is important that the DRD inquiry goes across the broader stream and brings in local government, environmental health, building control and the other agencies that are involved.

12.15 pm

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, support the motion and congratulate Miss McIlveen on bringing it to the attention of the House. As can be noted from the contributions so far, it is a concern throughout all constituencies and council areas.

Mr Moutray commented on Upper Bann and highlighted specific areas of concern. I am grateful to the Assembly's research officers, who have been able to distil for us what that means for Upper Bann. In Craigavon, there are 141 unadopted roads, which is one of the highest numbers in any council area. Banbridge has 50 unadopted roads. In the Craigavon Borough Council area, 14 housing developments have gone into liquidation or administration. There are two such developments in Banbridge. As many Members noted, the fact that many developments remain unfinished is not just a result of the boom-and-bust years; it was always the case that some developers were most reluctant to live up to their obligations to homeowners and, indeed, to the Department with regard to finishing roads, lighting and sewers to adopted standards.

At this stage in the contributions, it is difficult to say something new or different because concerns and problems are common throughout constituencies. I know, for example, that, in Kiln Lodge in Lurgan, there has been an issue with open trenches. Cables for electric wires were still exposed. As elected representatives, my council colleagues and I have had to fight for a long time with developers and, indeed, with Roads Service for any enforcement action to be taken.

Although we know that enforcement action is a last resort, I must say that, in many instances, Roads Service is most reluctant, for whatever reason, to take that action.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Would she consider inviting the Minister down to see a particular area? The former Minister, Conor Murphy, visited Kircubbin in my constituency. In no time at all, a problem there was solved. That is an invitation to the current Minister. Hopefully, he can come up to the mark.

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

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for that useful information. The challenge has now been thrown out to the Minister, who, I am certain, will receive numerous invitations from every council area. He may bring a few magic wands with him on his travels.

I note from the reply to AQW 3903/11 from Mr Roy Beggs that open space actually falls within the remit of Roads Service with regard to certain surety bonds. I found that interesting because it has been an ongoing problem in some parts of the central Craigavon area that developers have used open spaces as parking lots for their mobiles, workers and, indeed, construction materials. They have failed to finish off those open spaces. I want to learn more from the Minister on developers' responsibilities with regard to the establishment and ongoing maintenance of open spaces. We have difficulties with that issue. In Bells Row Court in Lurgan, for example, there is an issue with the maintenance of the grass area, which has become unsightly. It is a matter of great debate between Craigavon Borough Council and Roads Service. I am grateful to the council because it actually maintained the area last year, albeit for a short period. Lawyers who advise councils are most reluctant to tell them to pick up what they perceive to be Roads Service's responsibility. There is a great need for greater co-ordination across councils. Some Members suggested that a task force be employed. Mr Dominic Bradley, for example, has said in the past that building control, the Health and Safety Executive and Roads Service section engineers should work together with council officials on those matters.

I do not want to say much more. A lot of ground has been covered. I certainly endorse Members' contributions to the debate.

Mr Speaker: Order. The debate will continue after Question Time at 3.00 pm, when the Minister will respond. The Business Committee has arranged to meet upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the first item of business will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.19 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Molloy] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Environment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 3, 8 and 9 have been withdrawn and will require written answers.

Motor Insurance

1. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to ensure fair rates of motor insurance for drivers. (AQO 1240/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question, which is very relevant, given that we need to bear down on living expenses in a time of need. Government really needs to jump over some fences to bring that about. I take a twin-track approach to the matter. On the one hand, as Members will be aware, the Executive have already agreed to a road safety Bill. By improving road safety, you may improve the situation with insurance premiums. Beyond what the Executive have already endorsed, a series of further proposals will be brought forward over the next number of weeks.

The twin track is that, three weeks ago, I met the Association of British Insurers in London, and I challenged its chief executive about the higher premiums in the North, especially in rural areas. The association agreed to work with me over the next five months. I hope that the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Consumer Council will also work with me over the next five months to identify all possible measures that can bear down on insurance premiums in the North so that a more equitable outcome can be created, especially for our rural dwellers.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a Aire. I thank the Minister for his response. It is a massive issue, especially for young drivers who have recently passed their test. Even in our constituencies, some people may pay £1,000 or £1,500 more for premiums than those in a neighbouring area with a different postcode. So, it is a massive issue, and I appreciate the work that is being done. Has there been any talk about younger drivers, especially young female drivers, who seem to be particularly disenfranchised by the costs that some insurance companies charge?

Mr Attwood: I acknowledge the point about young drivers. I express my appreciation to the families and young people who participated in the recent series of 'Crashed Lives' advertisements on the TV. Those are very powerful. I was at the launch, and it was a privilege to hear their stories, traumatic though they were, given the serious injuries and deaths suffered by young people and the impacts that families suffered as a consequence. Those messages will be a material factor in furthering the strategy to reduce road deaths and serious injuries, which has been successful, especially in the past two or three years.

In my work with the various partners, including the Association of British Insurers, we will interrogate the 17-to-25 age category in particular. On the one hand, that is where the highest premiums are, but, on the other, it is where the highest risk is. It is a proven fact that 20% of newly qualified drivers will have an accident within two years of qualification. We need to identify what can be done on road training, road safety and driver licensing to impact on that and to create an argument with the insurers that they should drive down cost. However, the insurers have a responsibility too. There should be more competition and more insurance companies in the North. The insurance companies should have to justify much more robustly why the premiums are as they are. That is the purpose of the intense work that is being done with them and others over the next five months. Arising from that, I hope to come back to the House with hard outcomes that will drive down the high cost of the premiums.

Ms Lo: The PSNI estimates that there are 35,000 uninsured drivers here. We are all paying for them, yet we still do not have an integrated computer system in Northern Ireland that links driving licences and insurance. The other parts of the UK all have that computer system. Will the Minister consider making such an improvement?

Mr Attwood: Nobody will deny the value of continuous insurance enforcement, as they have in Britain at the moment. We have the legislative cover to do that. We have it as an aspiration in our road safety strategy. However, there is a consequence of going in that direction: it is most likely to happen as a requirement of the integration with Swansea of services provided to car owners in the North. There are issues around that. I met Mike Penning, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport, in London three weeks ago, and I outlined to him very firmly my concerns about an ongoing review of the potential for the integration of services in the North. It may, on one hand, deliver better services and continuous insurance enforcement; on the other hand, however, it could have consequences for jobs in the North of Ireland, including Coleraine. I made my concerns very clear to him and outlined my proposals for how we could provide services in the North beyond what we already do. Let us have continuous insurance enforcement, but there are job risks around it.

Mr Campbell: Further to the Minister's previous answer, will he assure those who work in County Hall in Coleraine, who have the capacity and skills to deal with motor licensing issues, many of which arise as a result of accidents and injuries, that they will be at the forefront of his mind?

Mr Attwood: I very much give that reassurance. That is why, as soon as I came into this job, I met Mike Penning in London. I have been in correspondence with him since, and, as I said, I met him again three weeks ago. He has made a decision that will see the potential loss of 1,000 jobs in parts of Britain because of the integration of services in Swansea. I wanted him to understand that I was opposed to those job losses and that there were services that our workforce in Coleraine and elsewhere could provide. Part of that work responsibility could include the difficult job that we will have in 2014 of managing foreign road haulage lorries and other vehicles coming into the North across the border. I made the case that the jobs were needed now and in the future and that I would not tolerate the short-termism of the

British Government, which sees integration as a mechanism to reduce costs irrespective of the jobs outcome.

Mr Kinahan: Are the data on the scale of insurance payouts and a breakdown of what is in those payouts widely available, or are we putting something in place to make sure that they become widely available?

Mr Attwood: That is a matter more particularly for the Minister of Justice, and I will raise it with him. The debate in the Chamber yesterday produced a wiser outcome than might initially have been the intention behind the motion. There are issues around the number and value of claims in the North. Insurers say that those and other factors lead to increased premiums. We need to reduce the number of accidents that give rise to claims, and that is what we are doing. We also need appropriate measures rather than reckless ones that jeopardise the welfare of people who claim compensation arising from accidents. We need proper, proportionate measures to manage the claims system in the North. That is something that the Assembly and the Minister of Justice will look at. I have written to the Minister in that regard.

Planning: Councillors

2. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the role of a councillor in the decision-making process when Planning Service powers are transferred to local councils. (AQO 1241/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for the question. As I have indicated to the House, this is a critical matter. Given that we are now moving to implement the review of public administration (RPA) and that the single biggest transfer of function will be on the planning side, we need to ensure that, come 2015, the planning system that has been devolved to local councils is fully fit for purpose. In particular, we need to move from a situation where, historically and legitimately, councillors have made planning representations, to one where councillors become the planning authority. That cultural, structural and systems change will be very important. In the near future, I will outline how we will work with local councils and councillors to build up the capacity on both management and elected sides to ensure that the role of the council as a planning authority matures.

The role of the councillor in the decision-making process will be vital. Councillors will make key decisions in local development plans, be heavily involved in the new community planning function, receive recommendations and decide the vast majority of planning applications. A small number of decisions will be taken centrally for strategic and economic reasons. Councillors will also have a range of other functions in respect of conservation areas, enforcement, tree preservation and so on and so forth. Given the scale of those responsibilities, the ethical regime that I intend to put in place will legislate against abuse and wrong practice and encourage best standards.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Given the proposed new role for councillors, does the Minister accept that councillors need special training to deal with that situation?

Mr Attwood: There is a deeper principle in Mr Irwin's question. Given the complexity around RPA and the issues

therein, including the functions that will be transferred, I am minded to provide training not just to councillors but to management. I am also minded to deploy a wide range of pilot schemes to test, in real time, the functions that will be transferred to councils in order to ensure that, when the councils are reorganised — I have a view on that that has not prevailed — they deliver efficiency, effectiveness and value for money and live up to the expectations of the ratepayers. Critical to that will be training for councillors. Although the Executive have decided — I agree — that there will be no contribution to RPA costs from central government, there will be contributions in kind, including through councillor training.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers until now. When will the Minister be in a position to give us the timetables for the detailed outline of the review of the planning reform process? When will he be in a position to outline the checks and balances that will be built into that planning process and are key, integral and important in it?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for that question. Let me first confirm that, as Members are aware, the Executive have endorsed my proposal to bring forward certain elements of reform in the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 into the life of the planning system in advance of RPA. Consequently, the planning system will be remodelled in respect of a number of critical areas — appeals, enforcement and timeliness — in the current period to ensure that it becomes more fit for purpose and that which is then transferred to the councils is proven to work.

Let me also confirm that there will not, however, be transfer of planning functions until 2015, when the councils go live. Part of the reason for that is that, given the profile of planning and the potential of issues around it, I need to ensure that there is an ethical framework of councillor standards and that all the other systems of checks and balances, including proportionality when it comes to elected positions within the council, committee memberships and call-in procedures, are in place. Consequently, there will be no transfer of planning powers until those systems and structures are in place. That will give everyone — in particular, minorities — confidence that, when councils make decisions, whatever those might be and including planning, they are in the public interest and not in any partial interest.

2.15 pm

Mr Dickson: In making the change towards planning decisions by local authorities and councillors and given the previous mistrust of councillors in making planning decisions and the fact that councillors are often vocal critics of the Planning Service without accountability, has the Minister considered the introduction of third-party right of appeal?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for that question; he captures some of the sensitivities and risks about the transfer of planning powers. Councillors will have to learn what Ministers are learning now. There is a difference between being in government, be it local or regional, and being in power. The more the Assembly and the Executive are in power and the more councillors demonstrate the wise use of power in their current and future functions, the better served our communities will be. Having the power to make

development plans, to have community planning and to make decisions in the vast majority of planning applications really will test the mettle of councillors. I agree with the broad thrust of that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Illegal Dumping

4. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline his Department's powers to require the removal of waste which has been illegally dumped on agricultural land. (AQO 1243/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I can confirm that the current powers that fall to central and local government are captured in the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The order provides for the powers on waste that the DOE has centrally and the local councils have locally. Article 28 of the order gives limited powers to councils, and much more extensive powers are provided under article 29, whereby one or the other can direct keepers of waste to take it to a location. That power is not often used, but that is the power. I look forward to the Member's supplementary question.

Mr Wells: The Minister is aware of a disgraceful case of illegal dumping in the Downpatrick area. It led to a prosecution just before Christmas, and those who were responsible were fined a total of £21,500. The Minister could send out a clear message to those involved in that irresponsible activity and demand that they take every brick, stone, piece of concrete and oil barrel out of the ground and process that waste through a licensed waste disposal site. That will send a clear message to the community that we will no longer tolerate this irresponsible activity.

Mr Attwood: I am aware of the case, as other Members will be. It was a very serious offence. Some 9,000 tonnes of illegal waste were dumped, some of which came from the demolition of Downe Hospital. There was a very substantial fine, but the Member is right: it is only part of the picture and half of the equation. There is a responsibility to clean up the wrong and the crime that was committed. Discussions are ongoing between the local council and the NIEA about how the situation will be rectified. When those conversations have concluded, I will advise Members of the outcome.

It is a difficult matter. The irresponsible and criminal behaviour of an individual — we must remember that the haulier was also convicted — saw that waste being dumped near a watercourse and a lough. Therefore, given what may be in the ground and the fact that there may be oil contamination, a very vigilant and precautionary approach has to be deployed to ensure that waste is disposed of appropriately. However, the Member is right: if those who are involved in the illegal dumping of waste look on a criminal penalty from the court as merely a business cost rather than a deterrent — there are examples beyond this case involving illegal dumping connected, in particular, to fuel laundering — government will be failing the community and endangering the environment.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. What enforcement actions have the Minister and his Department taken that resulted in successful

prosecutions? What new measures does he propose to introduce, besides the protocol that he has put forward, to ensure that local landowners and local authorities do not foot the bill in the future?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind other Members that they may put only one question to the Minister.

Mr Attwood: I do not mind answering all those questions, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I gave evidence two weeks ago to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on that very issue and made those points. That Committee is conducting an inquiry into, more particularly, the fuel laundering side of illegal waste, rather than taking a broader approach. My environmental crime unit, which, as I have said before, carries out a very difficult task at some risk and is trained to police standards, now attends live investigations when HMRC, which takes the lead on many of these matters, and the police attend to an alleged incident. It has strategically — rightly, in my view — changed its emphasis when going after illegal waste dumping. It now targets the godfathers of illegal waste rather than the second and third rank of those who are involved. As I said to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, without going into any detail, there are four serious live investigations of those involved in serious illegal waste offences, including fuel laundering. If we are able to pursue and prosecute those cases and if the courts measure up by imposing deterrent penalties, the better it will be for us.

Half an hour ago, I was on the front steps of the Assembly, where we launched an initiative to encourage those who are aware of illegal dumping, be it fuel laundering in particular or other, to report it to Crimestoppers. I welcome the fact that evidence is emerging that people who are aware of illegality are beginning, on a confidential basis, to make that known to the appropriate authorities, including my environmental crime unit. The purpose of the initiative launched today is to encourage people to provide the information in order to allow government, HMRC, the Department of the Environment and the police to bear down on those who are involved in crime.

Mr Agnew: I want to turn to smaller-scale illegal dumping, which is prevalent in my constituency. Will the Minister advise what legislation is in place and what powers his Department has to deal with all-but-abandoned plots of land that are not taken care of by their landlord and on which there has been illegal dumping, with the accompanying environmental and health risks?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for that question. It is very timely, given that the Irish Open will take place at Royal Portrush and the dilapidation and dereliction that exist in Portstewart, Bushmills and Portrush itself. We need to interrogate further the issue of development sites or other properties falling into decay because of illegal dumping. That is why, last autumn, I ran a blight summit in Portstewart to try to identify measures that might be taken by central and local government to deal with the issue.

The powers of central government are quite limited, although, arising from legislation passed last year, powers will be shared more between central and local government when it comes to dealing with dereliction, dilapidation and people failing to secure or develop their sites with all sorts of health and safety initiatives. I acknowledge what Belfast

City Council has done. It has published, in my view, the most coherent approach to what the powers of councils might be in that regard. The Member may want to look at that approach when considering the situation in North Down. At the end of the day, councils should deploy the legal weapons that they have in their armoury, and, on occasion, government should give them some encouragement and financial cover to do so. People may be aware of some recent developments on that in Derry. Unless that happens and unless there are the resources, both in central and local government, to deploy those weapons, there will be people who will think that they can get away with it and that the penalties that courts impose are business costs. They will conclude that government is not serious. Given the scale of our built heritage and the wonder that that is, that is not good enough.

Planning: Renewable Energy

5. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the restrictions that current planning policy might place on the potential for reaching the 2020 renewable energy targets. (AQO 1244/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. Renewable energy is arguably the single biggest economic opportunity that the North has. We have the potential, in a relatively short space of time, to be energy self-sufficient on the one hand and an energy exporter on the other. In my view, there will not be any impediment on the planning side to achieving the renewables target of 40% by 2020. The planning applications for renewables are primarily for wind farms, but, hopefully in the near future, they will be for more anaerobic digesters and more individual wind turbines. If you were to look at those applications, you would see that, of those who have received wind farm planning permission, so far only 65% have built. If those who receive planning permission were all to build or if the applications in the system were to be approved, you would be able to surpass the renewables target, which is over 1,400 megawatts by 2020. The issue is not the planning system; it is whether the national grid, which is a matter for DETI and NIE, will be expansive and extensive enough to accommodate that scale of renewable construction and development going forward. If we can resolve that issue, we will achieve the renewable target of 40% by 2020, and, in the decades to come, we will well surpass it.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra úsáideach sin. I follow on from the Minister's answer and his assertion that there are no problems in the planning policy. In light of a recent report that the Fermanagh Trust launched in my constituency on the deficits to the community of wind farms and in the community ownership of wind farms, does he plan to make any amendments to current planning policy statements to ensure that communities get a fair return from the benefits and profits of wind farms?

Mr Attwood: I did not say that there were no issues in the planning system. There are always issues in the planning system; that seems to be its character. For example, we have deployed training across the divisional planning offices to ensure that people have the knowledge and capacity in local offices to manage individual wind turbines. There are 700 currently in the system. Similarly, we are about to

bring in the major agents for those who are bringing forward anaerobic digester proposals, of which 70 are now in the system, to ensure that the capacity, skills and scientific knowledge are in the planning system and elsewhere so that those that should get over the line do so and quickly. There are issues, but my point was that, on the basis of the approval rate to date, if the management of the approvals to date and the scale of applications that are in the system mature, we will reach the target of 40% by 2020, given sufficient capacity in the national grid.

The Member's point is valid. Given the better experience in Scotland, where, as you will be aware, there are greater community benefits from wind farms, for example, as far as the scale of financial contributions from the renewable industry is concerned, it seems to me that we might be able to do more in community benefit from renewable approvals. That is why I have asked for further information from officials to see whether we can model our approach in the image of what happens in Scotland, which, in my view, is ahead of the pack on renewables generally.

2.30 pm

Finance and Personnel

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 4, 12 and 13 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Civil Service: Equal Pay

1. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on any outstanding issues arising from the Civil Service equal pay settlement. (AQO 1255/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The Northern Ireland Civil Service equal pay settlement has been implemented in line with the terms agreed with the trade union — the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) — and approved by the Northern Ireland Executive. Although concern about exclusion from the settlement has been raised on behalf of the NIO, the PSNI and former staff, I have no plans to extend the agreement to include groups of staff who have no entitlement under the terms of the settlement.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat as an fhreagra sin. Does the Minister agree with me that the recent decision of the High Court in London in the Abdulla ruling, which affirmed the entitlement to proceed to court for adjudication on outstanding equal pay claims, is significant and will have a bearing on this case, where not covered in the recent settlement here?

Mr Wilson: I have lost my bet with my colleague. I bet him that the supplementary would be about PSNI staff, but, clearly, that is not the case. Maybe I should have anticipated that. Under the equal pay legislation, former employees have six months to lodge an equal pay claim. The retirees, to whom the Member referred, had left more than six months before the claims were lodged. Therefore, they were excluded from the settlement. Indeed, in early 2011, the cases were tested by two former staff at tribunals. Those staff had retired before August 2008, and the claims were rejected by the tribunals as out of time. Abdulla versus Birmingham City Council was taken as a breach of contract

case, on which it was ruled that the time limit was six years rather than six months. However, that is not binding on courts or tribunals in Northern Ireland. Therefore, although we are considering the implications of that ruling, it is my view that the only legal obligation and ruling that we had — and in respect of paying out public money we can only abide by the law as it exists at present — was that claims had to be lodged within six months of leaving.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What does the Minister hope to do to resolve the anomaly of overlapping pay scales at levels EO1 and EO11 in the Civil Service?

Mr Wilson: When I announced the equal pay claim, I said that we were reviewing the overlap that there was, particularly at AO and EO11 level. That work is ongoing, and the trade unions are working with my Department on what is an essential part of the equal pay settlement, so we are not going to hang back on that. However, extensive work has yet to be done. My officials and the trade union representatives are working through that at present. I cannot give the Member a timescale for when we will have the final report, but I hope that it will be by the middle of this year. I cannot be definite on that because a lot of complex work has to be done.

Mr Hilditch: To avoid confusion and to help the lay person to understand the situation, will the Minister tell us why PSNI staff are still excluded from the settlement?

Mr Wilson: PSNI staff were not included in the Northern Ireland Civil Service settlement because pay delegation had been made to the old NIO, at that stage. Therefore, any pay arrangements had to be between the staff and their employer, which, at that time, would have been the NIO or the Police Authority for Northern Ireland.

It is up to the PSNI to show that there is an equal pay liability. We believe that there is not an equal pay liability, certainly not under the Civil Service scheme that there was. I think that there is to be a tribunal case on that later this month. When NIPSA was negotiating the equal pay arrangements with the Department this time last year, it accepted that it would only cover Northern Ireland Civil Service staff because pay had been delegated to the then Police Authority when the staff were transferred. We argue that there is no claim under the arrangements that we negotiated with the trade unions in respect of Civil Service staff.

Rates: Businesses

2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses will benefit from the proposed increases in rates stipulated in the Rates (Amendment) Bill. (AQO 1256/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Assembly has today approved the legislation that will raise almost £6 million a year, which is required to fund the extension of the small business rate relief scheme. That will enable 8,300 business ratepayers to benefit from the expanded scheme over the next three years. The relief will be 20% of the rates for properties with a net annual value (NAV) of between £10,000 and £5,001. The amount of relief under the main scheme will be broadly doubled, which will increase the number receiving help by around 50%. The average award will be in the region of £740 a year.

It should also be noted that to preserve the scheme's automatic nature, it will apply to all non-domestic ratepayers with small premises at or below the £10,000 net annual value but will exclude businesses with more than three premises. Some types of property are excluded as well, such as car parks, advertising hoardings and telecommunications masts.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can Land and Property Services easily identify those businesses that occupy three or more properties?

Mr Wilson: We cannot easily identify them. In fact, we had to undertake a manual exercise. Following representations from the Committee for Finance and Personnel and others, we decided that large businesses that owned a large number of small premises should not be included in the scheme. We have undertaken a manual exercise, and we believe that we have been able to exclude all those businesses that have multiple premises. Of course, there may be some that we have failed to identify, and there may be difficulties in identifying those. Obviously, as time goes on, some will be drawn to our attention that may have to be taken off the list.

Social Clauses

3. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the benefits of having social clauses in contracts. (AQO 1257/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Social clauses can deliver significant social and economic benefits in the performance of contracts for the supply of goods, services or works. They have been successfully used within the construction industry, first of all, to get people who are economically inactive back into work through the provision of training and help with skills development and, secondly, to provide opportunities for apprenticeships and placements for students on construction-related courses.

I will illustrate to the Member the extent of that even within my Department. In my Department, the firm that was awarded the properties management framework will deliver 14 opportunities for unemployed people and 35 apprenticeships over the four-year life of the contract. With the Civil Service cleaning contract, there will be 40 work placement opportunities through the Department for Employment and Learning's Steps to Work programme. Other benefits of social clauses are improved health and safety performance for companies and improved opportunities for equality.

Mrs McKeivitt: Thank you, Minister, for your detailed answer. Are there any centres of procurement expertise (COPEs) that have not included social clauses, and, if so, what will the Minister do to ensure that they will have?

Mr Wilson: First of all, we have set a target in the Programme for Government. There is guidance stating that when public contracts are being awarded, we expect social clauses to be included. Central Procurement Directorate (CPD), of course, does not award every contract in Northern Ireland. Some arm's-length bodies may well not be including some of the social clauses in their contracts, so that will again be up to Members through Committees to scrutinise. That is the scrutiny work that Members ought to be doing.

Mr Humphrey: What progress has the Minister's Department made in the implementation of social clauses across government?

Mr Wilson: The Department has standard contract documents that are given to all COPEs, which is also relevant to the previous question. Those were amended in 2011 to include an obligation on the contractor to provide detailed monthly progress in their sustainability report as to what they have done with social contracts. The reports can also be captured on the new key performance indicator database, which is now available through CPD to all COPEs. We give guidance in the contract documentation and require reports, and we then publish the progress that there has been. Hopefully, all those measures will help to ensure compliance.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn.

HM Treasury: Ministerial Contacts

5. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the issues that he has raised with the Chancellor and Treasury Ministers since May 2011. (AQO 1259/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I raised a number of important economic and financial issues with the Chancellor and other Treasury Ministers over the past six months. The issues raised have been wide-ranging. The main ones include corporation tax; air passenger duty; the aggregate levy credit scheme; carbon price floor; bank lending; enterprise zones; the Budget exchange scheme; and Barnett consequentials associated with the Olympics.

I am pleased to say that as a result of the engagement on those issues, we now have the ability to carry money over from one year to the next. Over £60 million has been carried over to deal with pressures next year, which is something that we did not have available to us this time last year. The Olympics funding issue has been resolved and there was a Barnett consequential from that, as there was for Wales and Scotland. The Government are now working on the devolution of air passenger duty for direct haul flights from Northern Ireland, which, of course, will have considerable bearing on our ability to attract inward investment.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. What representations have been made to the Chancellor in respect of firms that have had difficulties paying their tax liabilities to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC)?

Mr Wilson: This issue has come to prominence more in recent months, and having met a number of business organisations and insolvency practitioners, I am concerned about the way in which HMRC is dealing with some of these cases. For example, this year to date, there have been 268 individual bankruptcies resulting from HMRC petitions and 122 company liquidations. This is a worrying trend at a time when businesses are finding their cash flow squeezed because banks are not prepared to lend them money and by creditors shortening credit periods. I spoke to the Treasury Minister, as did the First Minister, and I am hoping to meet a representative of HMRC — Mr Graham Brammer — around the middle of February as a result of those conversations.

Mr Kinahan: With respect to the Minister's work with the Chancellor and the Treasury Ministers, will he update the House on the current discussions with the EU Commission

to reduce the risk of a legal challenge should corporation tax be devolved?

Mr Wilson: We spoke with the EU regarding the possibility of a legal challenge at an early stage. Provided that we abide by the Azores ruling, which is that the cost of the devolution of corporation tax must be passed on to the Executive, there should not be a problem with the EU. The question is what exactly is the cost? There have been wide and varied estimates of the amount of corporation tax that is collected in Northern Ireland. If you take an average historically, what period do you take it over and what kind of things do you include? Also, we checked with the EU that if the Chancellor should decide to write off against corporation tax other increases in tax revenues that result from new investment, would that fall foul of EU regulations, and the answer was no.

2.45 pm

Mr P Maskey: Has the Minister had any further discussions on additional fiscal powers coming to the Assembly, bar those on corporation tax that he just outlined? I think that it would be more beneficial for us if we had some sort of response.

Mr Wilson: First, we discussed a wide range of taxation issues. I do not want the devolution of a huge amount of taxation to Northern Ireland for two reasons. First, I am a unionist, and I do not want Northern Ireland to be separate from the rest of the United Kingdom. Scottish and Irish nationalists might want that, but as a democratic unionist, I do not. Secondly, there are very good economic reasons for not seeking that kind of devolution. Do not forget that the devolution of tax-raising powers would lumber Northern Ireland with all the uncertainty of that tax revenue. If things go well, we benefit from increased tax revenues, but if things go badly, we suffer from a reduction in tax revenues. If we were trying to plan any kind of public spending programme, having that kind of uncertainty built in would make life very difficult. That is one of the reasons why it is important not to build in that uncertainty through the mass devolution of a whole range of taxes to Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-Leas Cheann Comhairle. It seems that the Minister has had a wide range of discussions with the Chancellor and Treasury Ministers. Has he discussed with them the fact that welfare reform will take hundreds of millions of pounds out of the Northern Ireland economy and the effect that that will have here? Has he explored measures to mitigate the impact of those draconian cuts on our society?

Mr Wilson: First, I and my colleague the Minister for Social Development had such discussions with the Government at Westminster. Figures on the impact of welfare reform on Northern Ireland are being thrown around. The first myth is that, somehow or other, we will end up with less money than we have at present. That is not correct. If he had bothered to check with his representative on the Welfare Reform Group, the Environment Minister, he would be aware that figures given to that group just yesterday show that welfare spending will continue to increase, not decrease. *[Interruption.]*

I see the Member pointing downwards. He is the economic guru who does not rely on any figures. I have gone through long Budget debates during which one figure after another just tumbled down as he got it wrong, and he has got it wrong on this issue. There will be a slower increase in the

amount of money spent on welfare — there will not be a decrease. Indeed, by the end of the period, we will be getting hundreds of millions of pounds more in welfare spending here in Northern Ireland.

The second thing that I want to say is that many of the aims of welfare reform were supported by the party opposite when it supported the Programme for Government.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Minister.

Mr Wilson: One of the aims is to get people off welfare dependency and back into work. We have raised particular measures, of course, and we will continue to raise them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up, Minister.

Corporation Tax

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ceist a sé. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. Question 6.

6. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the devolution of corporation tax powers. (AQO 1260/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I see it is wearing off on the Member. It is spreading round the Benches; next we will have the Member for North Antrim speaking Irish, if we are not very careful.

The ministerial working group on the devolution of corporation tax and the rebalancing work held its first meeting on 15 December. We set up terms of reference and there were six work programmes that officials had to undertake. We will have a progress meeting on that on 7 March.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat. Given what the Minister said in an earlier response, all that has been spoken about corporation tax and the concerns expressed about it, will the Minister tell the House, honestly, if he is in favour of corporation tax powers being transferred to Northern Ireland? If so, will he go for the full hog — 12.5% — as it is across the border?

Mr Wilson: I think my position on corporation tax is very clear. I have responded to debates and answered questions in the House. In fact, the Executive position is no different from my position: we wish to seek the devolution of corporation tax powers, but it must be at a price that is affordable and does not do short-term damage to spending in Northern Ireland or to our ability to undertake programmes of work that we already have. Furthermore, as far as its implementation is concerned, given the work that has to be done and the fact that there will be a lead-in period, we will need to make preparations in the next Budget period, not this one.

Mr McQuillan: What measures, other than corporation tax, would make Northern Ireland a more attractive location for investment?

Mr Wilson: Many of the things that the Executive have in the Programme for Government will do that. Through the Department for Employment and Learning, for instance, we hope to prepare 114,000 people to enter the world of work. Over the next period, we hope that 210,000 qualifications at levels 2, 3 and 4 will be gained by people, which will upskill

the workforce. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is working on attracting inward investment and, of course, as I have, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has spoken to the Chancellor about what kind of tax credits there might be for such things as investment, research or the training of workers.

Mr Cree: Treasury figures for the amount of corporation tax collected in Northern Ireland are very vague. We are told that that is because of the registered addresses of companies and other factors. What work is being done to correct that apparent lack of information so that we will know the cost to the Northern Ireland economy?

Mr Wilson: That is exactly one of the things that officials are working on at present and one of the six work streams on which we will receive a report on 7 March. There are a lot of reasons for the vagueness. The Member has given the first reason, which relates to where companies might have their tax registered, which tax office they are using and what address they are using. What year do you use? If you go back four years, for example, when banks were making huge profits and probably accounting for about 40% of profit, our corporation tax would be inflated. However, with write-offs and whatnot, banks anticipate that they will not be making any payments for the next 10 years. That is the kind of work that needs to be done. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That was the Chancellor calling.

Cost of Division

7. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what further action his Department will consider in future Budget discussions to address the cost of division within our society. (AQO 1261/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Budget review announced in January as part of my monitoring statement is not a fundamental review of budget allocations. Indeed, it will consider departmental budgets at the margins and will be based on an assessment of underspends in the current financial year. There will be an opportunity for my Executive colleagues to register key financial pressures as part of that exercise. If, as part of the review process, individual Ministers identify further savings by addressing costs associated with division, that would be welcomed by the Executive.

Ms Lo: I thank the Minister for his response. Segregation in housing and education is a big factor in maintaining division in our society. As the economic guru in the House, will he consider, during the monitoring rounds or whenever, investing more in promoting more shared neighbourhoods and mixed housing, and increasing the capacity for integrated education?

Mr Wilson: I appreciate the title that has been conferred on me: economic guru. I do not know whether I merit it. However, it will be used in my election material, believe you me. The Alliance Party has dubbed me the economic guru of the Assembly. That should go down a treat in East Antrim.

A lot of the costs of division that have been identified are simply social costs rather than the costs of division. We are asking Ministers to look at how they spend their money, where there is duplication and where there is unnecessary spend to see whether it is possible to bring

forward programmes. Education is a good example. The First Minister, my party leader, identified that. In a period of rationalisation, that is one way to meet the objectives to which the honourable lady referred. However, in meeting our obligations and making the best use of the capital that we have, we ought to be looking at how we can have fewer providers of education in Northern Ireland. It makes good sense socially and economically.

Mr Spratt: Why does the Minister think that there is a need to revise the Budget allocations less than a year into the four-year Budget term?

Mr Wilson: The key reason is the amount of reduced requirements from Departments in what was meant to be one of the toughest years of the Budget. This time last year, all Ministers told me that we did not have enough money and that some of their Departments were going to collapse, and so on, yet we had substantial returns in that year. It makes sense to look at the position at the beginning of the year and at the end of the year to see whether we can make adjustments at the margins. As I said, as we look forward, if Ministers can identify where they have been able to reduce pressures, let us identify those at an early stage so that we can better plan how that money is spent. That is just good budgeting. When money was plentiful, perhaps we did not need to do that. However, now that money is much scarcer, it makes sense to do it.

Mr McDevitt: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, on the guru question, the Minister can call me it all that he likes, but I am not taking any responsibility for anything that he does. I just want to make that clear.

Will he tell the House how much division costs in this region? Does he have a figure and, if so, how much is it?

Mr Wilson: No, I do not have a figure. Figures have been bandied around. As I said earlier, many of the costs identified are not necessarily costs of division but may be attributable to social factors. I do not have a figure for that. However, I am more interested in how Departments and Ministers can tell me that the budget that I have allocated could be used better, or if I had some additional allocation, I could make longer-term savings through avoiding duplication or the provision of services twice when that is not necessary.

3.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I ask the House to take its ease for a couple of minutes.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Housing: Surety Bonds

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of housing developments where roads and footpaths remain unfinished and sewerage systems have not been completed to a satisfactory standard, despite developers having entered into surety bonds under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980, the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and any preceding legislation; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to carry out a review of the bond system in relation to roads, footpaths and sewerage systems in new developments and to review when a bond can be invoked by the relevant authority to address this ongoing problem. — [Miss M McIlveen.]

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):

I welcome the opportunity to resume the debate that we began earlier and I thank all Members who contributed to it. I thought that it was a very well-thought-out debate; the arguments were interesting and something that we can all work on. I, therefore, pay tribute to the Members who brought forward the debate: the lady Member for Strangford, and the Member for Mid Ulster. I have noted the comments and concerns expressed by Members and welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate on surety bonds that guarantee the provision of completed roads for new housing developments.

Given that this is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, Members may have great expectations about my response. It is a far, far better thing that I do now — I will leave it at that.

At the outset, I would like to make clear the distinction between unadopted private roads and unfinished streets and roads in new housing developments. The motion, and thus the debate, is restricted to the latter. I remind Members that the key existing legislation that govern the planning and eventual adoption of new roads in housing developments are the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 and the Private Streets (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1992. The original intention of the private streets legislation was to reassure homeowners that the streets serving their new homes would be built to appropriate standards and to ensure that they could be adopted into the public road network when they were completed. To that end, the legislation requires developers to make provision for the cost of street works and to secure that by means of a bond. For the private streets legislation to work as intended, it is essential that all parties play their part and carry out their responsibilities. That includes Roads Service, developers, planners, bond providers and conveyancing solicitors.

In the main, the current private streets legislation has served its original purpose quite well. That is evidenced by the fact that, over the years, the majority of roads in new housing developments have been properly planned, approved and constructed. In due course, those roads have

been adopted by Roads Service and become part of the public road network. However, there have been exceptions, and there is no doubt that the economic pressures of recent years have increased the number of housing developments that have run into difficulties. That is where the legislation and the procedures for completing and adopting the affected roads have been tested.

The types of problems that would typically be encountered include developers proceeding without agreement or a bond; roads not completed in compliance with the determination; issues with sewers and drains; road construction not keeping pace with development; and developers ceasing work on site or, indeed, going into liquidation.

On the question of surety bonds, I can say that the private streets legislation already in place requires developers to enter into a formal agreement for the construction and subsequent adoption of new streets in housing developments. Developers must make prior provision to meet street works expenses for their developments, and they are required by law to:

“secure the due performance of the agreement by means of a guarantee bond”.

Those bonds are legally binding agreements and are typically provided by banks, insurance companies and the National House-Building Council. In the event of the developer not completing the bonded roads as agreed, Roads Service can initiate proceedings to access the bond moneys, arrange for completion of all required street works and then adopt the roads into public ownership.

When housing developments have run into difficulties, the challenge for Roads Service has been to work through those difficulties with the developer or, in some cases, the administrator or liquidator to try to negotiate the best outcome. It is often in the best interests of the parties if, rather than going down the enforcement route too quickly, an agreed outcome can be negotiated. It should also be noted that moving to enforce a bond too soon can have unwelcome consequences. For example, developers would be less likely to complete work themselves, and bonds could become more expensive and, therefore, harder to get.

However, in cases in which the construction of a private street is not progressing satisfactorily, Roads Service can issue a notice under article 11 of the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980:

“requiring the execution of all works which are reasonably necessary to bring the street into conformity with regulations”.

That would typically be within one year from the date on which the buildings are first occupied, but it could be a longer period, if reasonable. Ultimately, where the requirements of an article 11 notice are not complied with, Roads Service can proceed to carry out the works using its own contractors, recover the costs of the work and the expenses from the bond, and work closely with NI Water to bring the sewerage system up to an adoptable standard.

It is important to know that the private streets function, from application through to determination of the street layout and finally to adoption, is conducted within a prescribed statutory arrangement that includes opportunity for a developer to

appeal the Department's notices. In other words, the process takes time to implement and there are no shortcuts. Roads Service must also notify a developer at each stage of enforcement proceedings, and that often prompts a developer to carry out the necessary remedial works.

I recognise that many homebuyers have experienced unexpected and unwelcome delays in getting the roads in their developments completed. I want to assure Members that Roads Service is making use of the current private streets legislation and procedures in order to address the problems as quickly as possible. In the past three financial years, Roads Service has served 227 article 11 notices, of which 71 led to enforcement action. I believe that the current legal provisions for surety bonds for new housing developments are broadly adequate, if all parties comply with their responsibilities.

The adoption of sewers in new housing developments is processed by Northern Ireland Water under articles 161 to 163 of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006. The order provides for NI Water to enter into an agreement with any person constructing or proposing to construct development sewers and for the adoption of those development sewers at a future date, provided that they are constructed to the specified standard in accordance with the terms of the agreement.

In completing the adoption agreement, the developer is required to provide such security as NI Water may reasonably require for the discharge of obligations imposed on the other party to the agreement. That is the sewer bond, which may be used in the event of the other party defaulting on its responsibilities and failing to complete the construction of the sewers to the specific standard.

Under current procedures, responsibility remains with the developer for the construction and maintenance of the sewers in a development until a final adoption of completion certificate is issued by NI Water. It is possible that a developer could have maintenance responsibility for the sewers in his development for several years. That is dependent on the sale of dwellings in the development, which could take between two years and five years or more to complete. Where a sewerage system in a new development has not been adopted and a developer ceases to trade, NI Water will consider the use of enforcement procedures to adopt the sewers. That is a prolonged process involving much preparation before the final notice of intention to complete the works and recover the costs can be issued. For straightforward cases, the process can take a few months, but for more complex situations, it can run for up to two years.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: I am sorry; I have to make progress. Thank you.

Since the establishment of NI Water on 1 April 2007, six referrals have been made to it for sewer-only bond developments where the developer is reported to be no longer trading. Those have been received in the past few months, and NI Water is in the early stages of the process to apply the terms of the adoption agreement. The initial work includes setting up communication channels with the developer, or, where possible, his agent, and his successor or assignee and the bondsman. In parallel with that, the status and condition of the on-site sewers have to be

established, and an estimate of costs has to be prepared for the remedial works required to bring the sewers up to an adoptable standard.

Application of enforcement procedures is, of course, dependent on the developer having entered into an adoption agreement with NI Water for the adoption of sewers at a future date and the adequate bond security being in place. If that is not the case, NI Water has no power to take any action, and the sewerage systems in such developments will remain private and be the responsibility of the developer and his successors and assignees.

The administration and recovery of sewer bonds for adoption agreements authorised prior to 1 April 2007 by NI Water's predecessor, Water Service, are administered by Roads Service under a joint sewer/street bond. In the past three years, NI Water has resolved and adopted sewers in 110 sites across Northern Ireland. NI Water and Roads Service work closely under the private streets/sewer adoptions joint working group to take forward the adoption of streets and sewers where the developer is no longer trading.

I am aware that the Committee for Regional Development has established an inquiry into unadopted roads and that the inquiry will include a review of the bond system and how it works. I welcome the fact that Members raised the example of how the process works in the Republic of Ireland and other jurisdictions, and I suggest that that should be included in the Committee's inquiry. I also recognise the roles of others in any such investigation, such as the Department of the Environment, the Department of Justice, local councils and their representative bodies, including the Northern Ireland Local Government Association.

In conclusion, I do not intend to carry out a separate review of bonds before the Committee inquiry has been completed. However, as the Minister for roads and water policy, I will ensure that my officials are available to the Committee in the process of the inquiry. I assure Members that Roads Service and NI Water will continue to enforce legislation in order to offer as much certainty as possible to new homeowners who find themselves in such situations.

Throughout the debate, a number of Members mentioned locations and particular developments. For the sake of expediency, I ask that Members with particular concerns in relation to housing developments or other cases write to me or e-mail me, so that I can investigate those concerns and bring forward a response.

At one point in the debate, the question, "Who is in charge?" was asked. I am in charge, and I am ready and open to make any necessary improvements. The inquiry established by the Committee affords me that opportunity. By working together, we can improve the system, not only to the benefit of Roads Service and NI Water but, most importantly, to the benefit of those who are directly affected — the homeowners of Northern Ireland.

3.15 pm

Mr I McCrea: I thank everyone for attending and contributing to the debate. I also thank the Minister for responding. It was good to see him in his place.

The Minister opened his response to the debate by referring to Dickens. I hope that, as a result of the debate, he will

not be a Scrooge and we will see a change in how the Department carries this forward. It is worth noting that many Members used the debate as an opportunity to highlight the local issues in their constituencies. I have no doubt that we will see an increase in statements to the local press. Mind you, I do not think that I will miss that opportunity myself. Nonetheless, as someone who sits on the Regional Development Committee, I think that the debate has been a good opportunity to hear some of the issues from local constituencies, which will be an important part of the inquiry.

As mentioned by the mover of the motion, my colleague Michelle McIlveen, and the Chair of the Regional Development Committee, Jimmy Spratt, the Committee will be undertaking an investigation into surety bonds. The Minister, in closing, stated that he has no intention of carrying out a review at the same time, but I accept that he is taking the matter seriously. I hope that he keeps it at the top of his agenda and keeps on top of how the Committee deals with the review.

The examples given this morning are clear evidence that there is a problem that needs to be addressed. In her speech, Michelle McIlveen identified three areas where she felt that change could be made: a means by which residents could mandate the statutory agencies to carry out work; greater proactivity by the statutory agencies to protect residents; and ensuring notification of insolvency proceedings and orders. The motion is about protecting innocent purchasers and enhancing residents' rights. That is exactly the kind of matter that the Assembly should be debating and taking action on.

I do not intend to go through the contributions of all the Members who spoke; if they really want to know what they said, the Hansard report will be available later. Each Member went through the issues, and everyone made a relevant contribution to the debate.

There are certainly many areas affected by this problem: I could name many in my constituency, but I will not bore Members who have no interest in Mid Ulster. However, as we heard in the debate, it is something that every constituency has a problem with. I accept the Minister's desire to hear from as many people as see fit the need to bring the problem to his attention.

If the offer is there, I will ask the Minister to visit my constituency. A Member for Upper Bann referred to a magic wand. If the Minister wants to bring that with him, he can feel free to do so, given that he is the top dog. I genuinely mean that: if we cannot resolve some of the issues locally, I will make no apology about contacting you, Minister, and inviting you down.

This is about trying to ensure that the people whom we represent and the residents in these developments have an equal right to, if nothing else, having their bins collected outside their homes and have a level of equality comparable to that of those who have gone before and the people who live in adjoining developments. As a member of a local council, I am more than aware of the difficulties to which Members referred of bins not being collected and gaining access to those developments, so I will not reiterate them.

This has been a good debate. On many occasions, Members are blamed for not debating issues that matter to people often enough. Many people across Northern Ireland have

had problems with this issue. I commend my colleague for bringing the motion to the Floor of the House and thank everybody for supporting it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the number of housing developments where roads and footpaths remain unfinished and sewerage systems have not been completed to a satisfactory standard, despite developers having entered into surety bonds under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980, the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and any preceding legislation; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to carry out a review of the bond system in relation to roads, footpaths and sewerage systems in new developments and to review when a bond can be invoked by the relevant authority to address this ongoing problem.

Human Trafficking

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

Ms Ruane: I beg to move

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increase in human trafficking where people are brought in illegally and forced into a life of sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude; or are transported onward to other jurisdictions for similar purposes; and calls on the Executive to use all their powers to raise public awareness of this crime to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice and that victims are given the support and help they need.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá méadú ag teacht ar mhinicíocht na gainneála ar dhaoine fásta agus ar pháistí.

The incidence of trafficking of adults and children has been on the increase. Between 2009 and 2011, 73 victims were rescued by the PSNI. That is, by even the PSNI's own admission at a recent Policing Board meeting, the tip of the iceberg.

Many find it difficult to admit that the crime of trafficking exists in Ireland. It is a crime that, without doubt, uses the border for its own insidious purposes. Recent investigations estimated that £500,000 is spent every week in the North on prostitution. The PSNI estimates that there are 88 brothels in operation across the North. Trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation does exist in our communities. It exists in our cities, towns and villages. It may be concentrated in cities, but let us be under no illusion: it happens right across our rural and urban communities.

Trafficking is a crime that exists on our doorsteps, and yet it is a crime that many find hard to see. The victims of human trafficking have no voice. They cannot afford that we avert our eyes from such a disturbing and horrific crime. It is an essential first step in rescuing the victims of trafficking and bringing its perpetrators to justice that agencies and the public accept that it does happen on the island of Ireland in 2012.

We need an all-Ireland sex offenders' register, which we still do not have. We also need North/South co-operation at every level and a public awareness campaign aimed not only at professionals but at communities in order to raise awareness so that they can recognise risk factors and see what may be on their doorstep.

By and large, women and children are victims of trafficking. However, there are also male victims, and we must do everything that we can to expose that. I pay particular tribute to groups such as Women's Aid and other far-sighted organisations that were alerting us to the issue when many others, including our police services, were turning a blind eye. Many years ago, I attended a conference in Newry organised by women's groups from across the island of

Ireland at which the issue was highlighted, and those groups spoke out about the trafficking of women.

Trafficking is not only about sexual exploitation but about forced labour and domestic servitude. Those aspects of trafficking are just as hidden and just as repulsive. Any campaign must address all aspects of trafficking in a holistic manner. In the North, one of the first confirmed cases of child trafficking was for forced labour, which remains a real concern. We already know that that can be concentrated in particular industries. Raising awareness among workers and employers in those industries of the risk that some people who work in them may be trafficked is critical. There must be zero tolerance of human trafficking.

As a member of the Policing Board, I remain particularly concerned about the lack of prosecutions for trafficking. The PSNI has clearly indicated that the crime that it has uncovered to date is the tip of the iceberg. The police need to do much more to develop their response. The role of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) and the judiciary is also critical. I call on the Minister of Justice to consider the need for an inquiry into the lack of prosecutions and for a more focused piece of work on how organisations might work together to ensure that offenders are brought to justice. I also call on him to ensure that there is an all-Ireland sex offenders' register.

Human trafficking is a crime to which we cannot close our eyes. The evidence is that the number of people who are trafficked is growing. That means that victims — women, children and men — are suffering unnecessarily. It is critical that the Assembly respond. Is coir í seo, agus ní féidir linn ligint orainn féin nach bhfeicimid í, nó tá fianaise ann go bhfuil líon íobartaigh na coire seo — idir mhná, pháistí agus fhir — ag fás i rith an ama. Go raibh maith agat.

Ms Lo: I beg to move the following amendment: At end insert

"regardless of whether they are co-operating with the law enforcement authorities; and further calls on the Executive to meet the obligations set out by the Council of Europe convention (2005) and the new EU directive (2011) on action against trafficking in human beings by addressing the demand for sexual and labour exploitation, increasing penalty levels, adopting a victim-centred approach and implementing effective preventative measures."

I am grateful to the Members concerned for tabling a motion on an issue of such importance. The amendment adds to and strengthens the motion in the areas of prevention of human trafficking; prosecution of those responsible; and protection of victims.

The Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings and the 2011 EU directive clearly outline a victim-centric approach that seeks to protect victims while calling for the implementation of effective policies and programmes to prevent trafficking, as well as calling for increased penalty levels. Human trafficking is the third most profitable illegal organised trade in the world today. It is a modern-day slavery that generates profits from human suffering. It represents a vulgar abuse of the fundamental human right of freedom.

I welcome the recent news of the first conviction for human trafficking in Northern Ireland. I commend all those who

were involved in the process that brought about that conviction. I hope that it serves as a warning to all those who are involved in or facilitating human trafficking that they will be pursued by the full rigour of the law and that our society will not tolerate such horrors.

Human trafficking represents one of the greatest evils that society faces. Victims can be male or female. Children have also been identified here as victims of human trafficking. Through media reporting, the Blue Blindfold campaign and public seminars, there is increasing recognition that human trafficking is a problem in Northern Ireland. Not only is Northern Ireland a country of transit for human trafficking, acting as a point of access to its neighbours, but it has become a destination country for the crime.

According to various research recommendations, the approach to tackling human trafficking can be dealt with under the three Ps: prevention, prosecution and protection. Prevention of human trafficking is essential. It represents a low-risk, high-profit trade. As with any trade, supply and demand drives the process. The demand for sexual and labour exploitation must be eliminated in order to stop the supply of human beings as commodities.

As Ms Ruane mentioned, many women who work in brothels here have been trafficked from abroad. Section 15 of the Policing and Crime Act 2009, which amends the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008, is a positive step in that regard, as those who knowingly or unknowingly use trafficked prostitutes can be prosecuted.

3.30 pm

More co-operation between countries of origin, transit and destination is needed to block known channels and stop the flow of vulnerable people to wealthy countries like ours. Countries of destination should network more to share statistics, research and information.

Prevention also comes from public awareness. Although policies and strategies are important, the fight against human trafficking also occurs on our streets. If members of the public are aware of illegal activity or suspect that there is a brothel in their local area, for example, they must report that to Crimestoppers or the police. Although it may seem as if an individual is participating willingly in activities such as prostitution or illegal labour, often they are in fear of violence by their traffickers, have been forced into debt or drug dependency and are being threatened by their captors that if they go to the authorities, they will be imprisoned and deported. Public awareness is crucial: if you suspect, report.

Once human trafficking has been detected, we must ensure the prosecution of those responsible and the protection of their victims. The prosecution rate for human trafficking is still far too low in the whole of the UK. The average sentence for human trafficking-related charges in the UK is just 4.69 years. Often, fines and sentences against offenders cause little damage to such a lucrative trade.

Article 19 of the 2011 EU directive stipulates that member states shall take necessary measures to establish national rapporteurs or equivalent mechanisms to assess trends and to gather statistics in close co-operation with civil society organisations, and shall generate reports and measure the effectiveness of anti-trafficking actions. I recently attended a human trafficking seminar in The Hague and was very

impressed by the work of the Dutch rapporteur, who submits to their Parliament annual reports with recommendations for action.

So that perpetrators can be brought to justice, we need collaboration between government organisations and NGOs to combat human trafficking and organised crime networks. Better partnership is needed between NGOs and the voluntary and community sectors so that they can continue to work as the eyes and ears.

The protection of victims of human trafficking is paramount. Victims have a 45-day recovery and reflection period. Once that is over, if they are not willing to co-operate as witnesses for prosecutions, they are deported. First, that reflection period is too short, particularly given the fact that many victims have been totally traumatised by working in the sex industry and being brutalised by their traffickers. Secondly, the deportation of victims of human trafficking re-victimises them. Returning a victim of human trafficking to their country of origin after they have been abused as slaves is inhumane and can place them in serious danger back in the grip of traffickers. They may also be ostracised by their families upon return.

Victims of both genders must be provided with specialised refuges and have access to medical, psychological, social or legal support and immigration advice. The rights of victims must be protected and promoted. Victims of sexual exploitation have suffered multiple rapes and abuses, which is a violation of their rights, their freedom and their bodies. Trafficked individuals who have been clearly identified as victims should be considered for the right to remain on humanitarian grounds, so that they may receive support and rehabilitation and be able to claim compensation from their traffickers. Although immigration is not a devolved matter and the responsibility for their immigration status falls within the Home Office remit, they constitute a very small number of people and would not open a floodgate of immigration. Trafficked victims should be treated as a special group, as outlined by the Palermo protocol and Council of Europe convention.

Our approach to human trafficking must be victim-centred to make sure that our response does not criminalise them. Removing the threat of imminent deportation would enable more victims to come forward to seek assistance. I recognise the gravity of human trafficking. I have proposed an Assembly all-party group (APG) on human trafficking, which will meet on 14 February at 4.00 pm in room 29. I look forward to seeing many of my fellow Members there as a continuing commitment to the motion. We hope that the APG will instigate a cross-departmental response to the problem. There will be opportunities for networking with other jurisdictions of the UK and other EU member states that have their own working groups.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice):

I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion today. It builds on a motion that David McNarry tabled some time ago. That highlighted the issue then, and it is appropriate that the House debates the issue again.

We are told that, every year, human trafficking accounts, on a global scale, for around two million to four million people who are trafficked outside of their borders or internally in their own country. If we put it in that perspective, the scale

of the crime that is being committed is atrocious. The nature of the crime is atrocious for the individuals who are being brought in to that type of criminal activity.

There are four main reasons why people are trafficked: sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and the harvesting of human organs. Thankfully, Northern Ireland, to date, has not had an example of trafficking due to the harvesting of organs. Shamefully, however, there have been incidents in Northern Ireland of the other three, primarily in regard to sexual exploitation.

The issue is not unique to Northern Ireland; it is a global phenomenon. Many countries across the world have to introduce new legislation or amend existing legislation, particularly immigration laws, to close the loopholes that are being exploited by organised criminals. When the police came to the Justice Committee, they told us that they were satisfied that the existing legislation in Northern Ireland is strong enough to enable them to carry out their job. If it is necessary for further legislation to be brought in, beyond complying with the EU directive, I believe that everyone in the House will be willing to put that legislation through the House. To date, however, the police have said that it is not necessary.

The police are dealing with the issue. It is an issue that should unite us, but I cannot ignore the comments that came from the Member for South Down Caitríona Ruane. She said that the police had turned a blind eye to the issue. That is a shameful comment. On an issue like this, when we should be united, she cannot hide her feelings towards the police. The police told the Committee that police officers have spent sleepless nights worrying about individuals who are being exploited as a result of human trafficking, so the comment that was made by the individual earlier in the debate was regrettable.

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

The true extent of the problem in Northern Ireland is still unknown. Five years ago, the issue was not on the radar. Sadly, today, it is becoming more and more prevalent. A piece of work needs to be done to truly identify how serious the problem is. Last year, 23 victims who had been involved in human trafficking were rescued. Five of them had been involved in forced labour and 18 had been sexually exploited. The majority of those rescued were from the Chinese community. That demonstrates that some of the organised gangs involved are local to Northern Ireland. However, organised criminal gangs are involved on a global scale, and gangs have been operating from Asia, mainland Europe and the UK mainland, not just from Northern Ireland. That example demonstrates the scale of the problem and the range of individuals involved.

The Justice Committee takes the issue seriously. This week, the Committee will be briefed again on how the Department handles those issues, and I know that it also takes the issue seriously. Ultimately, a criminal offence is being committed by the gangs who exploit individuals, but the demand is created by ordinary people. It shows the absolute depravity of some in our community that they involve themselves, particularly in prostitution. Individuals are trafficked and then forced into prostitution — they have no choice. It was shocking to hear the police tell us that

the age of those involved ranged from teenagers to people in their 70s. It is just disgusting that such a spectrum of individuals feels that that type of activity is acceptable.

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

Mr Givan: We should send a clear message that it is not acceptable, and whatever action needs to be taken to deal with the problem should be taken. I support the motion and amendment.

Mr Hussey: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about human trafficking, which is modern-day slavery. It is the forced movement of men, women and children for a variety of purposes, which can include sexual exploitation, labour and forced criminal activity. Members who attended this afternoon's briefing by the Serious Organised Crime Agency learned that it is a £32 billion industry. It was referred to as hidden but not invisible.

It is extremely important that we have the opportunity to discuss the issue to raise awareness. It is all too easy to turn a blind eye to such subjects. However, given that human trafficking is estimated to affect between two million and four million people globally, we must confront it.

It is difficult to accept that human trafficking happens in Northern Ireland, but we must face up to the problem. Some work has been done on human trafficking since a motion was tabled by the Ulster Unionist Party in September 2010. The Department of Justice published a report on prostitution, which has obvious links to human trafficking. As well as that, Barnardo's and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) combined to look specifically at child trafficking, which is a small but growing problem in Northern Ireland. The Blue Blindfold campaign also successfully raised awareness among key groups throughout the United Kingdom of the nature and extent of human trafficking. I encourage Members and the public to visit its website to learn more about human trafficking and the ongoing ordeal of its victims.

I want to mention specifically the work of the Policing Board. On 1 September 2011, its members focused on the work that the PSNI had been doing to combat human exploitation and, most notably, human trafficking. We heard about the financial benefit that criminals can gain from human trafficking, and that was evidenced by the fact that a crime gang caught by the police in 2010 was discovered to have spent £100,000 on advertising escorts over an 11-month period. The board's human rights and professional standards committee has also considered the issue, and Conall McDevitt, as its chair, may choose to expand on its work.

I am also aware that the police work locally in a number of areas to combat human trafficking through meetings and events. That excellent work should continue and be rolled out across Northern Ireland. As far as I am concerned, the Policing Board will continue to support and assist the PSNI in tackling that crime.

During Question Time in October, I questioned the Justice Minister on the action that he was taking against human trafficking. He outlined the work of the Organised Crime Task Force, of which he is chair, as well as co-ordinated intelligence-led operations such as Pentameter 1 and

Pentameter 2. Perhaps he will update us on those areas of work today.

There is an obvious European element to the motion, given that the crime of human trafficking is transnational, and the amendment reflects that. Ulster Unionist MEP Jim Nicholson fully supported the 2011 European directive and has also written to the Justice Minister and the Secretary of State for Justice, Ken Clarke, to seek assurances that the UK is doing all it can to help victims and bring perpetrators to justice.

3.45 pm

I conclude by reiterating the importance of the topic. We must continue to raise awareness of human trafficking and especially bear in mind the victims of this crime. Rescuing those victims is not enough; adequate support also needs to be provided. As yet, we have not seen any convictions for human trafficking, but I hope that it will not be long before we do. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member who proposed the motion. I also thank the Member who proposed the amendment, which the SDLP supports. The amendment enlarges on this very useful motion and brings in an added dimension of international protocols and European law. That is important in dealing with the problem. The problem is an international one, but, specifically, it affects both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland as well as Britain. It is important that we add that European dimension and strengthen co-operation between North and South. I know that there is good co-operation between the gardaí and the PSNI on the issue, and I hope that that can be usefully developed to prevent the transiting of people from one jurisdiction to the other. Northern Ireland is used as a transit point for the importation and trafficking of people to the South and to Britain and vice versa. Unfortunately, as Anna Lo pointed out, Northern Ireland has also become a destination point for human traffickers. That is a very disturbing development.

The Police Service's figures show a significant increase in the recovery of victims of human trafficking. There are not large numbers, but those figures indicate that the problem is, in fact, increasing. We should be concerned about that.

I thank Mr McNarry, who originally brought the issue to the House some time ago. He had the prescience to see that human trafficking was a growing problem. It is important that we keep a firm eye on the issue and see what further resources we can add to the fight against what Anna Lo has called "modern-day slavery".

It is good to note that there was a recent conviction in relation to human trafficking. That highlights the issue and indicates the purposeful way in which the PSNI is attempting to deal with this problem. I reject any criticism of the PSNI in this area. It has made considerable efforts to try to deal with the problem and has trained and specialist officers to deal with people who find themselves in such difficulties.

One of the issues that needs to be looked at carefully is the national referral mechanism. We need to see how we can strengthen that mechanism, so that genuine victims of human trafficking can be given assistance, support and help to deal with the trauma of being trafficked. We can then try to integrate them into our community and give them worthwhile work, training and education. However,

alternatively, if they genuinely — I emphasise that point — want to be repatriated, we can ensure that that is done in a humane and supportive manner, so that those vulnerable people are not simply sent back to the people who originally exploited them.

Many of the people who have come here did so under the false impression that they would get work. They did not know that their ultimate destination would be criminal exploitation. So, it is very important that we reassure people who are in such a position that they will be given support —

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

Mr A Maginness: — and that they will be able to co-operate with the authorities in dealing with the criminals who organised their exploitation and trafficking.

Lord Morrow: I, too, am pleased to take part in this important debate. Sadly, the topic is frequently in the news, so it is time that we took the appropriate action.

I think of "victim A", a young girl from China, who was orphaned as a child and, subsequently, sold into prostitution at the age of 14. Like so many trafficking victims, she fell prey to a fraudulent scheme that promised employment and a better life abroad. Victim A's journey started in rural China, continued through Hong Kong and eventually ended in Belfast. She quickly learned that instead of working at a proper job, she was to perform sexual favours for her trafficker — the man she believed would provide employment for her — and his friends. She was routinely raped in an effort to break her spirit, humiliate her and degrade her. Once in Belfast, victim A eventually escaped her life of exploitation, but she still lives with a deep sense of shame as a result of the terrible acts that were committed against her.

The impoverished family circumstances of a young Bosnian girl, to whom I will refer simply as "victim B", led her to search for work abroad. Victim B responded to a newspaper advertisement for what she thought was a housekeeper position in the United Kingdom. Her traffickers cleverly and swiftly put together her travel documents and arranged transport to Northern Ireland. Upon arrival, her life was turned upside down as she came to terms with the reality of her situation. Helpless and without any English, victim B was subjected to frequent beatings and was made to work long days without any time off. Her employers denied her the opportunity to phone her family in Bosnia, leaving her utterly alone and without a lifeline. Even the children for whom she was caring treated her badly and shouted abusive slurs at her. A few years after her arrival in Belfast, while taking the children to a local playground, a concerned acquaintance was made aware of her situation and the police intervened. She was taken to a safe place and received aftercare support to help her to rebuild her life.

It is the horror of stories like those that has led to today's debate. They demonstrate the importance of the United Kingdom's becoming a signatory to the EU directive on human trafficking. After some controversy over whether the UK should opt in, the UK took the right decision to sign up to important obligations that will help the victims that I have spoken about and that should help to prevent trafficking. Now we all need to ensure that we meet those obligations.

One of those obligations is to prosecute trafficking crimes committed by UK nationals abroad. The Westminster Parliament introduced such powers for England and Wales in a Bill in the House of Lords on 12 January. I understand that the changes that will be made to the Sexual Offences Act 2003 by the Bill in question will, in effect, leave the current law in Northern Ireland as it stands. It is, of course, for this Assembly to extend the legislation to prosecute offences that are committed abroad. Therefore, I ask the Minister of Justice to set out his timetable for bringing those changes into effect here.

There are, of course, other issues that must be addressed to ensure that we are doing all that we can to protect victims here. I plan to publish a Bill shortly to do just that, and I hope that Members will be able to support it. The Executive may already have plans to tackle trafficking more broadly. I understand that in a letter on 1 February, the Home Office set out its plans for ensuring that other provisions are met through secondary legislation and other means. Will the Minister do the same here and set out his plans for meeting the needs of victims and for ensuring that everything is done to eradicate this crime here?

Section 15 of the Policing and Crime Act 2009, which has been referred to, makes it an offence to purchase sex from a prostitute who has been forced, coerced or deceived. I spoke in support of that measure in the House of Lords when the Bill was debated in 2009. I understand that prostitution for sex is the main type of exploitation in Northern Ireland, and the traditional means of women operating on the streets is giving way to brothels operating off streets in flats and residential homes. I understand, too, that young women from Africa, eastern Europe and south-east Asia are being sold into prostitution here to potentially have sex with between 10 and 12 and, indeed, up to 40 men a day.

Whereas the trafficking directive focuses on prosecuting traffickers and providing better care for the victims of trafficking, it is important that we also have a robust prevention strategy. I want to raise with Members the possibility that the law in Northern Ireland should go beyond the provisions introduced —

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

Lord Morrow: — by the Policing and Crime Act 2009 and that we should introduce a new offence of paying for sex regardless of whether the individual has been subjected to force.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. With my colleague Caitríona Ruane, I support the motion in my party colleagues' names, and I support the amendment, which was tabled by the Alliance Party and spoken to by Ms Anna Lo.

It is clear from the debate so far that there is unanimity across all the parties against this pernicious crime that has been inflicted on far too many people in the community that we represent. In the interests of maintaining that unanimity, it is important that I address Mr Givan's mistaken — I would say — interpretation of Caitríona Ruane's comments. Caitríona Ruane did not specify the PSNI or any other police organisation but referred specifically to police services and did so in the past context.

As a previous member of the Policing Board, I think that it is quite clear that we all fully understand that, in the past,

a blind eye was turned, not only by police services here and elsewhere but by a lot of people across society. People had the view that that is something that goes on. As a representative for South Belfast, I can say to the House that even when debates of this nature were raised at Belfast City Council, all parties agreed that the days had to come to an end when a blind eye was turned to prostitution happening at the back of the City Hall or in parts of south Belfast.

I am pleased to say that, in recent years, the Police Service here and the Garda Síochána have begun to take the crime seriously. That is right, and in doing that, they have been given our full support. I remind Members that, not that long ago, the police were telling us that that type of human trafficking was not such a big problem, until Operation Pentameter exposed the extent of the problem that faced all of us. I am glad to say that the Police Service here was then very responsive and has been very proactive in trying to tackle that crime, to detect where it is happening and to bring people to justice.

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

As other Members have said, it is early days in getting to grips properly with that type of crime. Members have mentioned that the crime is one of sexual exploitation, forced labour and domestic servitude. All the Members who have spoken are clear in their abhorrence of those types of crimes, and they are resolute in ensuring that all the relevant organisations, including the Police Service, the Public Prosecution Service and all the other statutory agencies, step up to the mark to do what Ms Lo described as being prevention and prosecution and the protection of victims.

In the interests of maintaining the clear unanimity that exists across the parties here, it is important that we move forward on that basis. I was pleased to hear the Chair of the Justice Committee make his personal commitment, and I have no doubt that it would express the Committee's view to say that the House will implement additional legislation if necessary. We have had a history where prostitution, as it was called, was the done thing. It happened, and, as I said, everybody let it go on and did not pay much attention to it unless, of course, they were a victim. Tragically, the nature of that has changed dramatically, and we hear reports from the police that there is not a village or a town in the North or across the island where that type of activity is not going on in the types of apartments or hotels that Members have referred to. The extent of the crime that is going on does not bear thinking about. That applies equally to domestic servitude and forced labour.

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

Mr A Maskey: It is important that we are united in our rejection of this crime and, more importantly, our resolute affirmation that we will tackle it to the best of our ability.

4.00 pm

Mr D McIlveen: I support the motion and the amendment. I speak as a member of the Policing Board and chair of the all-party group on ethnic minorities.

Since April 2011, there have been 26 identified victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland, 18 of them victims of sexual exploitation. Using police information, it is important

that we get to grips in the debate with what is happening outside the doors of the Assembly. It is not easy listening, but I want to use police information to describe the average day in the life of a young lady who has been trafficked into this country for sexual exploitation.

It will start with a man — it is usually a man — who will go on to a website where he will find pictures of the woman. He will also see a list of services provided by that woman. He will go to meet her in an apartment, a hotel or some other establishment, where he will use the services that she provides. He will then leave that establishment and will have the opportunity afterwards to submit something like a restaurant review of his experience with the young lady. We have to get away from how the media portray this. It is not 'Pretty Woman'. This is not a glamorous, happy hooker, as appears in a number of Sunday newspapers. This is rape for profit. This is a high-yield, low-risk crime that needs to be dealt with urgently.

Victims of human trafficking are often too scared or simply unable to come forward. In Northern Ireland, we cannot get away from the fact that this is now becoming big business. The average cost of engaging the services of an escort — let us face it: "escort" is a euphemism for prostitute — is now £97 for half an hour. It is estimated conservatively that £25 million a year is spent in Northern Ireland by people who use such services. They are not punters or customers; they are men who pay for sex and exploit women. It is important, now more than ever, that we do not just sit back and allow that to continue unchallenged.

Mr Agnew: I thank the chair of the all-party group on ethnic minorities for giving way to the outgoing chair on the issue, as I will not have another opportunity to speak in the debate. Does the Member agree with me that, as well as focusing, rightly, on the traffickers, we need to focus on those purchasing such services? Although many may feel that this is somehow a victimless crime and that the women do it of their own will — they might even perceive it as legitimate work — those women have no choice. They are exploited and coerced into the industry. Therefore, far from being a victimless crime, it is one of the most disgusting in our society.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you. I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree. I would probably have slightly more conservative views than others on the issue. The fact is that, in my view, once money is exchanged, the game changes. I refuse to accept that any form of prostitution is done under the banner of consent. If you went into a school today and asked a boy or girl what they want to do when they leave school, which of them will say that they want to be a prostitute? Nobody does it because they want to. It is exploitation, and it is driven, unfortunately, by demand. I entirely agree with the Member that something has to be done to raise awareness and to reduce demand for such acts. We are here; we are having the debate; we are looking for solutions. I am glad that the Minister is here to listen to what is said.

Human trafficking is a crime. What is taking place is a heinous, disgusting, lurid, lewd crime, and it needs to be dealt with in those circumstances. We should look at having a trafficking community partnership, where there is an

Organised Crime Task Force-led objective and a police-led objective to bring with them the groups that do a fantastic job. I find myself agreeing entirely with the proposer of the motion. The work that Women's Aid does is to be applauded, as is the work of the Belfast Migrant Centre. There are so many fantastic groups out there, but there needs to be a more together, joined-up focus in taking the issue forward. This is a debate in which we are not asking for more money, because the groups are funded. DOJ does a fantastic job on that, for which I commend the Minister. However, there is a severe issue with how we are going about co-ordinating. It needs to be police-led. We need to look at human trafficking for what it is: it is a crime, and it needs to be dealt with as a crime. I exhort the Minister to take those comments on board and, hopefully, act on them.

Mr B McCrea: This is not the first time that the Assembly has spoken about the issue, and, in fact, it is not the first forum to have dealt with it. The key question, which Caitríona Ruane spoke about, is whether we can sort out this problem without first sorting out the problem of prostitution. That is the real issue. What is Northern Ireland's attitude to prostitution? What is the PSNI's policy on prostitution? Is it legal to have a brothel because it is easy to maintain and monitor if you have some legalised basis for it? I know that the PSNI was trying to resolve the issue some time ago. I do not know whether it has come up with what exactly it is going to do, but perhaps the Minister will be able to fill us in.

What goes on in our society was mentioned. I think that the real problem is that many people in Northern Ireland do not actually think that the issue exists. I had to leave the Chamber and come back because I was at an all-party group meeting dealing with young people and sexual orientation. Some of the issues raised there concerned how people get pregnant and what their attitudes to sex are. We sweep all those things under the carpet in this place. We can look at young people in care and at how taxis turn up to pick them up and take them off to places. That is absolute exploitation of our young people for similar purposes.

Those of you who were at the SOCA meeting today will know that what the agency's representatives were saying was really instructive. People here talk about the PSNI. It is not the PSNI but SOCA that takes the lead on these issues. I was talking to its head, and he was able to tell me that it is all about being intelligence-linked. These are serious organised crime syndicates exploiting people. It takes a certain amount of sophistication to bring people from one part of the world to another. He was able to tell me that intelligence has increased by some 50% in the past year, but we really need to find out exactly what is going on in our own society.

I heard the exchange between two colleagues about human trafficking being illegal and an absolutely heinous crime. That is a position that I myself adopt. That may be surprising, as some people think that I am the arch-liberal in this place. That may be news to the Minister, but I will issue a statement later. Look at what happens in Amsterdam, which has got a particularly free approach to the issue and where prostitution is licensed. My understanding — again, this comes from SOCA — is that the Dutch are considering reversing that decision. It is a fundamental bit in their society, yet they are going to change it. They are not going to legalise it or license it. They are going to outlaw it, because

it is absolute exploitation. It is a crime and should be stopped. We should not turn a blind eye to it.

We have to confront the fact that in Northern Ireland prostitution does go on. There are prostitutes. There are brothels. There are issues about sex that we are all apparently afraid to talk about. While we do not talk about them, people get exploited. On this particular issue, it is not really enough for the House to talk about it because it is the second time that we have done so. We want to see the agencies that can have an impact on it do something. We want to see action on this.

I have probably said enough about my support for the motion, and other issues have been put forward. I note the extension that Anna Lo is seeking through the amendment, and I concur. We should be going further and adopting other protocols. We should take a lead on the issue. I support the amendment as wholeheartedly as I would have supported the motion.

Mr McDevitt: I support the motion and the amendment. I welcome the unanimity across the House on the issue. I do not need to repeat what has been said well by others: this is right up there among the class A group of heinous crimes. It is happening right under our noses, and too many people in our society seem undisturbed about that.

I wish to add some detail that has not yet emerged in the debate. We have talked a lot about women being forced into sexual exploitation in this region as a result of being trafficked here, and that is indeed true. It is also true that there are people working in car washes in this region who are basically slaves. Maybe that is something that everyone should think about the next time they fancy getting their car washed cheaply. That is happening right here, right now. Those of us who are members of the Policing Board and are able to receive updates on this matter are told that it is not unconnected to prostitution. There is evidence, we are told, that there are women who are trafficked here for sexual exploitation who, in downtime, are sent to wash cars.

The immediacy of this crime cannot be overemphasised. It is very present. I am never able to get my head around the fact that there are more people in slavery in the world today than there were at the height of the slave trade. That is a fact, yet we seem to be able to carry on as though it were someone else's problem, when, in fact, it is not.

In the short time available, I want to raise a substantial point. We need to acknowledge — colleagues from all sides have done so — that the PSNI, the guards, the English, Scottish and Welsh police services and, indeed, police services across the European Union have upped their game over the past decade in dealing with human trafficking and modern-day slavery. I hope that the reports that we will continue to receive will be positive about the progress that has been made in better understanding how to undermine and bring the perpetrators of this type of organised crime to justice.

The Human Rights Commission published a pretty important scoping study on this region in 2009 that made a series of specific recommendations on service provision. The recommendations go beyond the criminal justice side of things, because a lot of damaged people are rescued from brothels and other places. One very specific recommendation was that:

"a multi-agency approach led by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety along with the PSNI, should be established to co-ordinate services for victims of trafficking to and within Northern Ireland."

I understand that we have made some progress on doing that, but not nearly as much progress as I think the House would want to see. It is probably not fair to say that we have done our bit. It is probably fair to say that we have done some of our bit. However, there are other Departments in Northern Ireland that are right under our nose, as is the problem, and they really need to step up to the mark. They could start by picking up on the recommendations made by the Human Rights Commission, which then goes on in its report to talk about the role that non-governmental organisations will have to play. There is a huge role to be played there too, which is something I spoke to the Minister about briefly. I have to leave the House early, but I think that he will pick up on that point in his closing remarks.

We need to understand that every trafficked individual needs a support plan, and that support plan needs to go beyond treating them as a witness to a crime. It needs to understand that, if they are treated as a witness to a crime, they help put someone behind bars. If they are then handed over the UK Border Agency, as happens more often than not, they will simply be made criminals themselves. The chances are that they will be deported, and the intelligence is that many women in that situation go back into slavery. That is the safest thing for them to do, because they have just been sent back to the very place that they were taken from. So we have an awful lot more to do.

I hope that, following the debate, more than just the Department of Justice will begin to wake up to its responsibilities. I hope that we can use the collective advocacy of the all-party group to push for services —

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

Mr McDevitt: — so that people who are arrested in this place can continue to feel that they are cared for by this place.

4.15 pm

Mr S Anderson: When I entered the Assembly in 2010 to replace David Simpson MP, my maiden speech was on human trafficking. I say that to highlight not my record but the fact that the subject will not go away. The Assembly should never allow it to go away, not while people are being bought and sold or traded.

On Friday night, I had the honour of attending a major conference in Portadown on anti-human trafficking. It was organised by David Simpson MP and jointly hosted by the Mayor of Craigavon. We honoured Kate Richardson from Portadown on her return from her epic transatlantic rowing achievement, which was a challenge that she undertook under the banner of Row For Freedom to raise awareness of the growing worldwide problem of human trafficking. We were joined by many groups, including the A21 Campaign, the Craigavon Stop the Traffik ACT group, the International Justice Mission and Women's Aid, as well as the PSNI and the chairman of the Westminster all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking, Peter Bone MP. The conference was also attended by 200 concerned local people who wanted to help to tackle the scourge and end the misery of people across the world, including victims here in

Northern Ireland. Among the messages to emerge from that conference were the truly international nature of the crime, the appalling treatment that victims endure and the level of ignorance of human trafficking. One senior PSNI officer said that the brutal trade centred on victims, usually females, who are, in effect, raped for money. However, the crime is much broader than that.

Money and the making of it are the only motivations of those behind trafficking. The criminal gangs who trade in human misery and suffering are often the same gangs who trade in counterfeit DVDs, fuel laundering and all manner of criminal activity. Indeed, this criminal enterprise brings together people not normally considered natural partners, but they are prepared to work as one for financial gain.

Progress has been made, and the beginning of prosecutions and convictions is to be welcomed. Also, the PSNI announced recently that it would visit people suspected of paying for sex with trafficked women. As Detective Superintendent Philip Marshall said, they are not clients or punters; they are exploiters or rapists.

On Friday evening, we were also heartened and encouraged to hear from the PSNI that Northern Ireland was well placed in the United Kingdom when it came to how we tackle the crime. However, despite the efforts of many people, we remain a long way from turning back the tide. Indeed, we simply do not know how deep the waters are.

Miss M McIlveen: The Member, rightly, highlights adult trafficking, as did other Members, but does he agree that the issue is much broader? In the first nine months of 2011, seven children were identified as having been trafficked. We must ensure sure that practitioners and professionals on the front line are aware of that. They must know how to target the problem and make progress in tackling it.

Mr S Anderson: I thank my colleague for her intervention. Indeed, my next paragraph refers to young girls and boys. UNICEF estimates that, at any one time, there are about 5,000 child sex workers in the United Kingdom. Most of them were trafficked into the United Kingdom. Some 75% are girls, but there are young boys as well.

Mr Moutray: Does my colleague accept that many of the people who become victims of human trafficking simply go missing and go off the radar and are not heard of again? Does he also accept that we in this House should be voices for those who have gone missing? We should be not only disappointed and shocked at what we hear today but angry that this is happening in civilised western Europe, not in darkest Africa.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr S Anderson: I thank my colleague for his intervention. These issues are very much to the fore, and they were brought out at the conference. As my colleague said, people are going missing. They are brought into houses and locked away in a single room that may have no windows. They have a mattress on the floor, and the doors are locked. At the conference, I learned that there are locks on the outside of the doors and scratches on the inside of the doors, which are marked with the victims' nails and blood and everything. Sometimes, when DNA tests were done, they showed that the nails and blood did not match with the victim who was in the room. That shows how horrific the whole thing is.

As has been mentioned, we also have those who are trafficked into forced labour and held in virtual slave camps, as well as those who are held in domestic servitude. There is also the shocking spectre of organ harvesting, which, I think, my colleague Mr Givan mentioned. Thankfully, we have not had any examples of that in Northern Ireland, but how can we be sure that it will not happen at some time right here on our doorstep? The whole criminal enterprise requires that the Assembly —

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

Mr S Anderson: — the PSNI, statutory agencies, various groups and the wider public work together. We need to tackle the issue and help to resolve it. We all have a stake in beating these criminals.

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I congratulate Caitríona Ruane and her colleagues on securing the debate this afternoon, and I welcome the motion and the amendment. They have, rightly, attracted strong opinions in every part of the Chamber. They have also attracted what must be the nearest thing to unanimity that we have seen for some time. On the basis of that unanimity, I do not propose to respond to everything that every individual said, but I will refer to some of the issues that were raised in the context of work that the Department is doing. I think that that would be helpful to the House.

There is absolutely no doubt that the organisations represented in the Organised Crime Task Force are extremely well aware of the problem of human trafficking and are committed to tackling the issue and to ensuring that victims are rescued. They are also committed to ensuring that the victims receive the support and care that they need. They do that alongside dealing with those who perpetrate such crimes. However, a debate like this is useful in helping to raise awareness, although there is no doubt that there is perhaps a greater awareness in Northern Ireland than in some other areas.

Human trafficking is simply, in many senses, a part of organised crime, although it is probably the foulest of all such crimes. It is clear that those who carry it out are engaged in a range of other organised crimes. My three key objectives in tackling trafficking are in line with the motion: supporting the victims; bringing the traffickers before the courts; and raising public awareness. Given what was said, I should, perhaps, concentrate on the first and the last objectives, although Members should be well aware that the Department is fully conscious of the issues involved in bringing traffickers before the courts and in supporting the police and other agencies. Members will undoubtedly be very grateful, as am I, for the fact that, last week, we saw the first conviction for human trafficking in Northern Ireland.

As the motion highlighted, we need to acknowledge that trafficking is an issue not solely for women but for men and children. Nor is it simply an issue of sexual exploitation, although that is probably the largest element. There are also issues of labour exploitation and domestic servitude. As has been highlighted, the different areas may overlap. We know that 18 victims were trafficked into Northern Ireland for sexual exploitation and five for the purposes of forced labour in 2010-11. As a result, we have seen two children supported by social services. I believe that, contrary to the

impression that was given at times, the Police Service and the UK Border Agency are genuinely proactive in addressing the area. There may be concerns about what happened in the past, but we see very strong engagement by the Police Service. That engagement is evident in the involvement of those who get specific training at local district level and of those in the organised crime branch. Through such co-ordination, they ensure that they maximise the efforts of the specialist expertise and the local, on-the-ground knowledge of what is happening in each district across Northern Ireland. That specialist training for the organised crime branch includes training in the recognition and investigation of human trafficking.

We have seen very positive relationships developed by the police with a wide range of organisations and community representatives to help those who come in touch with trafficking. A strategy has been developed for brothel searches to maximise the opportunities to obtain the trust of potential victims. One of the key issues is that those who do not trust the authorities in their home country may have great difficulty in dealing with police officers when they come into contact with them here. We are working hard to develop a victim-centred approach. After that, comprehensive care plans are put in place involving both the voluntary sector and social services as regards the duties to children, although I note the point that Conall McDevitt made about the Human Rights Commission report of three years ago and the serious issues about the services provided and the different agencies that have responsibilities there.

The services provided for adult victims include safe and appropriate accommodation; help with day-to-day living and travel costs; information in a language that they can understand; help to access emergency and non-emergency healthcare, which may be sexual health services, general GP services, dental or specialist medical treatment; and access to other services around support, immigration and counselling. I cannot praise too highly the work done in that respect by Women's Aid and Migrant Helpline, services that are available to all adult victims of trafficking and not just those who co-operate with the police, although I accept the point about wider coverage, which I will come to. I thank Women's Aid and Migrant Helpline for their work. I am pleased to confirm that, just this week, I renewed their contracts for providing the services.

Conall McDevitt and Anna Lo referred to the subsequent treatment of victims of trafficking and the issue of what is in practice only a 45-day period of reflection. Of course, that issue is not devolved, but, if I can take my ministerial hat off for a minute, I accept that there are real issues as to how that is seen overall. I will ensure that the agencies that have responsibility to the Department of Justice do their best to ensure that confidence is built with victims to ensure that they can use that period of reflection wisely.

The motion refers to the fact that Northern Ireland is both a destination and a transit camp, and a number of Members mentioned that. That is why it is extremely important that we develop good working relations with neighbouring jurisdictions. For example, people from an Garda Síochána and other agencies in the South are represented on a number of OCTF subgroups, including human trafficking and immigration. Indeed, Assistant Chief Constable Drew Harris said that the relationship is not just one of co-operation; it is one of joint working.

Last week, I had a tripartite meeting in this Building with the Irish Justice Minister, Alan Shatter, and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Kenny MacAskill. One of the topics that we discussed was human trafficking. It is an issue that features at virtually every meeting of the intergovernmental agreement on co-operation on criminal justice matters North/South. When I met Kenny MacAskill, the Scottish Police Services Authority, the PSNI and the UK Border Agency at Loch Ryan in the autumn, serious attention was given to dealing with trafficking across the North Channel. I certainly propose to attend the next meeting of the interdepartmental ministerial group on human trafficking convened by the Home Office.

There are also proposals in a Bill that I have waiting for Executive approval that deals with notification orders for those who cross the border into Northern Ireland. At the moment, an Garda Síochána will inform the PSNI if somebody who is subject to notification requirements in the Republic crosses the border. That will place an individual requirement. When we consider that we also have issues of people moving between Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, we can see that there is no particular benefit in a single sex offender register for Ireland. The important issue is to join up the connections in every part of these islands.

We also have to consider the issue of tackling demand in the OCTF strategy. Members referred to the fact that it is a criminal offence to pay for the sexual services of a woman who is subject to force. I hope that that will make anybody tempted in that direction think seriously about it and the fact that that simple act will give them a criminal record. People should be extremely careful of their responsibilities in that respect. I have also asked the Home Office to review the remit of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority to include construction, hospitality and the catering industry alongside agriculture and fisheries, which will provide protection for some victims of forced labour.

4.30 pm

The Department has been active in seeking to raise awareness of human trafficking, particularly among the general public but also with the relevant agencies. That was why, in January of last year, we relaunched the Blue Blindfold awareness campaign, which Members have referred to, encouraging people to find out about human trafficking and to report their concerns to the police or to Crimestoppers. That campaign has a very high recognition level, considering the relatively limited sums of money that were available to spend on advertising. I urge Members, as others have done, to go to the Blue Blindfold website to get the information about the signs to look out for. If Members ensure that they are informed, they can assist their constituents who have concerns.

The key issue of OCTF's work across a number of crimes is that of changing the mindset. That covers all kinds of organised crime, but is, I believe, absolutely key in connection with the foul crime of trafficking. People need to be informed about what their exploitation is doing.

There were references in the debate to the increased penalty levels. In fact, Anna Lo quoted the average sentence that somebody might receive. Holding someone in servitude can receive a maximum sentence of 14 years, and I suspect that across the range of offences, that is adequate. Members have to recognise that sentencing is, of course, a

matter for the judiciary. However, the fact that we have now had a conviction for human trafficking — and other cases are in the pipeline — shows that things are moving.

I welcome the fact that the Committee Chair gave the commitment of the Committee to legislate further if required. We are looking at the EU directive, and I am pleased to say that as the law stands in Northern Ireland, we have very little to do to deal with it. Opting into the directive will ensure that the UK as a whole remains at the forefront of world action in this area. We require two relatively minor changes to primary legislation, which would include extending powers to prosecute UK nationals who commit offences anywhere in the world and dealing with trafficking within the United Kingdom. Those changes fall within the competence of the Assembly.

In answer to the point raised by Lord Morrow, consultation will, I hope, begin shortly, after I have discussed the issue with the Justice Committee and the Executive. It is possible that we will have amendments to our law in place, in line with the EU directive, by April of next year. That is also in line with the proposals for England and Wales. We are not, in that sense, lagging in any way behind other UK jurisdictions. The consultation will allow people to give wider opinions as to how they see the problem and to make any further suggestions for what they believe may be necessary.

In her proposing speech, Caitríona Ruane called for a public inquiry. Measures are already in place to monitor our response to human trafficking, including those of the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which has the cheery acronym of GRETA. It has responsibility for ensuring that member states comply with the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Northern Ireland was inspected as part of a UK-wide inspection in October last year, and we await the report of that evaluation. I assure Members that if the report makes recommendations, I will take them to the relevant justice agencies to ensure that we maintain our position at the forefront of dealing with this crime. The fact that we have opted into the EU directive and are fully involved with the Council of Europe convention are indications that this jurisdiction is moving forward. Therefore, I am not sure what an inquiry would add to that.

I turn now to the motion and the amendment and the remarks made generally around the Chamber. This is something about which we can say that, with the slight query that I raised about the penalty levels as opposed to the judicial application, there was unanimity in the debate, and I have great pleasure in maintaining that unanimity in my response. I hope that I have shown that many of the points covered in the debate are issues on which the Department is taking action, and will continue to take action, to ensure that we protect the vulnerable, deal with victims and take action against the perpetrators of this crime.

In conclusion, I would like to praise the NGOs that work most closely with us, particularly Women's Aid and Migrant Helpline, but also other voluntary and church groups across Northern Ireland that are raising awareness in their areas. I add my words of praise for the police, not just the PSNI but the cross-border co-operation that we receive from an Garda Síochána and the co-operation that we receive across the Irish Sea from police services in Scotland, Wales and England. I noticed that, unusually in debates such as this,

there was praise for the Department and the actions being taken. I was a trifle shocked by that but am grateful to have received it. I am happy to notice that the House has recognised the positive work being done by the Department and the various agencies that co-operate on the matter. That is a sign that we can collectively take a degree of pride in. I was slightly disappointed by the comments of Sydney Anderson, who spoke immediately before me, because I understand that at the meeting in Portadown to which the Member referred, Peter Bone, the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking at Westminster, said that Northern Ireland was at the leading edge of work within these islands. We should collectively take pride in that. We should certainly not suggest that we do not keep up our efforts in that area.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Sinn Féin Members for tabling the motion and my party colleague Anna Lo for moving the amendment. I welcome the unanimous sense of repulsion from the House today for this brutal crime and the united commitment to ensuring that we tackle the problem in as robust a manner as possible.

The UK Anti-Slavery Society was founded in 1823 and the Slavery Abolition Act was delivered in 1833, so it is a brutal horror that, in 2012, the House must face what has rightly been described as modern-day slavery. It is an international problem, and it is a problem for humanity. It is one of the most disgusting crimes in society, as Members have rightly said. It is believed that over 12 million people are trafficked internationally every year, 79% of whom are trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, with the vast majority being women and girls.

My party colleague Anna Lo has rightly described human trafficking as a crime that generates profit from human suffering and represents a vulgar abuse of the most fundamental human right of freedom. I thank Members for supporting that view today. I welcome the first conviction last week for human trafficking offences, and I, too, commend the work of the PSNI and the Organised Crime Task Force. I welcome the reassurance that we have received today from the Justice Minister that Northern Ireland will set an unerring commitment to bring the full force of the law to bear on perpetrators of such inhumane criminality.

As many Members have agreed, we are not only a transit country for human trafficking but a destination point for this heinous crime. My party's amendment seeks to emphasise the three-strand approach to improving our response to human trafficking — prevention, prosecution and protection — and has delivered a number of important messages that Members throughout the House have supported.

We must tackle the demand for sexual exploitation, and there has been unanimous agreement in that regard. We need a greater public debate and greater public awareness in order to prevent this brutality and to better understand the full extent of the crime. Any members of the public who suspect that illegal activity of this kind is taking place must report it to Crimestoppers or the police.

We must also improve our prosecution rate for the perpetrators of abuse and ensure that we have appropriate protection in place for the victim. We need a victim-centred approach that gives people who have been brutally violated medical, psychological, social, legal and immigration

assistance, as has been mentioned, so that they can make the fullest possible recovery and feel safe and secure enough to make a full contribution to the prosecution of the crime. I, too, agree that we need to give serious consideration to our moral responsibility to work towards removing the threat of imminent deportation for victims of human trafficking, and we have to work with other institutions to meet our obligation by way of more robust legislation, be it from Europe or Westminster.

The Assembly and Executive must take seriously their responsibility to respond to this international and brutal crime in the most robust manner possible. My colleague Anna Lo has established a cross-party working group to ensure that we deliver a united response, and I encourage all MLAs to consider contributing to the group's work. We have to work together to combat human trafficking and organised crime, and I welcome the House's unanimous support for the motion and the Minister's commitment to work to that end.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Deputy Speaker. From listening to the debate, I think that everybody is united in their condemnation of this vile crime, and I am glad that everyone is sending out a very clear message to the perpetrators.

Before I start summing up what Members said, I want to say that it is worth remembering that human trafficking is a hidden crime. Members talked about the fact that it is not something that is in your face. A lot of people, therefore, do not even realise that it is happening on their doorstep and in their communities. Although we have debated the issue in the House before, I think that it is very important to keep it on the political agenda. People need to know that human trafficking is happening not just in another country or thousands of miles away but in the North of Ireland today. That is an important point.

The brutal nature of the crime cannot be overstated, and Members talked about that as well. We also heard about some of the human stories. A number of Members mentioned the Blue Blindfold campaign, and to get it into the heads of Members in the Chamber and people in our communities what human trafficking really means, I want to read out the following quote:

"Try to imagine being promised a good job abroad. You're taken thousands of miles away from home to a strange country. The job doesn't exist. Your passport is taken from you. You're intimidated, petrified, penniless and trapped in a vicious cycle of debt. And you've no idea what your rights are. You could be sold on to become forced labour on a farm, in a cannabis factory or as a domestic slave. If you're a teenage girl, you could be tricked into forced prostitution and made to have sex with 40 strangers a day."

— some Members talked about even children being the victims of such crimes —

"You're held against your will, physically and emotionally. Try to escape and you, or worse, your entire family face the threat of violent retribution, even death."

That is what the victims of human trafficking are thinking and going through day and daily. People in our communities need to wake up and to see that that is happening on their doorstep.

I want to look back on some of the points made by Members. My colleague Caitríona Ruane, in opening the debate, put forward some very glaring statistics. For example, from 2009 to 2011, 73 victims were rescued from human trafficking by the PSNI, which said that that was just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, £500,000 is spent on prostitution in the North every week, and 88 brothels exist across the North. Those statistics make it clear just how common and prevalent it is. We heard that women, men and children are all victims. My colleague paid tribute to Women's Aid and the other voluntary organisations that do sterling work in supporting victims, and I think that it is worth mentioning that again.

Anna Lo, in moving the amendment, referred to human trafficking as a global issue and said that it is one of the greatest evils facing the world today. I think that she is right about that. Human trafficking is the third largest source of income for criminal gangs, next only to arms and drugs. In fact, some gangs are actually switching from drug dealing to human trafficking because it is safer, in that there is less chance of getting caught or of being given a long sentence if they are caught.

Prevention, prosecution and protection are very important. We then went on to the issue of supply and demand. We really do need to eliminate demand. I think that other Members spoke about that as well. People who engage in prostitution know that some women and young girls are being forced into it, and that is rape. That is what it is, so let us call a spade a spade. Those people, in my view, should be charged with rape. People who know that and are willing to do it should be charged with that offence. Members called on members of the public not to be afraid to lift the phone to ring the PSNI if they suspect that that is happening to someone close to them. At the very worst, you will look silly, but you could be saving somebody from this crime. So, it is very important that if people have any suspicions at all, they ring the police.

4.45 pm

The prosecution rate is still too low. Anna, I think that you said that the average sentence was 4-6 years. The Minister talked about 14 years being the maximum sentence: we need to see those sentences being handed down to stop this happening and to send a very clear message to people who are engaging in this vile crime.

Paul Givan mentioned the scale and the nature of the crime. He also said that in some cases, although maybe not here in the North, human trafficking had been used to harvest human organs. He talked about the demand being created in society and said that we need to tackle that demand.

In his contribution, Ross Hussey mentioned the Blue Blindfold campaign. I agree: if you want to get some information and to have your eyes opened, you should go onto the campaign's website, which provides startling facts, some of which are very difficult to read.

Alban Maginness mentioned the co-operation between the PSNI and the Garda Síochána and made the point that the North of Ireland is used as a transit point. It is also important to mention that the victims are not always foreign nationals; there are Scottish, Welsh and English people and people who live in the South of Ireland who are subjected to this crime and trafficked into the North. So, it does not

just happen to people from countries far away; it happens internally as well.

Mr Maginness talked about people being repatriated to their countries and said that it was important that they go willingly and are not forced to go back, because sometimes when they are forced to go back, they are forced into such slavery again.

Maurice Morrow told us a vivid story about "victim A", who was a 14-year-old girl from China, and the brutality and suffering that she had to endure after being forced into prostitution. He also talked about "victim B", a Bosnian girl who went into a housekeeping position. Those types of stories need to be told, because we need to realise that this is happening to real people.

In his contribution, my colleague Alex Maskey also talked about the blind eye that had been shown to the problem. Some of the PSNI representatives who gave evidence to the Committee said that prior to 2007, people did not think that human trafficking was happening here. Although some were saying that it was happening, people did not believe it. Most people were, perhaps unwittingly, turning a blind eye to the issue. Now, it is a very real problem and everybody is working together to tackle it. It is very important that we continue to work together like that.

David McIlveen explained that prostitution is a big business and said that £25 million a year is spent on such services. He said that something has to be done to reduce the demand for prostitution and that there has to be a holistic approach to that.

Basil McCrea said that all forms of prostitution are forms of exploitation. David McIlveen said that as well, and I agree. No woman would choose to go into prostitution. Women become prostitutes because of their financial situation, and anyone who would say any different would need to talk to some of the women affected directly to find out their reasons.

Conall McDevitt said that trafficking was in the class A of heinous crimes. He also mentioned some of the people who are involved in the local car wash industry. I was not aware of a lot of that information, but it was very disturbing to hear that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Ms J McCann: Sorry, I will not be able to go into great detail about what the Minister said, but he did say some very positive things about how he will combat human trafficking. I was glad to hear him say that. We just need to send a very clear message: this is a heinous crime and its perpetrators have to be brought to justice.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increase in human trafficking where people are brought in illegally and forced into a life of sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude; or are transported onward to other jurisdictions for similar purposes; and calls

on the Executive to use all their powers to raise public awareness of this crime to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice and that victims are given the support and help they need, regardless of whether they are co-operating with the law enforcement authorities; and further calls on the Executive to meet the obligations set out by the Council of Europe convention (2005) and the new EU directive (2011) on action against trafficking in human beings by addressing the demand for sexual and labour exploitation, increasing penalty levels, adopting a victim-centred approach and implementing effective preventative measures.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Millennium Way, Lurgan

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the proposer of the topic shall have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes in which to respond. All other Members who wish to speak on this occasion will have eight minutes.

Mr Moutray: I assure all those present that I will not take 15 minutes to build a case. I am delighted to have secured this Adjournment debate calling for the completion of Millennium Way in Lurgan. I will start way back in 1976. To be more precise, in fact, I will start on 11 May 1976, when the then Minister with responsibility for the environment, a Mr J D Concannon, better known to those who remember as Don Concannon, wrote to the then MP for Armagh, the late Harold McCusker, concerning the construction and completion of Millennium Way.

Mr Deputy Speaker, if you will just permit me, I would like to read a short section of the letter for us to get a flavour for the fact that that stretch of road has been promised to the people of Lurgan since 1976. The letter states:

“Dear Mr McCusker,

You will recall a recent telephone conversation with my office on behalf of the Lurgan Chamber of Trade when you requested details of the current programming of the Lurgan through-pass. The provisional five-year major works programme presently being considered by my Department incorporates the entire Lurgan through-pass from Edward Street to the Gilford Road. The programme’s start dates are: Edward Street to Union Street, 1978-79; Union Street to Malcolm Road, 1980-81; Malcolm Road to Gilford Road, 1980-81.”

Members will be aware that it is the Malcolm Road to Gilford Road section that we are speaking about, and that it, to date, has not been constructed. I have no problem in making this letter available to the Minister for his perusal so that he can add it to the file that is sitting in the Department gathering dust, and after these 30 years, I imagine that the dust is probably quite thick.

In all seriousness, however, for 30 years, traders and elected representatives have, in my opinion, been given the runaround by being given promises and commitments, as was the case in the letter that I just read out, that were, unfortunately, to no avail.

I am aware that Minister Kennedy is familiar with this scheme. When I met him back in November, along with members of the Chamber of Trade and Lurgan Forward and Mr Joe Johnston, principal of Lurgan Junior High School, the Minister expressed a desire to have the matter drawn to a conclusion and the road completed, but the funding of the scheme was where the difficulties lay. However, I would like to take this opportunity to impress upon the Minister the need for the completion of Millennium Way.

Lurgan suffered greatly at the hands of IRA terrorists for too many years, having been bombed on two occasions, when the very heart of the town was ripped to pieces. It has received bad press because of the divisions in the town. As a result, it still suffers from the effects of the Troubles, coupled with the economic downturn.

Business owners who have remained faithful to the town are keen to try to assist regeneration and are keen to progress. However, the current situation with regard to access and the bottleneck caused by the railway lines means that there is a need for the completion of Millennium Way, which ultimately will give traffic the opportunity to bypass the town centre entirely. That would, undoubtedly, open it up for more businesses and shoppers, and it will give those wanting just to travel through the town to another destination an opportunity to bypass the town centre. It is notable that since 1976, the Chamber of Trade has been consistent in calling for this. It remains committed to it and must be commended for its efforts.

The completion of the final phase of Millennium Way would open up further development opportunities in the town and on the outskirts, as it would open up development sites within the town boundary. Furthermore, it would assist in achieving what the public realm works seek to achieve: to make Lurgan’s town centre more pedestrian-friendly. At present, there is gridlock in the town, particularly at rush hour, with queues backed up. The link road would give motorists who have no reason to travel via the town centre the option to bypass it. Phase 1 of the public realm works has been a huge success in changing the aesthetics of the town. We are delighted that phase 2 is imminent, as it will further enhance the town visually and bring about a sense of completion. However, given the significant funding that has been given by the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for the public realm works, it is of utmost importance that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) buy into that opportunity to make real change in Lurgan. Often, in the House, we talk about collaborative working and the need for a joined-up approach. That would be a joined-up approach that would deliver for traders, road users and the general public.

In addition to the business folks who desire completion, so, too, do the parents, pupils and principal of Lurgan Junior High School. The school has 618 pupils, all of whom have to access the school via Toberhewny Lane. It, too, is a complete bottleneck, particularly at school drop-off and collection times. The access has serious health and safety implications owing to a lack of space, and the Millennium Way project would give the school an additional access point. Furthermore, in the past couple of years, the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB), along with Sport Northern Ireland, Craigavon Borough Council and the Big Lottery Fund, has spent significant money on developing two state-of-the-art 3G pitches, both of which have to be accessed via the school. That leaves the school vulnerable, particularly when the pitches are being used after school hours. If Millennium Way were completed, direct access to the top-of-the-range 3G pitches would be available, which would bring significant benefits to those who use those excellent and much-needed facilities.

In conclusion, the cost of that work has been indicated by the Minister to be about £6 million or £7 million. In the

grand scheme of things, that is not a significant amount; it represents a minute percentage of the Department's overall budget. Therefore, in tabling the Adjournment topic, I urge the Minister to sanction the completion of Millennium Way in Lurgan as soon as possible before the town is further affected by the economic downturn and daily significant traffic problems.

Mr O'Dowd: I support the Adjournment topic. As the previous Member to speak said, it is a long-running issue in Lurgan; it dates from as far back as 1976 and, perhaps, beyond. It is an important factor in Lurgan's redevelopment. As has been pointed out, through the decades — perhaps even the centuries — Lurgan has seen significant troubles and events from all quarters. However, it has undergone regeneration, and its town centre is a fine example of how towns have benefitted from the town regeneration scheme, which is sponsored by DSD. It now has significant plazas and street improvements, which greatly enhance the look of the town. It is a place where businesses should be supported in developing and moving forward.

However, as with all such development, infrastructure is required. Not only has the first phase of the Millennium Way project eased traffic congestion, it has opened up the area known as the backlands of Lurgan to further development. Although, unfortunately, the recession has affected that area, that is investment for the future. A significant proportion of land that was once not open to development is now available for future development. Phase 2 is an opportunity to open up further land for future development for commercial use, business use and, perhaps, housing. Therefore, Millennium Way is not simply about a road. It is about opening up Lurgan to future development and encouraging businesses that are already there and others to come along in the future.

It is a long-running issue. I am acutely aware of the financial pressures bearing down on Departments. On at least one occasion, I had the previous Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, in the town to have discussions with Lurgan Forward, the company that has been very active in promoting the project, to look at options for how to move it forward.

One option being explored was to open up land so that a private developer could contribute to the road project. Unfortunately, as I said, the recession has hit us, and that is no longer an option.

5.00 pm

However, if the Minister can identify funds in his limited budget, the development of Millennium Way will significantly improve infrastructure in Lurgan and allow the town to develop further. Its development would be a vote of confidence for businesses already there and would allow other businesses to come into the town centre and the outer areas. As Mr Moutray said, it would also ease traffic congestion around Lurgan Junior High School and address a number of other major issues.

I support the project. The Minister will, no doubt, be aware of the issues. It is important that we raise the profile of the project once again and if they are available in the Department, moneys be directed to it.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Member who tabled the Adjournment topic for enabling us to debate an issue that, as we have heard, is of great importance to the people and businesses of Lurgan.

Upper Bann MLAs had the opportunity to meet representatives of Lurgan traders here at Stormont last June. We heard their concerns at first hand. Indeed, we need only take a short drive down Lurgan Main Street to see those concerns for ourselves. It is not good for a town to have so many businesses that have closed and businesses that are going through tough economic times. Lurgan has been especially hard hit. The traders told us that, in some cases, their properties' rates exceed the rents and that they find it incredibly hard to get tenants for their premises. I commend the longstanding work of the Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation, which I visited recently along with party colleagues. It is working very hard to bring new small businesses to the Craigavon borough and to incubate them.

The benefits of the completion of Millennium Way have long been clear. Indeed, over the years, those benefits have been raised a number of times with successive Regional Development Ministers in the House by Upper Bann MLAs in broad agreement. The completion of the project would provide an economic corridor for Lurgan. It is an important element of moving Lurgan forward, socially and economically. Its completion would provide important opportunities for existing and new businesses to expand in Lurgan, generating local economic growth and creating much-needed jobs.

Upper Bann MLAs from across all parties have helped to support the Lurgan branch of the YMCA, which is engaged in the construction of a new purpose-built centre. Once constructed, the centre will be on the edge of Millennium Way. Access to it would benefit greatly from the completion of the project. The Ulster Unionist Party in Upper Bann has lobbied the Minister for Regional Development since he took up his position in May 2011. We have made the case for Lurgan, and I am hopeful that the project will be completed under an Ulster Unionist Minister. Last October, I asked the Minister for an update in a question for written answer and had two meetings with him at which this important issue was discussed. In answer, the Minister advised me that the preliminary design of the Millennium Way scheme had been completed and planning approval obtained.

I am aware that funding is a stumbling block. Having been given the opportunity to speak on the issue today, I again urge the Minister to ensure that Roads Service completes all the necessary steps to progress the scheme through the statutory processes so that when funding does become available, it can commence immediately.

I am sure that other Members will join me in welcoming the Minister's announcement last Friday of a £3.6 million investment in rail infrastructure in the borough. That will totally transform and modernise facilities at Portadown railway station. The Ulster Unionist Party is delivering on the issues that matter for the people and businesses of the Craigavon borough. I press the Minister again to do all that he can to progress the completion of what I have called the economic corridor of the Millennium Way. I hope that its completion will not be a long way off.

Mrs D Kelly: I commend my colleague from Upper Bann for securing the debate. It highlights an issue that is important for the development of Lurgan, not only for commercial reasons but for obvious traffic management reasons. Is it churlish of me to say that it would be quite a landmark achievement if an Ulster Unionist Minister were to complete the road, given that, some 30 years ago, the MP for the area of upper Bann stopped the work when money was available? That fact is in the archives of the 'Lurgan Mail', and I have articulated it on previous occasions. Let us hope that the Ulster Unionists finally finish the work that the people desired some 30 years ago.

Members who know the area well will be aware that there is substantial brownfield development on both sides of Main Street in Lurgan. Millennium Way would go some distance to freeing up and providing additional opportunities for economic and commercial investment in the town centre. I am sure that colleagues referred to the traffic congestion problems that people who travel along Main Street in Lurgan experience. A lot of that — I am sure that the Minister has been lobbied about the issue on numerous occasions — is caused by the unique situation in Lurgan in relation to the William Street crossing and the fact that the railway station cuts off a main part of the town and the arterial route from the M1.

Many years ago, Craigavon Borough Council and the Department had a temporary requirement for land; I think that it is where the Classic Mineral Water Company factory is located. Some land was set aside to provide a better road between William Street and Edward Street to avoid some of the town centre. I ask you, Minister, to resurrect some of those proposals and to look at how that could be achieved, given the modern-day requirements of travellers.

The traffic signalling in Edward Street is another problem that adds to travellers' difficulties. Many years ago, traders in that area campaigned against a roundabout, but it would be useful if a survey could be carried out to look at whether the traffic lights are an advantage. Many people say that they are a disadvantage because, as Millennium Way is not completed, people continue to use the main streets in Lurgan. There can be a huge traffic backlog because of the various traffic lights, pedestrian crossings and the railway. I would be very grateful, Minister, for your Department's urgent appraisal of the whole traffic situation and the development that is required to get Lurgan back on its feet with the completion of Millennium Way.

Mr S Anderson: I congratulate my colleague Stephen Moutray for securing the debate. As an MLA for Upper Bann, I have a desire for that stretch of road to be completed. It has been promised for many years, as has been outlined by my colleague.

It is a timely debate, given the further spend that is due to be made in Lurgan by the Department for Social Development on the completion of the public realm works, to which Members have referred. In a previous role in Craigavon Borough Council, I was involved in the public realm phase 1 in Lurgan and Portadown. The overarching aim of the works was to help to make the towns more accessible to shoppers and the public. Phase 2 for Lurgan, which is imminent, will see the completion of the public realm works. However, it will not achieve the aims of making the town less busy for vehicles and more appealing to

pedestrians unless Millennium Way is completed. That will allow an alternative route for traffic that wishes to bypass the town. The current layout does not lend itself to that because of the bottleneck that is created by the railway crossing. Traders, motorists and developers have lobbied for the road's completion for many years. The fact that it has been promised is somewhat disheartening for traders who are struggling in the economic downturn.

It goes without saying that Lurgan, like many towns throughout Northern Ireland, is struggling economically, with many businesses having closed and many vacant properties existing in the town centre. However, if the completion of Millennium Way were to take place, it would assist in regenerating the town and bring about new development opportunities. The stretch of road in question would open up development sites that lie within the town boundary, allowing for business growth and expansion. Additionally, the conservation rules within Lurgan town centre are undoubtedly hampering growth and locking much land that is available to the rear of the town centre properties. However, if Millennium Way were to be completed, I believe that it would open up new lands and greater opportunities that would allow existing businesses to expand and would assist in attracting new businesses to the area.

The Department for Regional Development needs to take its lead from DSD, which is delivering in Lurgan and seeks to bring about real change to the aesthetics of the town. However, ultimately, unless the completion of this road complements the DSD project, it will not meet its aim of making the town centre more accessible to shoppers and the general public.

Millennium Way, if completed, would help to alleviate the serious traffic problem that has existed for many years. Its completion will assist in opening up land for development, thus fostering economic growth in the town, and would help existing businesses that wish to expand but cannot, owing to the stringent conservation legislation that exists in the town centre.

On the back of all that, I call on the Minister to dig deep and to allocate funding for this much-needed project, so that this road can be completed as soon as possible. After 30 or 40 years — or what my colleague said — it is well overdue.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):

I thank the sponsor of this important debate and the Members who contributed to it. I very carefully noted the comments and concerns expressed by Members and I, too, welcome the opportunity to debate the completion of Millennium Way in Lurgan. I am heartened, not only at the cross-community support, but at the cross-party support that we heard across the Chamber.

Millennium Way, which extends from Edward Street to Malcolm Road on the west side of Lurgan town centre, was completed a number of years ago as part of a comprehensive development plan. In addition to opening up land on that side of the town centre for development, the new road provides a high-quality distributor road, and an alternative route, allowing motorists to avoid the congestion that occurs on a daily basis along Market Street and High Street, especially during times of peak traffic flow. I understand that there has always been an expectation that Millennium Way would be extended southwards, from

Malcolm Road to the junction of Gilford Road and Banbridge Road.

As Members outlined, I received considerable representations about the extension of that road from elected representatives, traders and local businesspeople, and from the principal of Lurgan Junior High, Mr Johnston, and I have taken the opportunity to meet local traders and elected representatives to discuss their concerns.

I can fully understand the benefits that an extension of Millennium Way, from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road, could be expected to provide, including the relieving of peak hour traffic congestion on the road network in that part of Lurgan. In addition, that improvement would improve the attractiveness of Millennium Way as a through-traffic route generally.

Following the publication of 'Shaping Our Future — the Regional Development Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025' and the 'Regional Transportation Strategy for Northern Ireland 2002-2012', the Department developed three transport plans, including the 'Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015'. The proposal to extend Millennium Way in Lurgan is included as one of a number of proposed highway improvement schemes in the 'Sub-Regional Transport Plan 2015'. Roads Service, with the help of its technical advisers, has developed plans for the scheme and initially received planning approval in December 2006. However, funding was not available at that time and the scheme did not progress. Roads Service has confirmed that an application to renew the planning approval was submitted and was subsequently validated by the Planning Service in January 2012, just last month.

5.15 pm

I can confirm that the traffic and economic assessments that have been undertaken indicate that the scheme would provide good value for money, with transportation benefits, including peak-time traffic benefits on the road network in that part of Lurgan, exceeding the costs involved in providing this improvement. However, the limited funding that has been available for capital improvements has been fully committed to a programme of major improvement schemes on the strategic road network, and as indicated in my Department's 2008 investment delivery plan for roads, current funding levels do not enable Roads Service to promote improvement schemes that are on the non-strategic road network. I advise that neither Millennium Way nor its extension to Gilford Road form part of the strategic road network. However, as I have indicated on other occasions, the timing of future road improvements will be dependent on the resources that are available to develop and construct those schemes. In due course, the funding levels will materialise from the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, which has been published for consultation.

I assure Members that I acknowledge the arguments that they made today describing the need to extend Millennium Way from Malcolm Road to Gilford Road. I am convinced of the merits of that scheme, as I am convinced of the merits of other schemes about which I have received similar representations. As the Minister for Regional Development, I want to see improvements across the road network that will enhance safety, reduce journey times and provide value for money. However, there are sizeable pressures on the

Executive's capital funding and on the capital budget of my Department. As a result, unfortunately, difficult choices will have to be made over the next few years to deliver the best services and infrastructure in the areas of water and sewerage, roads and public transport.

When the funding is confirmed, I intend to consider the spending priorities across my Department. I will explore opportunities to bring forward non-strategic improvement schemes such as the extension of Millennium Way in Lurgan. I point out that the regional development strategy understandably gives preference to the needs of the strategic road network. However, I understand the frustration and the calls that I have heard not only today but since taking up my post as Minister last May.

It has been a very long time indeed since Don Concannon wrote to the late Harold McCusker MP. Therefore, I understand the frustrations of local representatives, and particularly of the traders in Lurgan, about this issue. Indeed, that point was made by the Member who secured the Adjournment debate, Mr Moutray. He also mentioned the fact that Lurgan Junior High School would greatly benefit from such a scheme.

Mr O'Dowd highlighted the fact that the scheme could provide significant regeneration to Lurgan and would open up the town and ease traffic congestion. I accept and agree with those points.

I thank Jo-Anne Dobson for her contribution and for her ongoing representations on behalf of people in Lurgan and the Upper Bann constituency generally. Along with her colleague Mr Gardiner, who is unfortunately unable to attend the debate today, she continues to press the case for the extension of Millennium Way at all times and at every opportunity. I assure her that we are moving forward as best we can with the statutory approvals that are required. Indeed, I mentioned the renewal of the planning application in my speech.

I was slightly concerned by Mrs Kelly's rather churlish attitude. She seemed to blame the Ulster Unionist Party, but I can be responsible only for the period in which I am Minister. I tactfully suggest that others had responsibilities in the past but did not bring the scheme forward. I will investigate the issues that she raised about the land belonging to the Classic Mineral Water Company and the traffic lights.

I assure her and other Members, including Mr Anderson, who supported the case for the scheme that, as roads Minister, I am in the business of improving the overall network. I understand the significant benefits that the scheme would bring to the traders in Lurgan and the town in general, and I will seek to do whatever I can, within the existing financial constraints, to bring forward the scheme as quickly as possible.

Adjourned at 5.21 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 February 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matters of the Day

Mr Andrew Allen

Mr Speaker: Martina Anderson has sought leave to make a statement on the death of Andrew Allen, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. I will call Ms Anderson to speak for up to three minutes on the subject. I will then call Members from the other parties, as agreed with the party Whips. Those Members will also have up to three minutes in which to speak. As Members know, the convention is that there will be no opportunity for interventions or questions on the matter. I certainly will not take any points of order until the matter is dealt with. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Speaker. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I extend our deepest condolences to Andrew Allen's extended family and friends. I visited the home yesterday evening, and the deep sense of hurt and pain that the Allen family are feeling was very clear. They are a very respected family, originally from the Top of the Hill area in Derry, and they are known by many. There is a lot of hurt and pain because of what happened not just among the relatives and friends but across the society of Derry and Donegal.

There has been a lot of speculation as to why and by whom Andrew Allen was murdered. I will not add to that speculation at all except to say that the silence of those who murdered Andrew speaks volumes. People in Derry and across Donegal have spoken in a united voice in condemnation of what has happened. Their rejection of those who murdered Andrew Allen has been heard by many. If people have any information, they should hand it to the gardaí and speak directly to them or to any other relevant authority for that matter.

There is a duty and a responsibility on all of us in the Chamber but especially those from the Foyle constituency. Many of us have stood together, shoulder to shoulder, to speak with a united voice in order to advance peace and the political process in which we are involved. I will say now what we said back then: an attack on anyone is an attack on us all, and an attack anywhere in our city is an attack on all the people who live there. If we want to go forward in advancing peace and the political process, we should speak in that tone about Andrew Allen's family, his parents and the circumstances surrounding his death. I think that the people in our city want to see us united in our condemnation. All of us must continue to that end. The self-appointed vigilantes, whose murderous actions only served to undermine the

fabric of our community, must be condemned by all of us with one voice.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member of the time.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Campbell: I join in the universal condemnation, not just in the House but across Londonderry and Northern Ireland as a whole, of the brutal murder of Andrew Allen. He was murdered in the Irish Republic but was, as stated, originally a resident of the Top of the Hill area in Londonderry. The vicious killers who carried out his murder at the weekend speak for no one. However, as we have said repeatedly and on many occasions, the fact that such people speak for no one does not stop them killing people. Their actions reap universal condemnation, which is right, proper and appropriate, but that universal condemnation, in and of itself, does not bring them to justice. The only thing that will bring the killers to justice is the evidence that the police and, in this case, the guards in the Republic can accumulate in order to bring a case against them and get convictions in a court of law. That is what we need to see.

Everyone who can give information should do so, be they people who were in the area at the time, political representatives or anyone else. This type of activity has no place in our society in 2012, just as it had no place during any period of the past century, be it the 1970s, 1980s or 1990s. Hopefully, this will be the last occasion on which we have to do this. We support totally the family and express our condolences to them.

Mr Hussey: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I express our sincere sympathy to the Allen family following this tragic murder in Buncrana in County Donegal last Thursday. It is hard to imagine how anybody could go up to somebody's house and carry out a murder in the way that this murder was carried out. What type of people are we dealing with? Are they dissident republicans? What are they? Nothing can justify it, nothing at all. To anybody who believes that what those people did was right I say that it was not right. Gregory Campbell made the point that we do not want to stand here again in the future to condemn such actions.

Our sympathy must be with the Allen family. Mr Allen was a young man, 24 years old, with two children. His whole life was ahead of him, but some individual took that life away. The only justice is through a court of law, and, hopefully, the people responsible will be brought before a court of law. Anyone who has any information will hopefully provide that either to the Police Service of Northern Ireland or to the Garda Síochána. I wish them well in their endeavours.

However, at this time, we must condemn the murderers. At this time, our thoughts must be with the family of this young man. On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I send our sincere sympathy to the people of Londonderry and to the family who have lost this young man.

Mr Durkan: It is with great sorrow that I rise on behalf of the SDLP to condemn the cold and brutal murder of a young man from my city that was carried out last Thursday night in Donegal. By acting as judge, jury and executioner, those responsible have left two young children without a father and have robbed the Allen family of a son, a brother and an uncle. To the family, we offer our deepest sympathies at this sad and traumatic time.

I have just spoken with my colleague Pat Ramsey, who is on his way here from Mr Allen's funeral. Fr McFaul, who concelebrated the Mass, described this tragic death as meaningless. Who could say anything more about it than that? This vigilantism does not work. It has never worked. The sorrow on the streets of Derry over the past couple of days is almost matched by the anger. Andrew's mother is imploring his friends to forgo retribution. People must put their faith in the justice system, and it is our duty to give them a justice system in which they can have faith.

Acts such as this perpetuate a cycle of violence and victims, and I call on all those involved in such acts to stop now and to put an end to the suffering caused by expulsions, beatings and executions — sorry, murders. Actions such as those are beyond justification and beneath contempt. It is right that we come together in the House to condemn such terrorism. We must stay together to combat it because, together, we can defeat this terrorism.

Mr Dickson: I rise on my own behalf and that of the Alliance Party to express disgust at the actions of the dark and sinister thugs behind this brutal and callous murder. Our thoughts and condolences are with the family of Andrew Allen, whose life was cruelly ended. This barbaric murder has sent shock waves through the whole community. Those behind it have nothing to offer but pain and distress. As others said, they must be brought to justice. I encourage anyone with information to give it to the guards or to the PSNI. The community has nothing but contempt for those who carried out this brutal act.

Mr Allister: I readily join in expressing condolences to the Allen family. Murder is murder, no matter who is murdered or by whom. This is yet another foul murder in a litany of what pass as vigilante murders over the years. On this occasion, we are told that the perpetrators may fly the flag of convenience of Republican Action Against Drugs but really represent someone else. Be that as it may, that pattern is sadly familiar to us in this Province. Over the years, many have been murdered under such flags of convenience. The predecessor to this particular title was, of course, Direct Action Against Drugs, which was widely recognised as a flag of convenience for the Provisional IRA. As we think today of the murder of Andrew Allen, we should also think of the murders by those who claim to be Direct Action Against Drugs: Micky Mooney; Tony Kane; Francis Rice; Paul Devine; Francis Collins; Christopher Johnston; Martin McCrory; Ian Lyons; John Paul Devlin; Brendan Campbell; Brendan Fegan; Paul Downey; Patrick Quinn; Christopher O'Kane; Paul Daly; and Matthew Burns. All were murdered in similar fashion under that particular flag of convenience.

Ms Anderson commented that the silence of the perpetrators speaks volumes. The silence of those associated with whichever flag of convenience in those murders also spoke volumes, and I join the call that we appeal for information and evidence, not only in the murder of Andrew Allen but in the murders of the other men, whose murders have gone unanswered through the justice system. It behoves everyone, particularly those who bring cases such as this to the House, to ensure that all is done by those whom they control to solve other murders as well.

12.15 pm

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr Dickson: I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 February 2012.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this 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 13 February 2012.

Mr Speaker: As the motion has been agreed, today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Ms Sue Ramsey be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Ms Michelle Gildernew be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. — [Ms J McCann.]

Public Petition: Indigenous Fish Species

Mr Speaker: Mr Robin Swann has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr Swann: I present this petition on behalf of everyone who has an interest in the future of the indigenous fish population in our waters and on behalf of the individuals who actively gathered the petition's 5,246 signatures. It is now apparent that the indigenous fish stocks of our rivers and waterways are quickly reaching a point at which their stocks are no longer sustainable. It is important to strike an appropriate balance between the conservation of fish stocks and the fishing industry and to acknowledge that a thriving recreational angling estate has the potential to be a major tourism revenue stream for Northern Ireland. It is a sad fact that there are cases in which indigenous fish species such as dollaghan, pike and salmon are being exploited to the point at which stocks are no longer sustainable, and they are being exploited by legal and illegal practices.

We have rivers with confirmed salmon counts that show that all of them are well below their conservation limits. In fact, some of them are 50% below their conservation limits, where the killing of fish continues. We have confirmation of thousands of yards of illegal nets being seized in Lough

Neagh containing tens of thousands of dead fish every year. We have nets off our north coast that breach the EU habitats directive. The Minister has stated:

"the continued commercial exploitation of wild ... salmon and killing of salmon caught by rod and line in the DCAL jurisdiction is currently untenable. Authorising such exploitation would be inconsistent with the Departments obligations under the EC Habitats Directive and with NASCO guidelines. This could lead to significant infraction fines being imposed by the EC."

Those are the Minister's words, not mine. Not only is there a moral requirement to take action but there is a significant financial one.

The Minister made a call for clubs to go catch-and-release voluntarily, and many have heeded her request. However, some are still waiting to see whether she will issue the licence for the nets off the north coast. There is a large dedicated body of individuals who are passionate about the survival of indigenous fish, which is why they have contributed thousands of voluntary man hours and millions of pounds to conservation and environmental projects the length and breadth of our water systems.

I hope that, in the short time that I have, I have highlighted some of the main concerns behind the petition and raised the profile of the issue, which will be developed further in an Ulster Unionist Party-sponsored debate in the coming weeks. In conclusion, on behalf of individual anglers, angling clubs, the No to Nets campaign, the Maine Enhancement Partnership and many more interested representative groups, I present the petition to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in partnership with other relevant Departments to tackle the problem with consultation and including the key stakeholders to ensure that our rivers and waterways can return to the glory days, when anglers can cross from riverbank to riverbank stepping on the backs of fish and every angler can boast of catching a fish this big and then release it.

Mr Swann moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and send a copy to the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Public Petition: Car Parking, College Park Avenue, Belfast

Mr Speaker: Mr Conall McDevitt has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have to up to three minutes to speak about the petition.

Mr McDevitt: The petition that I wish to present before the House is on behalf of the residents of College Park Avenue in Belfast. Colleagues may know College Park Avenue, which is one of the streets on the edge of the Holylands between that area and Queen's University, and it is one of the few streets in the area that remains sustainable. It is a street with families and some elderly people. It has welcomed new members of our community and is determined to survive as a residential centre in the middle of the university district. However, to do so, it needs to be able to operate and live as a street.

I am sure that many in the House will share the frustration that I have felt, as a city representative, in securing residential parking schemes, which are simple schemes to allow residents to get preferential parking on the street where they live. One barrier that is often put up against a successful application for a residential parking scheme is inability to secure a sufficient level of residents' support. That, of course, can be very difficult in streets with a large number of homes of multiple occupancy. The petition that I will present this morning on behalf of the residents of College Park Avenue is a unanimous petition signed by every resident. It asks the Minister for Regional Development and the Department for Regional Development please to expedite a residents' parking scheme in their street. It is a simple ask, but it is quite an important one. If those householders, ratepayers and families do not have access to a basic parking space within a reasonable distance of their front door, the viability of their street will continue to be threatened. It would be a great tragedy if College Park Avenue, like so many other streets in that part of our city, were to end up falling into the hands of speculators whose only intent is to turn the street into flat land. Mr Speaker, I thank the House for its indulgence, and I am happy to present you with the public petition on behalf of the residents of College Park Avenue.

Mr McDevitt moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister for Regional Development and send a copy to the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development.

Executive Committee Business

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 and Vote on Account 2012-13

Mr Speaker: The next two motions relate to the Supply resolution, and, as usual, I propose to conduct a single debate on both motions. I shall call the Minister of Finance and Personnel 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. I will then call the Minister to move the second motion, before putting the Question on it.

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 to proposing and making a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves that a total sum not exceeding £15,244,040,000 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 2012 and that total resources not exceeding £16,220,944,000 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 2012 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 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,987,469,000 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 2013 and that resources not exceeding £7,451,346,000 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 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Today's debate is an important step in the legislative process that governs our finances. The debate covers the final spending plans for 2011-12 and the first year of the Executive's 2011-15 Budget. In the first Supply motion before the House, I seek the Assembly's approval for the Executive's final spending plans for 2011-12 as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates that were laid before the House on 6 February. Through the second motion, I request interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2012-13 in the form of a Vote on Account. 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 2011-12 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 for approval. I will take the opportunity to remind Members that the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect all the in-year changes made since the Main Estimates were approved by the Assembly last June; that is, they reflect the DEL changes agreed in the June, October and January monitoring rounds, as well as AME funding that has been agreed by the Treasury since the approval of the 2011 and 2012 Main Estimates last June.

Before going into some of the detail of the spending plans for 2011-12, 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 Supply resolutions, Budget Bills etc. They are important legislation, but it is important that Members appreciate that this is not a new Budget in terms of financial allocations by the Executive. The four-year Budget was set in March last year, and that still holds. The legislative process today and over the next few weeks simply gives form to the Budget agreement for the financial year 2011-12. There have, of course, been changes to the allocations in this financial year that have been driven by the monitoring round process, and the spring Supplementary Estimates are the finalisation of those changes in legislation.

I hope that Members will not use this opportunity, as has happened in recent years, to seek a debate on the fundamentals of the Budget-setting process. *[Interruption.]* As the Member to my right has said, that is probably a vain hope. Nevertheless, I have put it on record so that, should Members err or veer off the path, they have not done so without some warning from me and without some attempt from me to make sure that they do not wander in that way.

As I said in the January monitoring statement last month, I have been rather surprised by the level of resources surrendered by Departments as part of the monitoring round system. Although that may reflect robust action taken

by Departments to control expenditure, it also raises the possibility that the Budget 2011-15 allocations to some Departments represented either an overestimation of need or an underestimation of the capacity for savings. It is in that context that I will now undertake a review of departmental budgets for 2013-14 and 2014-15.

Today's debate is not about that Budget process. We all know that the Supply resolution debate has been hijacked in a similar manner in the past, so, in order to head off some of the inevitable questions on the Budget going forward, with your permission, Mr Speaker, I will outline that process. Perhaps that will allow Members to then concentrate on the business at hand — 2011-12 — for the remainder of the debate.

12.30 pm

It is envisaged that the starting point of the review process will be a robust assessment of the departmental performance in 2011-12 based on the quantum of reduced requirements surrendered and the level of underspend. The level of underspend will be based on the provisional outturn position as will be reported by Departments in May. It will be important to assess the scale of reduced requirements or underspend against the opening position, and, more importantly, the reasons that drove that surrender of resources.

My officials will also have a series of bilateral discussions with Departments to ascertain their future pressures. Those will be considered in the context of the new draft Programme for Government, and I will then advise Executive colleagues of the outcome of that review. Let me make it clear that it will be a review at the margins of each departmental budget allocation and not an opportunity to invite universal bid submissions. Having made this clarification, I will turn to the detail of today's business.

This financial year has been one of the most difficult in recent memory for the citizens of Northern Ireland. The economic outlook meant that local unemployment increased and the UK spending review constrained our public spending. The Assembly had to make difficult decisions about the allocation of that funding to best protect its citizens.

The expenditure plans for 2011-12 were finally agreed by the Assembly in March 2011 in the Budget for 2011-15. That Budget was the first for many years to provide Northern Ireland with a reduction in the overall departmental expenditure limit when compared with previous years. However, Members will remember the actions of the Executive in attempting to mitigate the impact of those reductions. Additional receipt-based funding was generated and resources were diverted to capital where the reduction was the greatest.

We began the financial year 2011-12 with an overcommitment. An additional £30 million in capital and £30 million in current expenditure was handed out to Departments, with the expectation that the Executive would be able to recoup that through reduced requirements during the course of the year through the monitoring rounds. I can confirm that this approach not only allowed additional funding to be appropriately planned for, but it was effectively managed through the three monitoring rounds. In addition to eliminating this planned overcommitment, the Executive were able to allocate further funding throughout the year to high-priority emerging issues.

I will take a moment to look at the overall spending picture in 2011-12. As regards current expenditure, Departments surrendered £65.7 million in non-ring-fenced resource departmental expenditure limit for redistribution in the three monitoring rounds. That compares with the equivalent reduced requirements of £54.9 million, £80.9 million and £126.8 million for the preceding years. This year was the first one in which we had a reduction in departmental expenditure limit, and I think that shows why there has been some surprise expressed at the level of money that came back to the centre.

Northern Ireland also received £28.4 million of resource as a result of Barnett consequentials from Her Majesty's Treasury. Taking into account the Executive's social funds, funding to manage the overcommitment, and ring-fenced resources, the Executive were able to allocate £11.7 million to emerging issues in 2011-12. On the capital side, Departments gave back £48.2 million for redistribution during in-year monitoring. The management of the overcommitment and additional allocations from HM Treasury meant that the Executive were able to meet the capital pressures of £40 million in 2011-12.

I will address the detail of those current and capital allocations. In difficult economic times, you can tell the priorities of a Government by where they redirect their available funding. In 2011-12, the Executive allocated over 80% of additional current expenditure funding to education, health, social development and employment and learning, reflecting our strong emphasis on protecting the vulnerable, while aiming to educate and equip the emerging workforce.

Specifically, we allocated £10 million to schools' end-year flexibility to ensure that they have access to their reserves and can plan appropriately; £10 million to the Department of Education for the maintenance of the schools estate; £12.7 million to the Department for Employment and Learning's Steps to Work programme; £3.7 million to employment services for those with a disability; £25 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for a range of measures, including specialist medicine; £22 million to the Department for Social Development from the social protection fund to redistribute to eligible persons; and £15 million to the Department for Regional Development for a range of areas, including roads repairs and street lighting improvements.

On the capital side, the Executive allocated £3 million to the Titanic public realm and buildings in preparation for this important centenary year; £5 million to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for health trust equipment; and £11 million to the Department for Regional Development for structural improvements to the roads network and the replacement of buses for the transport network. I see that the Member from the Green Party is not here, but I am sure that he would have been very happy to hear that. Indeed, spend on the structural maintenance of the roads network will be over £111 million this year, which will be the highest figure ever recorded. Some £13 million has been allocated to the Department for Social Development for co-ownership and first-time buyer initiatives to help people to get on to the property ladder, and £4 million has been allocated for thermal improvements to Housing Executive homes, allowing those on low incomes to save on fuel and electricity bills.

Those are some of the notable departmental expenditure limit allocations in the monitoring round. However, as I have said in the past, Members must not forget that, in addition, provision was made in the annually managed expenditure exercises and the spring Supplementary Estimates in 2011-12 for, among other things, £2.9 billion of non-contributory, income-related social security benefits to the most vulnerable. That funding goes some way to protect the most vulnerable and provides mainly for expenditure on disability benefits, income support, pension credit, jobseeker's allowance and housing benefits.

Before leaving the detail of the spring Supplementary Estimates, I want to inform the House that the additional headroom built into them is over and above the January monitoring position. As the SSEs and the Budget Bill are the final statutory ceilings on spending plans for 2011-12, it is prudent to include headroom for three specific items of expenditure that could crystallise prior to the end of the financial year. The common agricultural policy disallowance, Invest Northern Ireland capital and payment from the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) for the Irish Open golf tournament are uncertain in their timing but require additional cover should it become necessary to make payments before April.

No doubt, Members will be aware of obligations to the EU in respect of the CAP. In regard to DETI headroom, it was thought prudent to provide additional legislative cover for some Invest Northern Ireland capital projects that may materialise this financial year, but they are by no means certain. Some Members will be more aware than others of the efforts of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to bring the prestigious Irish Open to Portrush. Should it be necessary to incur expenditure this year, headroom has been incorporated into the DETI Estimate to allow for that.

It is crucial to emphasise to the House that such headroom has been included on the condition that the resources must be used only for the agreed purpose, effectively ring-fencing those areas that I have outlined. I am sure that Members will endorse the actions taken, which will ensure that we meet our obligations to the EU, assist local businesses and develop tourist potential through the Irish Open.

I turn now from the 2011-12 financial year to the 2012-13 financial year. The second motion before the Assembly today seeks approval for the issue of a cash and resource Vote on Account to ensure the continuation of services into the financial year. The amount of cash and resources proposed are in advance of 45% of the final 2011-12 provision and have no direct correlation to Budget allocations for 2012-13. That advance is necessary to enable services to continue into the first part of 2011-12, until the Main Estimates reflecting the second year of the Budget 2011-15 are prepared and presented to the Assembly for approval.

I commend to Members the 2011-12 spring Supplementary Estimates and the 2012-13 Vote on Account and Supply motions tabled. I look forward to a relevant debate on those issues. At the end of today's debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, I will endeavour to deal with any of the points that have been raised, and, of course, I hope that all the points raised will be relevant to the discussion that we will have had. If they

are irrelevant, they may get answered, or they may not; it depends.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire fosta. On behalf of the Committee, I will try to be as relevant as I possibly can. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

At our meetings on 1 February and 8 February, the Committee for Finance for Personnel took evidence from DFP officials on the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2011-12 and the Vote on Account for 2012-13. I thank the departmental officials for their assistance in that regard, particularly since that was the first occasion on which the new Committee was required to scrutinise these routine but complex matters.

As the Minister outlined, the spring Supplementary Estimates, the Vote on Account and the associated Budget Bill give the Departments the authority to spend. They also set controlled limits for Departments to which they can be held to account by the Assembly. The Committee has approved accelerated passage for the Budget Bill, which will be introduced by the Minister later today. I have written to you, a Cheann Comhairle, to provide confirmation of that.

The opening Budget position for 2011-12 was set out in the Executive's 2011-15 Budget, which was agreed on 9 March 2011, during the previous Assembly mandate. The spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) reflect the changes that have been made to that opening Budget position as a result of the monitoring rounds in June, October and January. Additionally, as the Minister said, some headroom has been built in to facilitate any additional allocations that may be made in respect of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The DFP briefing paper provided to the Committee stated that that headroom had been included on the strict DFP condition that, should the spending not materialise, DFP virement approval would not be given later to cover excess spending in any other area.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel has actively scrutinised the monitoring rounds throughout the 2011-12 financial year. The Committee has received timely briefings on the Department's position prior to each monitoring round, followed up by written responses to queries raised. In addition, following the Minister's statement in plenary session on the outcome of each monitoring round, the Committee was briefed by DFP officials responsible for central finance on the strategic and cross-cutting issues relating to public expenditure.

During the evidence session on 8 February, DFP officials confirmed that they had been surprised at the level of reduced requirements declared during this financial year. Although the officials stated that some of that, such as the reduced requirements for Invest NI, had been unavoidable, they considered that it was indicative of some positive efforts to reduce administrative expenditure within Departments.

Members also heard that it is not possible to reallocate some of the easements, as they apply to ring-fenced areas of spend, such as depreciation. In that regard, the Committee notes the proactive action that has been taken in light of the level of reduced requirements to consider the Budget allocations for the past two years of the Budget period.

The reconciliation between the Main Estimates budget position and the SSE budget position was also discussed, with the departmental officials providing explanations for allocations, easements and technical adjustments where possible. Although it was useful in assisting the Committee's consideration of that matter, the discussion served to highlight a weakness in the SSE process. As the SSEs were laid only on 6 February, Committees will not have had sufficient opportunity in advance of today's debate to scrutinise their departmental SSE position and how it differs from the Main Estimates provision.

12.45 pm

Although, as we heard, the SSEs essentially reflect the changes that are made through the monitoring rounds, the read-across is not necessarily apparent or easy to follow. In the case of DFP, for example, the reconciliation showed a technical adjustment in excess of £6.2 million capital for which no detailed explanations had been given during the monitoring rounds. Perhaps the need to provide the other Committees with sufficient time and opportunity for scrutiny of departmental SSEs is an issue that the Minister and his officials can give consideration to as part of the reforms proposed in the review of the financial process.

As part of that review, the Committee noted that the Audit Office intends to further discuss the presentation of the Estimates with DFP. I do not wish to go into any detail on that, as Members will be aware that there is a debate later today on the Committee's response to that review. The Committee asked that consideration also be given to improving the resource accounts to provide better read-across between published financial documents, enhance transparency and better facilitate Assembly scrutiny.

I will turn briefly to the motion on the Vote on Account for 2012-13. That is a practical measure that provides interim resources at approximately 45% of the 2011-12 provision. It enables Departments to ensure that public services continue during the early part of the financial year until the Main Estimates for 2012-13 and the associated Budget Bill are debated before the summer.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I support both motions.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute briefly to this important debate. As each of us brings a range of political and constituency matters to the Floor of the Assembly, there can be a feeling of *déjà vu* about the annual debates on the Supplementary Estimates and the Budget. That is especially so in recent years as we continue to face economic recession and financial instability. The simple reality is that the block grant, which is the cake that we have been given by Westminster, is too small. The Finance Minister is doing an excellent job of carving up that cake in very difficult circumstances, even though each Department feels that it has not been given its fair share and is complaining that it is suffering from undernourishment.

As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I know that we are all aware that the future of the Department for Employment and Learning is the subject of consultation. That is putting it mildly. Whatever happens to the Department and the Committee, I place on

record my appreciation of the hard work that the Minister and his officials have done and continue to do, even though I do not always agree with the Minister on a number of issues. However, the simple reality is that we have too many Departments. Given the times that we live in, it is more vital than ever that we reduce the cost and burden of government.

I am confident that DEL's remit and responsibility and the policies and strategies that it devised and developed can be effectively integrated into the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. However, we must ensure that there is no slippage or loss of focus. Therefore, there must be a determination by both Departments to ensure that they work closely together. There can be no room for a silo mentality; there must be a joined-up governmental approach. We have already seen the evidence of interdepartmental approaches, such as the Pathways to Success strategy, which is a clear example of the potential of that sort of co-operation and joined-up approach.

The work that DEL has been doing is critical to economic growth. The key drivers for a dynamic and substantive economic recovery are a properly educated and skilled local workforce, as well as inward investment, which will secure long-term, high-value jobs for that workforce. One of the key drivers in that regard is the further education sector. I make a plea that there be no reductions to the budget of that sector. Youth unemployment is rising across the UK, and the number of unemployed young people is at its highest for over 15 years. The consequences of that are very worrying indeed. We must take whatever action we can to train and educate our young people in a focused and targeted way. If we fail to do that, it will put an increasing strain on the public purse and we could well lose many of our young people, who would be forced to leave Ulster in search of work abroad. I am sure that nearly every Member in the Chamber today can testify to the fact that, already, many young people from their constituency are leaving the shores of Ulster, going especially to Australia, where they can find work. The consequences of that for us include the increased alienation of young people from society, which is very dangerous for society as a whole.

Young people often get a bad name, but from what I see and hear, most of them are keen to learn, keen to be trained and keen to get into work. I heard recently of a young lad who approached the owner of a tyre and exhaust centre in search of work. When the owner told him that he had no vacancies at present, the young chap said that he would work for nothing, just simply to gain skills and experience. That is typical of many of our young people today, and why we have an obligation to ensure that they are properly trained and skilled to get into the workplace.

We must reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training, known as NEETs, to an absolute minimum. That is a critical issue. Just a week ago, in this Chamber, we debated NEETs and the education maintenance allowance (EMA); two key areas in which a great deal of valuable work has been done by the Employment and Learning Committee. I referred earlier to the need for a cross-cutting approach, and it is a pity that no meaningful action has yet been taken to move forward and implement the NEETs strategy, which was considered at length by the previous Employment and Learning Committee.

I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning to speed up that process in that vital area.

I also have a number of concerns about the EMA. When I spoke in the debate last week, I mentioned that payment of the EMA can be made only to participants in the Department's Training for Success programme and not to the hard-to-reach young people in pre-vocational training as organised by Include Youth. Today, I want to reiterate what I said last week: we need to address that anomaly on equality grounds. The Minister argues that he needs more money to make the EMA work. With respect to the Minister for Employment and Learning, it is more important to ensure that we target existing resources in a focused and carefully managed way, giving priority to those who need them most, rather than continually seeking to fill up the pot with extra money and missing the real target of those who are in need.

Mr Speaker, I want to take a moment now to turn briefly to some key concerns in my constituency of West Tyrone. I would like some reassurance from my colleague the Health Minister about the new acute mental health centre that is to form part of the second phase of the Omagh area hospital plans. Concerns have recently been expressed that the new acute facility might well be located in the new hospital in Enniskillen and taken away from Omagh. It is important to get some clarity on that issue. I urge the Minister —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member of the Minister's warning about going outside the Supply resolution motion and the Vote on Account. All Members, I am sure, have important issues that they will want to raise. I understand that. However, I am concerned that we might be widening out the debate to the point at which we will have every Member raising an issue from their constituency. That is not what this debate is about. I am warning the House and the Member.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will bear that in mind. *[Laughter.]* I was coming to the point at which I was going to press the Minister to bring forward the moneys for the capital works to bring that second phase forward as quickly as possible.

Moving from health to education, we do have a problem with schools. Again, I urge the Minister to ensure that the capital moneys can be found to bring forward the development of our schools in Omagh. I want to mention Omagh High School on the Floor of the House today, because it has been deteriorating for years —

Mr Speaker: Order. I am really trying to give Members some latitude in the debate on the two motions before the House. However, Members need to, as far as possible, link whatever they are saying to the two motions before us. I have heard nothing thus far from the Member that links what he is saying to the two motions. I know that he is talking about important issues in his constituency, but the issue is how he links what he is saying to the two motions.

Mr Buchanan: Thank you again, Mr Speaker. I will bring my remarks to a close.

Obviously, this is not in keeping with what the Speaker wants to hear. Nevertheless, finally, I turn to the long-running saga of the A5.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member is really tempting fate. This will apply to all Members. I keep saying to the House, especially to the Member who has the Floor at the moment, that I understand that these are important issues, and I am not trying to make light of them. However, I am trying to guide the House to the two motions before it this afternoon and their effect. The issue is how Members deal with the topics that they raise and how they link them to the two motions. That is what this is all about. I am happy for the Member to continue but, once again, I implore him to link what he is saying to the two motions.

Mr Buchanan: OK, Mr Speaker. I will take on board what you have said and bring my remarks to a close.

We must accelerate our capital build programmes across Northern Ireland wherever possible. That will be a much-needed shot in the arm for the construction industry: it will create jobs, improve our infrastructure, be an investment in our economy and reap great dividends. I know that the Finance Minister and the Executive are committed to that, and I encourage them to continue to think strategically.

Mr Cree: I was pleased to see the latitude that you gave the previous Member who spoke, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* I hope that that was a precedent.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the two Supply resolutions, which, as you indicated, will be debated together. I also thank the Finance Minister for outlining some of the detail involved and for the work that the Department has undoubtedly put into compiling these statistics. In particular, the spring Supplementary Estimates contain a lot of figures, and I am sure that it was no easy task to collate the information.

The Finance Committee has considered these issues in the past few weeks. The Chairman of the Committee touched on that, so I will not go into specifics on the work of the Committee in that regard.

As you know, Budgets set spending plans. However, they do not give Ministers and their Departments legislative authority to spend cash and use resources. That legislative authority is gained through the approval of departmental Estimates by the Assembly and the subsequent passing of the Budget Bill. That is why it is important to take this process forward without jeopardising the ability of Departments to provide vital services to the people of Northern Ireland.

I turn to the two motions before us. The first Supply resolution seeks the Assembly's approval of the Executive's final spending plans for 2011-12, as detailed in the spring Supplementary Estimates that were laid before the Assembly on 6 February. The second resolution requests interim resources and funding for the first few months of 2012-13 in the form of a Vote on Account. The spring Supplementary Estimates are largely technical and are there, essentially, to tidy up the loose ends that have been dealt with in the in-year monitoring rounds. They also obtain Assembly approval and final spending plans for this year.

1.00 pm

I want to mention a few issues that arose during the monitoring rounds that were particularly concerning. Invest Northern Ireland twice handed back substantial amounts

of money to the Executive, amounting to £39.1 million. Job creation is key to economic recovery in Northern Ireland, and we must ensure that Invest Northern Ireland works to its full potential. As well as that, during the last monitoring round in January, all bids were met and money was still unallocated. That is not ideal, and all Departments must improve their financial accounting to prevent that occurring again.

The Vote on Account today is needed to ensure that the flow of cash continues to Departments, and it authorises spending of around 45% of the Budget, as the Minister confirmed. It has been said before in the House — I will reiterate it — that it is not an ideal situation that we vote through an authorisation to spend almost half the Budget when we do not have the necessary details of that Budget to scrutinise effectively. However, the Chairman of the Committee referred to the review, which we will talk about later, and that will, I hope and sincerely believe, correct that situation. Nevertheless, we are stuck with a procedure and must adhere to it. We will, perhaps, look in more detail at this anomaly in the later debate on the review of the financial process in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: That was a fine example of a Member very much keeping to the two motions before the House. I would hope that the Member has set an example.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá áthas orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo ar Mheastacháin Fhorlíontacha an earraigh agus ar an Vóta ar Chuntas.

I am happy to participate in this debate on the spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account. I will try, as far as possible, not to do what will become known as a Tom Buchanan.

Debates on budgetary matters are always important, but I suppose they take on added significance during straitened financial times such as we are in. We are struggling with huge cutbacks of almost £4 billion over the four-year period. Those cuts required and still require extremely careful management of the public purse to ensure that the best possible benefit and value is gained from every pound spent by Departments and all public agencies and every possible efficiency achieved without detriment to front line services.

The spring Supplementary Estimates are, as we heard, a tidying-up of the finances from the previous financial year. For that reason, some may view them as a mere formality. However, there are important trends in them to be noticed, interpreted and responded to. The Vote on Account resolution, as Mr Cree pointed out, is a mechanism that provides almost bridge finance between the two financial years until the Budget Bill reaches its Final Stage.

Many will recall the angst around the formulation of the four-year Budget leading up to the devolution of policing and justice powers. Indeed, there was a collective sigh of relief when the Finance Minister came to the House with a draft Budget in December 2010 and made a statement. At that time, there was no Programme for Government, and the Minister thought that it was fine to proceed on the basis of the former Programme for Government. Earlier in this financial year, I heard him say on the radio that there was no need for a Programme for Government because the Budget itself was the Programme for Government. Yet, as they say, on mature reflection, after he saw the extent

of the underspend thrown up during the in-year monitoring exercises, I think he decided that there was a need for alignment of departmental spending to the new Programme for Government, and he has initiated a review on that basis. Gradually, the horse was taken out from behind the cart and led round to where it should have been from the beginning. Therefore, strategic policy strategies will drive financial allocation, not the other way round. Indeed, we could use many metaphors for the role of the Programme for Government. The best one is that it is a road map that should lead public spending in the direction in which it needs to go in order to best serve the needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

After one year of the Budget, it is clear that we need the direction of a Programme for Government. If we look more closely at the reconciliation of departmental expenditure limits from the Main Estimates to the spring Supplementary Estimates for 2011-12, we see that the amount of easements is outstanding, as the Minister said. It stands at around £140 million on the resource side and £50 million on the capital side. We could be kind and say that those easements are the result of careful financial planning and greater efficiencies. However, we have to ask whether they are; we simply do not know at this stage. As I said, the extent of easements was such as to lead the Minister to initiate a review of departmental spending over the last two years of the Budget. Indeed, he would have done so for the coming year had it not already been too late to get the necessary information. At a time of economic hardship, Departments should not miscalculate to that extent. Can we say that that is prudent financial management? It remains to be seen.

If we look in more detail at the changes that came about as a result of in-year monitoring, we see that DETI surrendered £18 million in resource and £35.5 million in capital, a total of £53.5 million. Given that the Programme for Government's main priority is the economy, one has to ask why the Department that is mainly charged with delivering that commitment cannot spend its allocation. We need to ask what changes need to be made to ensure that that resource is of full benefit to the growth and the support of the economy.

During his January monitoring statement, the Minister mentioned that the Department of Education had handed back £10.5 million, which amounted to a miscalculation of the drawdown expected from the budget exchange scheme. Although, thankfully, that resource is not lost to schools, questions must arise about financial planning in a Department that is currently under huge financial pressure. Indeed, the Minister's own Department surrendered almost one quarter of its capital allocation. Perhaps, the Minister would care to comment on that later. One also wonders what his view is of the eventual £8.5 million overspend on the establishment of Account NI, which was highlighted in the media last week.

There is no doubt that my party colleagues will want to be more detailed about the figures for the Departments that they scrutinise. I will leave that work to them. I cast my mind back once again to the beginning of the budgetary period, when the Minister told us that the asset management unit would be charged with disposing of £100 million of assets spread over the four years of the budgetary period. The first tranche of that was £10 million in the current financial year.

However, to date, only £1.3 million of that £10 million has been realised. Unit officials tell us that they hope to realise another £4 million or £5 million before the end of the current financial year. That sounds very much like wishful thinking. Realising £1.3 million over 11 months and hoping for £5 million in the final month is a little difficult to accept. Even if that degree of success could be achieved, it would still be well off the £10 million mark for the year. I wonder what the Minister's assessment is of that performance. If only £1.3 million can be realised in the first year of the budgetary period, what chance is there of realising £100 million over the four years? How will that impact on the Budget? On the basis of the asset management unit's record to date, one would have to question its effectiveness. We should consider that businesspeople have told us that it is high impossible to buy land from Land and Property Services, even when that land has the potential to create jobs and generate additional rates income through retail development. By the time the valuations are returned to the asset management unit from LPS, the market has decreased and lands are overpriced. Perhaps the Minister would like to comment on that issue.

The Minister said that he had allowed for headroom of around £38 million to cover CAP fines, £2.5 million for the Tourist Board for the Irish Open and a further £5.6 million for capital projects that will be undertaken by Invest NI. I welcome his assurance that, should the spending not materialise, approval will not be given to cover excess spending in other areas.

Mr Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr D Bradley: Yes, Mr Speaker. The Vote on Account indicates a Budget that is little more than a continuation of what we have had.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: However, I will have an opportunity to contribute further on that subject tomorrow. Thank you.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motions tabled by the Minister. Noting the inconvenient scheduling of last year's corresponding debate, I am certain that the Minister will take great delight in knowing that Valentine's night will once again be his own to enjoy, as he, no doubt, turns his interest to personnel of a different variety.

As suggested by other Members, the consideration of these codependent motions in the House is, traditionally, a technical, tidying-up exercise, and one could be forgiven for thinking that there is little need to debate or oppose them. Of course, the reality is that any opposition to the motions would translate into a shortage of funds for each Department as they enter the next financial year. On those grounds, Members would be hard pushed to justify such opposition. However, what we can and should consider carefully during the debate are the finer details and the bigger picture for the local economy, using the Estimates and the impending Budget Bill as our basis.

Since June of last year, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has engaged with the Department in reviewing and assessing the evolution of departmental spending plans, as they altered in each monitoring round and settled finally to give us the figures that we have in front of us

today. I know that Members and Chairs from respective Committees will put their individual case for the greater financial needs of one Department over another. Therefore, I will keep my specific comments to the biggest proposed changes, which lie in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the Department of Justice and the Department of Education.

As the Minister stated, additional headroom has been built in to allow for specific issues. Allowances have been made for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for additional resources to account for the common agricultural policy needs in the event of potential decisions that may extend from the European Commission on disallowances. Further headroom has been provisionally allocated to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment because of the welcome addition of events such as the Irish Open to the 2012 calendar year. That event already promises to be significant and will doubtless bring great opportunities for additional tourism and increased spending throughout Northern Ireland. In respect of the report and in considering the aforementioned Departments and their associated requirements and Estimates, the pervasive concern for Members should be the need for airtight accountability across the board and a clear and identifiable range of priority areas that reflect where need is greatest. The pre-emptive allowances for capital projects and the Irish Open in the DETI Estimates highlight the reflective and proactive nature that we should seek to ingrain in the allocation of all departmental spending. A more cohesive approach that prioritises areas based on need and supports areas that show economic potential will make for a more efficient and, ultimately, a more effective system of government.

1.15 pm

Traditionally, Northern Ireland's budgetary position is levied on us at the discretion of the Westminster Government, and so we are hamstrung in what we can realistically hope to secure on a year-to-year basis. You cannot find gold in a coal mine, however, and, rather than cry foul and vilify those who control the purse strings in the current economic climate, we must rise to the challenge set before us and seek to mitigate the reductions through supporting revenue-generating enterprises and efficiency savings.

Going forward, it is imperative that we shift the balance of services, altering how funds are apportioned, specifically towards early intervention and prevention measures. A change in the balance of resources into programmes that seek to prevent problems from emerging or to intervene at an early stage could produce a wealth of savings, avoiding the need for greater resource spending after problems fully develop. Currently, the funding of the former tends to be optional, while the funding of the latter tends to be statutory. An enhanced focus on preventative measures can ensure savings across a range of public spending areas, including Health and Justice, which are the two Departments with the greatest additional requirements in the Estimates presented today.

Many of the most pressing challenges facing Northern Ireland, as well as the opportunities awaiting us, do not fall into departmental silos. Therefore, we need much better co-operation still between Departments to make sure that we can grow the economy more effectively and maximise efficiencies and the value of public services. As

I have said before in the Chamber, technology is already in place to allow the sharing of information securely across Departments, yet we appear to choose not to use it to its full capacity. Perhaps sharing such information could more effectively assist Departments in coming up with efficiency options as well as solutions to the financial costs of our divided society. At a time when we are trying to grow the economy, the resources wasted on the cost of division are still a massive millstone round our neck. Residential segregation continues to create considerable inefficiencies for the housing sector, along with significant costs associated with the underdevelopment of blighted or segregated land. We also need to promote more shared services on a North/South basis. That need not be about politics but about good finance and economics. The North/South Ministerial Council already exists, but progress on the North/South Parliamentary Forum would also be beneficial, as it would act as another opportunity to benchmark with neighbouring jurisdictions. That is not about political grandstanding but about practical issues.

As a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, I have been involved in discussions over the level of detail provided during the whole budgetary process and whether it allows sufficient time for adequate scrutiny. I know that I will get the opportunity to speak on that issue later today, so for now I will bring my comments to a close and support the motions.

Mr Girvan: I support both motions. I always think that finance has a wonderful way of making what should be a simple process extremely difficult. Maybe that is the wrong way to start off, but we are here to counteract the doomsday scenario that was predicted last year. We had a similar debate in the Chamber in which Members told us that we would be unable to pay wages and all sorts of problems were ahead. I am glad to say that we are still here this year and that wages have been paid and money has been passed back from Departments. We have identified savings through three monitoring rounds, and Northern Ireland is still moving forward, which is important.

There are issues about the amounts of money that have been handed back by Departments. I appreciate that there are all sorts of reasons for that, but I take exception to some of the comments that have been made about why certain Departments have had to hand money back. We have had difficulty with getting the go-ahead for some capital projects, and one Department blames another. The Department of the Environment's delays in making planning decisions has been a key issue when it comes to underspend by DETI.

Mr A Maginness: In relation to the point about Departments or agencies within them handing back money, I think particularly about Invest Northern Ireland handing back well over £40 million. I am not condemning Invest Northern Ireland, but that situation raises serious questions. We have to scope out what is going wrong and why it is happening. Otherwise, we will not have a proper system of budgeting and scrutinising spending. That is the question that I would like the Member to address.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I appreciate exactly where he is coming from. I understand that Invest NI had a number of key projects in the pipeline. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, money was

handed back to give us an opportunity to make use of it elsewhere. So, that has been a very helpful approach.

How we bring forward the spend that each Department is allocated is a debate that has to take place within Departments. I know that the Finance Minister spoke about including a certain amount of headroom to allow things to move forward for certain projects that could have major spend, and we do not know exactly how much that may be. Those were outlined. However, I believe that some Departments have engaged in creating a certain amount of headroom within their own budget. I come from a local government background, and I know exactly how some departments end up with a certain amount of money to, as they call it, play with and do other things. Unfortunately, I do not think that that happens only in local government; central government has a similar process in some areas. So, that is something that needs looked at.

Arm's-length bodies were commented on. Additional controls need to be put in place to ensure that the overall Budget truly reflects what arm's-length bodies actually bring back to the table.

To allow us to move ahead with the spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12, the process has been good. We are allowed to carry forward £60 million, I think, of underspend to next year. I am glad to see that the tight fiscal controls that have been put in place are bearing fruit, and we are seeing benefits from that through the amounts that are going back. We have seen the change from the £128 million a few years ago, which would be totally lost to the Northern Ireland economy today were it not for this process. It is great that we have done a body of work to reduce the amount that we hand back.

It is important that we have this debate to discuss the 2012-13 forward spend. If it is not agreed, a difficulty could arise, and we would end up in the doomsday scenario. So, we need the spend to allow us to move forward for next year. On that basis, it is prudent that we make the representation for the extra 45% of the Estimates for 2011-12 to be used for next year's spend.

I know that the debate on the detail of where we believe certain moneys should be spent will take place tomorrow. I know that, at that stage, each and every one of us will have our pet subject — A5 included, Tom. It is important that we highlight exactly where, we feel, the money should be spent and deal with it on a local basis. Considering that we have gone through a recession and deep hardship for our economy, we have achieved quite a bit. There have been efficiencies, the sky has not fallen, and we are still here.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his outline. I support both motions.

A number of Members addressed the issue that obviously concerns Members across the Chamber, and I will address the reduced requirements. Last week, officials attending the Committee for Finance and Personnel told us that they were somewhat surprised. In the context of being able to acknowledge tighter financial management and cost projections, they indicated that, setting aside Invest NI, which was caused by external global economic circumstances that we can all recognise, reduced administration costs would possibly be a partial explanation. Nevertheless, I am concerned that we are getting reduced

requirements in the last quarter, as, in some instances, reallocating and spending the money within the required time frame is a significant challenge. Perhaps the Minister could confirm that the reduced requirements were for legitimate reasons, as, due to the time constraints, it was not possible for the other scrutiny Committees to get into the detail of them with their Departments. If they are down to continued progress, discipline and good financial management, that should be welcomed as a positive and flagged up. If there are issues that are more akin to the particular challenges facing Invest NI, we also need to know about those. I am keen to hear the Minister's comments on that.

In relation to DEL and the review of Invest NI's functions in the current economic climate, I think that, as an Assembly, we can afford to be strategic and to start thinking about the type of economy that we would like to see here post recovery. We should take that approach when realigning DEL's functions and considering Invest NI's efforts in what are very difficult — you might say impossible — economic circumstances. Such circumstances may not always apply, and hopefully, they will not always apply. So, perhaps in the here and now and for the limited time going forward — certainly, coming out of this four-year Budget period — we could refocus on developing the capacity, skills and expertise that would enable agencies such as Invest NI to attract investment here. It is difficult to be confident that there will be any major investment decisions in the present climate. I know that Invest NI will continue to do its best, and we have some very good people in the field. However, this is a challenge that confounds many other economies, and I have to admit that we are very small players in that particular circumstance.

The review of the Budget processes that the Minister announced goes some way towards addressing concerns. I am comfortable with a four-year Budget period and with mapping out expenditure on a more strategic basis, so I will defend that. However, in changing and deteriorating economic circumstances, Members will get anxious and might attempt to argue the case for an annual Budget process. I do not think that that is a sustainable argument, but we should provide the scope to review the plans and projections, see what stands up and see what will be deliverable and what has to be amended. There is nothing wrong with being agile and responsive to changing circumstances.

I hope that the Minister will be able to give some comfort that, in the review of the Budget processes, we will try to build in a better opportunity for scrutiny Committees to do what is, in fact, their statutory function. It is not an add-on, and it is not an optional issue. The fact is that they do not have sufficient time. I accept absolutely that that is almost a legacy issue. It is not manipulation; it is the way it is. The Finance Committee gets good, timely explanations, and those of us who are members of that Committee are in a position to say with some confidence and competence that we have been briefed on the issues. However, many other Committees struggle to get the detail that they seek, and that is not a good way for us to do business. I hope that we will be able to continue to address and refine the process. Having said that, I support both motions.

Mr Humphrey: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak from these Benches in support of both motions. When I listened to the Minister, I heard him mention a surrender of £65.7

million of non-ring-fenced money out of the three monitoring rounds, which was redirected. In 2011-12, there was a supply of £15 billion cash, £16 billion in resource and £2 billion accruing resources, totalling £33 billion.

It is important to stress, as the Minister did, that those are in-year changes. This is not a new Budget, and it is important for us to remember that. Whether a change results from an overestimation of need or an underestimation of savings, it is clear that it is essential to redirect money to where the need is.

1.30 pm

There are emerging issues in the fluid financial situation that prevails in the world today, and a regional Government such as ours has to be responsive to that. As I said previously in the House, the Business Secretary said that the economic situation that prevails in the United Kingdom is equivalent to this country being at war, yet some Members question issues with foreign direct investment and the failure of projects to be taken forward. I welcome the fact that 80% of the redirected money went to education, health, employment and learning and social development. That included £2.9 billion for non-contributory benefits, which are hugely important to the society that exists in Northern Ireland.

Ideally, it would be right and correct if the Programme for Government and the Budget were to run concurrently, but there needs to be flexibility and an understanding that the financial situation that prevails is very difficult. That is why we on these Benches have been so proud of the performance of the Minister in response to so many in the private sector and the public sector, not least the 'Belfast Telegraph'.

It is right that Ministers should be aspirational, but given the economic situation in the United Kingdom, Europe and, indeed, throughout the wider globe, it is understandable that policies and projects may not come to fruition or be achievable or deliverable. Mr Buchanan mentioned the A5, and that project was not deliverable because the money was not there from the Republic of Ireland Government. Mr Girvan mentioned DETI's targets for foreign direct investment. The reason why the money from DETI had to be redirected was nothing to do with the Government here; it was because the businesses that would bring foreign direct investment and much-needed meaningful employment to this part of the United Kingdom did not have the finance at their end to come here. No matter how many times that is stated in this House, it seems never, ever to penetrate.

Last week, I listened intently to finance officials at the Committee for Finance and Personnel. From the £10 billion block grant given to the Northern Ireland Executive, our Finance Minister surrendered only £1 million in capital funding. That is the envy of Scotland and Wales. To the mirth and laughter of the Committee — I mean this in the best way — I welcomed our Minister's having a "No Surrender" policy. Efficiencies have been driven by Ministers, civil servants and, to its credit, PEDU, which has gone into Departments and striven to make efficiencies. More of that work needs to be done. Some Departments have gone right down to the purchase of pens in saving money for the Northern Ireland Exchequer. That is prudent and responsible government. Regional government has to be

responsible, and we have seen that recently in how the Rates (Amendment) Bill was welcomed by the private sector, including small businesses, chambers of commerce, the Pubs of Ulster and city centre management across Northern Ireland.

Monitoring rounds ensured the refocusing of £8 million into double glazing for Housing Executive houses. That will benefit people who deal with the effects of the poverty trap weekly, and it is essential. That is government delivering. The Minister also mentioned that £10 million from end-year flexibility (EYF) will go to schools to assist them in their future planning and maintenance. I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors at Springhill Primary School, and the £500,000 that we got was essential. The truth is that we need to look at how we will build business confidence, build confidence across government and ensure that government in Northern Ireland is being seen to deliver. The way to do that is to ensure that, when the money comes back to the centre through monitoring rounds, it is redirected to build the capacity in government to ensure that we deliver for the people who sent us to this place. The Irish Open will come here, and that is an example of the responsiveness of our Government.

Tourism is absolutely vital to the Northern Ireland economy, and I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council. Somewhere in the region of 15,000 people are employed in the tourism and hospitality sector in Belfast. When visitors come to the city — 7.5 million of them a year, of which 1.5 million of are out-of-state visitors who stay overnight — they spend £455 million on the city's economy, but the other important thing, which is less measurable, is that they help to deal with the perceptual and reputational problem for Northern Ireland's capital city over the years of the Troubles. That is invaluable to those who will go into the world and sell Northern Ireland as a place to visit, stay and do business. I support the motions.

Mr Kinahan: I am pleased to support the motions, and I echo Mr Humphrey's comments on supporting and promoting Northern Ireland. We should all be doing that.

However, as the Ulster Unionist environment spokesman, I will raise one or two points of concern. Is the Minister related to Charles Perrault, who wrote Cinderella? As you know, the character of the Fairy Godmother can come up with everything with a wave of the wand. I congratulate the Minister on finding money in many areas where it is needed, but I wonder if we will need some other waves of the wand in the future. The £120 million for education caught us all out, but we welcome it. We need, and we may have found, £70 million for Compton, and £41.5 million is needed for the freeze in fees.

I could go on, but I want to raise the points about the environment aspects that seem to be overlooked. I hope that, as things are worked out through these Supplementary Estimates and money is made available, money can be found for other matters. There is nothing at the moment to finance the green new deal, which needed £4 million, and I am concerned that it is falling off the list and that the two major parties maybe do not want to push it. We also need finance for the marine plans, river management, fly-tipping and many other issues that were due to be financed by the carrier bag tax, which does not come in for a year.

However, the big wave of the wand that I want to see, Minister, is on the review of public administration (RPA) and planning and the mass of things that we have passed to councils. At the moment, those need money as the councils are under-resourced —

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the Member that we are straying into areas that are outside the two motions before us. *[Interruption.]* Order. There will be an opportunity at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow to raise all these issues. I am trying to lead and guide the House on what the two motions are about this afternoon. I know that Members have their pet subjects, and that is understandable. However, I say to the Member: let us get back to the two motions that are on the Floor this afternoon. There will be an opportunity tomorrow and further down the road to raise all those other issues.

Mr Kinahan: I thought that it was relevant to today because it is about how money is spent. Various areas were not getting their money, and it concerns me that we have waste but no money. It also concerns me that, if we go back to the Cinderella side of life, the two big ugly sisters of RPA and planning will come back and bite the Minister. I support the motions.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the House as Chair of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I apologise to the Minister for not being here for the full debate. I have to nip out this afternoon as well, because I have a meeting with your colleague to talk about health.

I have a couple of points to make on behalf of the Committee. Given our financial situation, the Committee welcomes the fact that the Department will break even this year and be able to balance the books, because the Committee was told last June that the Department was £177 million short. Based on some of the information that came out last year, the Department has obviously worked hard to find places in which savings can be made, for which it should be commended.

The Committee has had concerns about the Department's approach to in-year monitoring rounds. The Minister did not make any bids in the June monitoring round, and the Committee was disappointed by that, as we felt that there was a chance to secure funding for the likes of Home-Start and the Music Therapy Trust, which are under threat of having to stop providing vital services. In the October monitoring round, the Minister did make bids, but he would not tell the Committee what those bids were. We asked to see copies of the bids but were told that they amounted to confidential correspondence between the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Minister of Finance and Personnel. As a result, the Committee found out what the Minister had bid for only when the outcome of the monitoring round had been announced. That was disappointing — indeed, it was disrespectful, to say the least. However, in fairness to the Minister, we spoke to him, and he assured us that that will not happen again.

The Committee was pleased that the Department received money out of the October monitoring round: £15 million for the Invest to Save scheme; £5 million for specialist drugs;

and £5 million capital for equipment for the trusts and for ICT. We understand that the Department did not make any bids in the January monitoring round because it would not have been able to spend the money in time if it were to get any that time round. Although the Committee accepts that there are practical hurdles to overcome to being able to spend money at short notice, we think that people need to start thinking a bit more creatively so that we do not end up losing out on money that could be spent on vital services. Those are just some of the points that the Committee wishes to make at this time. Go raibh maith agat.

Dr McDonnell: We are here to debate the Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account associated with the Executive's current Budget. Let me be clear on the SDLP's position: the current Budget is flawed, as is the Budget process. We have routinely and consistently demonstrated that in Assembly debates and in our voting record. However, given that the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account are, in effect, a tidying-up of the finances for the current financial year, we will not vote in any way that leaves public services unfunded at the start of the next financial year. Come tomorrow, however, we will again demonstrate our consistency in standing up for front line services and will vote against the current Budget and its damaging and devastating cuts. The SDLP has in the past been unfairly accused of being unco-operative in the Budget process. In fact, we have played a full and active part in all Budget debates, Committee scrutiny processes and Executive Budget subcommittee meetings and have even published two papers on budgetary issues: 'New Priorities in Difficult Times' and 'Partnership and Economic Recovery'. Those papers contain our constructive ideas, which we attempted to have included in the Budget process.

We believe that we have co-operated at every stage. However, co-operation does not mean that we should put aside our principles and vote for something that we know to be damaging — damaging to front line services in our schools and hospitals and damaging to local families.

Mr Givan: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. In stating that the SDLP will oppose the Budget tomorrow, will the Member follow through on that consistent, principled position and withdraw the party from the Executive?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Member resumes the Floor, I must say that we are almost on to debating the Budget. That is not what the two motions are about.

I am trying to guide Members. The two motions are specifically on the Supply resolution and the Vote on Account; the debate is certainly not on the Budget. I have continually said to Members that there will be an opportunity tomorrow and beyond to talk about the issues that they seem to want to talk about today. I am trying to get Members back on track: the Budget is for a separate debate.

1.45 pm

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I make no apology for the SDLP playing an active part in the Budget scrutiny process in a way that ensures that we represent and protect the needs of our voters and the wider community. As you rightly said, there will be opportunities over the next two days to demonstrate good co-operation and to contribute

positively to the budgetary process by highlighting changes that we believe could and should be made.

There is a strong sense of déjà vu today. When the financial crisis first hit local businesses and families, the Executive had already settled on a three-year Budget. Despite representations from us and others, the Minister and the leading Executive parties decided that a three-year Budget had been created and that, no matter how the world changed in the meantime, it could not be fundamentally altered. Except for a few tweaks here and there, that Budget lasted until last year. It did very little to alleviate the distress of many vulnerable people or to prevent a large number of businesses going bankrupt, but it did serve the short-term political needs of the two main parties.

At the start of this year and the new process, we are again hopeful that, as the Executive develops a new Budget, they take the opportunity to include as many of our proposals as possible. Unfortunately, deficiencies remain, and we will debate the Budget Bill tomorrow.

The Northern Ireland Executive have very few levers with which to transform the local economy and set it on a path that will stimulate growth and generate jobs. The one lever that the Executive do have is public expenditure in key strategic areas. That is why our budgeting process generally —

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want to stop Dr Alasdair McDonnell, and I know that he is on to the Budget, but I am trying to guide and lead the House. The Budget is a separate issue and separate motion. We will debate the Second Stage of the Budget Bill tomorrow. Once again, I say to the whole House that there will be an opportunity to discuss some of the issues that have already been raised in the House, and most of the issues that Dr Alasdair McDonnell has raised this afternoon, tomorrow at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I appreciate where the Member is coming from, but we are trying to debate the two motions that are before the House this afternoon.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will restrict further comment until tomorrow afternoon —

Mr Wilson: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Dr McDonnell: The two issues are separate but, at the same time, a little intertwined, and it is very difficult to discuss one without the other. The past three years are relevant to the years going forward, but I respect your ruling and am quite happy to leave budgetary stuff until tomorrow. The main point is that we have to get on with the current resolutions and to ensure that money is in place to sustain government running forward over the next few months. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your consideration.

Mr Campbell: I apologise to the Minister for not being in my place earlier. Having listened to and watched the debate, I think that some Members should just take an early break and come back tomorrow. That might shorten the day's proceedings quite a bit.

The Minister of Finance can be commended on a number of issues. It is a difficult task to try to ensure that the books are balanced. The current climate — that is, the economic climate, before he goes off on a green climate

issue — does not lend itself to balancing the books, given what has happened in recent months. One would hope that, as the Departments begin the process over the next few months of trying to ensure whatever expenditure has been given to them, they will be able to balance their books. A number of schemes have been outlined in various departmental assessments, which can not only help the people whom we all represent but help to resurrect and revitalise the local economy. For example, the Minister for Social Development is considering the double-glazing of various Housing Executive properties. Hopefully, that scheme can be speeded up considerably because it will bring significant benefit to those tenants. It will also ensure that the local building and construction industry will get an injection of funds. I am glad to note that there has been £4 million earmarked for thermal improvements to Housing Executive homes.

Mr A Maginness: Where did you get that from?

Mr Campbell: I will give way if the Member wishes to ask a question. *[Laughter.]*

Mr A Maginness: I was just wondering how the Member was suddenly inspired with that figure of £4 million? Was it anything to do with the Minister's notes? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for asking how I am far-sighted enough to be able to see and assess that just at the drop of a hat. I am glad that he drew that to the Assembly's attention; now everyone can see the knowledge and far-sightedness that I have. *[Laughter.]*

We are also aware of Department for Regional Development (DRD) matters, and the Regional Development Minister is trying to improve our roads infrastructure and upgrade minor roads. We all have issues in our constituencies. Hopefully, those can be addressed in order to assist motorists, the haulage industry, and those who work in the industry of relaying and tarmacking roads. Thankfully, more than £111 million is going to be allocated there.

Mr A Maginness: That is amazing.

Mr Campbell: I am glad the honourable Member for North Belfast again acknowledges my far-sightedness; I am happy to concede to that, but, in all due modesty, I must say that it just came to me in a flash. *[Laughter.]*

Various Departments need to knuckle down on other issues. The wider public wants to see the Assembly knuckling down and getting on with the business. We have a lot to do, so let us get there and ensure that we help people who are hard-pressed and who are facing very difficult times, whether in their homes, schools, hospitals or roads. We are now more able to tackle those areas than we were several months ago because of the prudence of the Finance Minister. I will not adopt the cliché that was adopted about a famous previous Chancellor when he spoke about prudence so much that people thought there was an affair going on at 11 Downing Street. However, the Minister of Finance here has shown due prudence, and we should acknowledge that. We should knuckle down and get on with business.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate as Deputy Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. It is widely recognised that

the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) has proportionately the smallest budget; nevertheless, the Committee has undertaken a robust and active scrutiny role throughout the 2011-12 budgetary year. It recognises that even small changes in the baseline can have a disproportionate effect, not just on major capital projects, but also on smaller projects designed to deliver across the spectrum of culture, arts, libraries and sports.

Since May 2011 —

Mr McCarthy: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way, but I cannot sit here and listen to what he has just said. How does that square with the fact that the arts are in dire straits at the moment, as they have been refused funding to the tune of £500,000? How is that going to live up the arts that we want to promote in Northern Ireland?

Mr Irwin: Does the Member want to take that money from Health or from some other Department?

Since May 2011, the Department has briefed the Committee on the management of its annual budget. Sessions were held with departmental officials in June, October 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 robustly challenged the Department to explain its reasons for making bids and surrendering resources.

During December, the Committee was made aware that the Department was handing back around £2.5 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel. The bulk of that £2.5 million is as a consequence of a delay in the construction of the 50-metre pool in Bangor, which was caused by damage to materials while in transit. That delay left DCAL with a total underspend of £2.25 million. DCAL was able to identify seven projects that could benefit from that underspend and allocated money to those projects. However, a total easement of £1.8 million remains. The Committee is disappointed that more projects were not able to benefit from that easement at this time.

Furthermore, the Committee expressed concern that 50% of the Ulster-Scots academy ministerial advisory group's budget was surrendered, and it sought assurances from DCAL that that will not be repeated in future years. The Committee will keep a watching brief on the matter over the remainder of the mandate and will shortly receive a briefing from DCAL and the ministerial advisory group on an update on progress of the work of the group.

The Committee is acutely aware of the financial challenges facing DCAL, particularly coming into the new financial year. There are already pressures on its budget: £2.5 million resulting from the delay in the construction of the pool; and the additional fund of £2.4 million provided to Libraries NI to relieve the pressure of reducing library opening hours following an effective lobby from local community groups and the Committee.

The Committee is also aware that a business case has been finalised from the UK City of Culture company for additional funds. Given the Executive's commitment to the project, as outlined under the draft Programme for Government, the Committee will expect that available financial support is provided across government.

Members of the Committee also expressed concern that DCAL is using the fund for regional stadiums as a way of balancing its books, as, on two occasions, DCAL has internally realigned money allocated to the project to manage internal pressures. The Department has assured the Committee that funds will be available for the regional stadiums, particularly in light of the Executive's substantial investment of £110 million and their commitment to the project under the draft Programme for Government. However, it is clear that the year ahead will present significant challenges. Indeed, the Committee was told by DCAL officials that slippage is under pressure, and, unlike other years, the Department cannot assume that there will be a given percentage of slippage. Therefore, the Committee feels that its concerns are justified and wishes to flag that up early and avoid unnecessary budgetary pressures in year four of the regional stadium project. The Committee is closely monitoring that large capital project to ensure that targets are met and slippage is avoided. It has made a start in that regard and has already heard from DCAL and the three governing bodies of football, rugby and Gaelic games on progress towards regional stadium development in 2015.

It is extremely important that scrutiny of the Budget remains a top priority of the Committee, given that 85% of DCAL's budget is managed by its arm's-length bodies. The Committee will seek to reassure itself that the Department is managing its budget effectively and driving forward much needed efficiencies.

The Committee calls for the Minister of Finance and Personnel to ensure that the money required by DCAL to manage its financial pressures is made available to ensure that the impact that sport, culture, the creative industries and libraries make to our local communities, to our health, to the economy and to tourism is not undervalued during this mandate. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motions and welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. In the current economic climate, all Departments must seek to ensure that budgets are used as effectively as possible for the public good and in order to make efficiency savings. Mr Irwin challenged my colleague to say how those savings would be met, and the business sector, for one, has consistently called on the House to recognise how duplication in the provision of goods and services limits economic growth and efficiencies. As the Minister has often been reminded by my party, a report commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) estimated that the cost of division and duplication in public service is over £1 billion.

In light of the £4 billion budgetary reductions, it is surprising that the Minister has not required more from Departments to tackle that waste. It is astonishing that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have failed to spend £1.2 million that was allocated for improving community arrangements.

2.00 pm

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. He refers, as he does frequently, to the cost of division being £1 billion. In doing that, he also referred to the £4 billion cut that we are faced with over the next four years. Does he not feel just an eensy-weensy bit of regret about the part that

his party played in the coalition with the Liberal Democrats, which implemented the £4 billion cut in the first place?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention and the opportunity to clarify, again, that my party has no role in that coalition. Indeed, I objected to that level of budgetary reduction.

I am more interested in the resolution and the failure of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to spend the £1.2 million that was allocated to improving community relations in Northern Ireland. It could have helped to facilitate some of those efficiencies.

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I remind the House not to go outside the two motions that are before us. I am allowing all Members some latitude. I can understand that they need latitude, but let us try to keep to the two motions before the House this afternoon.

Mr Lyttle: If we are serious about the better use of public funds, it is imperative that duplication and segregation are tackled. Proposals by the Minister for Employment and Learning for increased sharing and integration in the teacher training system saw the House split along familiar lines. That was a missed opportunity to rationalise public service spend.

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

In conclusion, it is clear that if we are to sustain a high level of public services and enable economic growth, we need a sea change in the way in which we spend public money in Northern Ireland. I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some details on what action is being taken centrally to ensure that Departments reduce spend on duplicated services and invest in a way that promotes a shared and better future for Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: Taking into account the Minister's opening comments about being brief and the Speaker's directions, I will raise a number of concerns and points as the Ulster Unionist Party's spokesman on culture, arts and leisure. My comments follow on from those of the Deputy Chairman, who spoke earlier.

I am fully aware that the Department operates with nearly 85% of its budget allocated to arm's-length bodies. I would like clarification on the finance allocated to them and, in some cases, the Department's budget, which, as Mr Irwin said, is under the scrutiny of the Committee.

Among the easements and moves that we have seen to date is the £342,000 taken from the regional sports stadia and moved to the live side screen planned for Londonderry. Another £100,000 was taken out of the sports stadia money to buy a weed cutter required by fisheries. I have raised a number of times my concern that we seem continually to use the pot of money assigned to regional stadia as a slush fund for other activities in the Department. That is because of the slowness to act on the stadia desired by the GAA, IFA and rugby football. I am moving slightly off subject, but we are concerned that the sole sports stadium budget is a six-year package. Given that there is already slippage, we are concerned that there is no guarantee that, post-2015, the money will be available to fund those stadia. In the monitoring rounds, finance is already being used to sustain other projects. Some £225,000 was also taken out

of the stadia budget because of the shortfall in the receipt generated when the old Public Records Office building was not sold. In light of a recent announcement that the building has still not been sold, or that the sale has fallen through, a concern has been raised, under the DCAL and DFP budgets, about how that will have a knock-on effect into future monitoring rounds.

When my colleague, who is sitting to my right, spoke earlier about the arts, I was not exactly sure where he was going or what finance he was referring to. However, as we drive forward, I am concerned about the creative industries and the recent announcement of DSD's withdrawal of the Laganside Events Grant, which will be effective from 31 March. As the spokesman for culture, arts and leisure, that concerns me. That money has already benefited activities such as the Open House Festival, the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, the Festival of Fools and the Culture Night. I am concerned that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure will be challenged to find ways to mitigate the negative effect that this will have on arts and culture in Belfast, and that her budget will be put under pressure, especially in the next monitoring round, to ensure that those things happen.

Concerns about the funding of libraries has been raised a number of times in the House. In the past year, we have seen the potential closure of some rural libraries. We have also seen a proposed reduction in the opening hours of rural libraries. Suddenly, like a lot of other Sinn Féin and DUP Ministers, the Sinn Féin Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure was able to produce £2.36 million, with which she was able to offset some of the reduced hours. If money can be found like that, we should now be declaring how much is out there that could be utilised in the budgets that are under pressure.

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank you for your indulgence, it was announced recently that the construction of the Bangor Olympic-sized swimming pool, which was meant to be fit and ready for the Olympic training teams, will be delayed due to an incident in Amsterdam. I do not expect the Finance Minister to be aware of any incidents in Amsterdam. *[Laughter.]* However, one of the major construction beams being used, due to the size of the span, has been damaged in Amsterdam, which will have a knock-on effect on the entire project. I am concerned as to how those easements and moneys will be moved forward in the spring Supplementary Estimates to ensure that they are not lost and that development in the sports, culture and arts industries will still go forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has thanked me for issuing indulgences. I do not issue indulgences.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you will be as gracious to me as the Speaker has been to everybody else.

I am pleased to speak in my role as Chairperson of the Justice Committee. The Committee regularly scrutinises the Department of Justice's budget and receives detailed information on the monitoring rounds and savings delivery plans. The Committee pays particular attention to the likely impact on the delivery of front line services when considering the Budget plans and allocations.

The main pressure faced by the Department of Justice in this financial year relates to legal aid expenditure. In

October, a pressure of £14.5 million was forecast, and that had increased to £18.2 million in the December monitoring round. The Department has funded that pressure from a range of easements identified by other spending areas. The cost of legal aid continues to far exceed the budget allocated for it. As part of the devolution financial package, an additional £39 million of HM Treasury reserve funding was provided for legal aid and other court pressure. However, £36.2 million has already been used, leaving a balance of only £2.8 million additional funding that can be accessed in 2012-13. Therefore, it is imperative that the cost of legal aid is brought within budget as soon as possible, otherwise the impact on other spending areas in the Department of Justice will be unsustainable. The Committee has supported the Minister in making changes to legal aid fees that will reduce the overall cost, and that should start to impact during the next financial year.

However, further changes to reduce legal aid costs are also being considered, and I contend that much more needs to be done to reduce the expenditure on legal aid. Not only are the sums of money being spent on legal aid far in excess of what Northern Ireland can afford, there is a disparity between where the legal aid is being funded, in that defendants are benefiting on a ratio of around 2:1. Therefore, it is very clear to everyone that there is not equality of arms for the Public Prosecution Service — for the state — in taking forward cases. The amount of money spent on legal aid is clearly to the benefit of the defendants, and we are all concerned that there should be equality of arms. Therefore, we will continue to raise the issue of the reform of legal aid in the Committee, and the Minister needs to continue to provide proposals for its reformation.

Also, there is the prison reform programme. All members agree that our prisons cost too much to run and that the outcomes to wider society are not justifying the amount of money that is being spent. That is an area that the Committee and the Department have to look at as part of the ongoing monitoring rounds within the Budget.

The Department's budget remains ring-fenced for the 2011-12 to 2014-15 period. That does not mean that the budget is protected. The Department received the direct Barnett consequentials arising from changes in the funding levels of the Home Office and Ministry of Justice as a result of a UK spending review settlement for Whitehall Departments. That resulted in a 6.2% reduction in the departmental expenditure limit baseline. Taking into account the effect of inflation, the real term impact is significantly greater than the £82 million that is being taken off the Department of Justice.

Overall, the Department of Justice remains on course to achieve its delivery of the 2011-12 in-year savings target of £36 million. However, there are worrying indications that, in some areas, there is already an impact on front line services, despite the Department's aim, supported by the Committee, to protect front line services as far as possible. A number of areas in which that has been highlighted to the Committee include the Probation Board, the Police Ombudsman's office, the Policing Board, the Youth Justice Agency and the Criminal Justice Inspection. They have difficulties in delivering the savings and have highlighted the impact that those savings could have.

A key concern that I wish to highlight is the impact on the Probation Board. There is an increasing move towards more people doing community service. The Probation Board is already facing a rise in caseloads, with an increase of 15% in community service orders and a 9% increase in the number of offenders under supervision. There has also been a 66% increase in the number of dangerous offenders coming under the remit of the Probation Board. The board has consistently highlighted the impact that achieving what is being asked of it in the savings plan would have on front line services and staff numbers. The most recent information available indicates that staffing levels have been reduced, resulting in slower throughput for community service and waiting lists for sex offender and domestic violence programmes. Therefore, although the Committee recognises and welcomes the Department's commitment to fund many of the board's pressures that have been highlighted through the monitoring round process, it is a concern for the Committee and something that we will be scrutinising in the future financial year.

Another key priority for the Department is protecting front line policing. A high proportion of the budget from the Department goes to the PSNI, accounting for almost 65%. To that end, the Chief Constable will attend the Justice Committee meeting this Thursday to discuss his budget and initiatives to reduce costs while ensuring that front line services are protected. That meeting with the Chief Constable will be a first for the Committee since the devolution of policing has taken place. It is a welcome opportunity for the Justice Committee to scrutinise the Chief Constable and how the PSNI is delivering its budget.

I support the Supply resolution for 2011-12 and the 2012-13 Vote on Account.

Mrs Overend: I am speaking today in my role as enterprise, trade and investment spokesperson for the Ulster Unionist Party. As we have heard many times today, the two motions that we are debating, the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account, are largely technical and fulfil the purpose of authorising additional resources. They also enable Departments to continue to function into the incoming year. I note the Minister's opening remarks regarding the rationale of the debate today, and I will try to keep my comments in line.

I have a few issues that I would like to highlight. First, as my colleague mentioned, is the specific issue of Invest Northern Ireland handing back money twice to the Department of Finance and Personnel. That amounted to a combined total of £39.1 million, with £21.6 million being returned in January and £17.5 million returned the previous year. As that occurred within the context of the in-year monitoring rounds, I am sure that the Speaker will be happy for me to expand on that.

It has been outlined that the economy is the number one priority of the Executive, and it is right and proper that adequate significance is given to that area. However, action is more meaningful than words, and if we are to be successful in rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy, we must work to grow the private sector. Invest Northern Ireland has a vital role to play in that rebalancing process. However, it must work to its full capacity, and handing back such a substantial amount of money in the current economic climate cannot be justified. The Finance Minister

intimated at the time that that money would still be used for job creation. I ask for clarification as regards the specific projects or initiatives to which the £31.9 million has been reallocated.

2.15 pm

The Enterprise Minister must work to improve the confidence of companies to make major investments while ensuring that there is no negative perception of Invest Northern Ireland in the business sector. I have a keen interest in supporting our local businesses, and I wonder whether the Enterprise Minister and Invest Northern Ireland should examine some sort of plan B for that finance.

Tourism is central to boosting our economy. Last year, there were some very disturbing figures that showed that the number of tourists visiting Northern Ireland dropped by 300,000 in one year. I am pleased that the recent figures are more encouraging, but continued investment is necessary, and I will be able to deal with that area in more detail in the Budget discussions in June.

This morning, the Finance Minister mentioned headroom being given to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for capital investment funds. Given that the Irish Open golf tournament is taking place in the north-west of Northern Ireland this year, that type of flexibility is welcome.

Finally, I am concerned by the proposed dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning. We must keep a close eye on the issue, including the reallocation of the Department's responsibilities and the supposed reduction in bureaucracy and how those work out. I will be watching that area with keen interest. I am keen for clarification on the figures for the dissolution of that Department and how that will work out. I am also keen that the dissolution proves to be an example of better joined-up government in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ritchie: As Members and the Minister said, this debate comes largely as a result of the very technical spring Supplementary Estimates. In so authorising the expenditure, the Minister has clearly missed a trick by not referring to other means of leveraging in further expenditure to invest not only in the local economy but in other sectors that could bring benefit and much improvement to the lives of the people of Northern Ireland, an issue in which he has a particular interest.

For the SDLP, that is the whole purpose of devolution. Last week, the Minister that said he is not interested in other forms of devolution. Surely, Minister, other forms of devolution could include the devolution of tax-raising and tax-varying powers, such as landfill tax, motor tax and corporation tax. So, I was a little surprised to hear you say that you did not believe in or want any other forms of devolution and that you thought that there were enough because you are a unionist.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: No; I will continue with my train of thought.

Does that mean that you are putting party political interest ahead of the needs of the wider community in Northern Ireland? Your remarks were all the more disappointing and surprising because they clearly contrast with the position

of your party colleague, the First Minister, who wants more forms of devolution. Perhaps, as the Minister of Finance and Personnel, you could clarify the official position of the Northern Ireland Executive, your position as Minister of Finance and Personnel and the position of the DUP.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: No; I wish to continue. I will give way in a little minute.

Why would a Finance Minister in Northern Ireland not want to ensure that we had greater financial control, further ability and capacity to have those tax-varying powers and to set, collect and invest those taxes back into the economy, our health service and the benefits for the people of Northern Ireland? Why would the current Finance Minister be putting party or maybe personal political preferences ahead of the greater good of the wider population in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: I am quite happy to give way. No doubt he will be able to elucidate that matter.

Mr Wilson: I would, except it is totally irrelevant to the debate. Mr Deputy Speaker, I would have thought that after nearly three minutes of an irrelevant speech, which is 30% of the Member's time, you would have drawn to her attention that we are talking not about tax-raising powers or additional levers but about the money that was allocated for 2011-12. The debate is simply about authorising the additional money that went into departmental budgets as a result of monitoring rounds, Barnett consequentials, etc. We are discussing that money, not the devolution of corporation tax or any other taxes. Maybe, Mr Deputy Speaker, you would get your former party leader in line on the debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Member has taken the lesson from the Minister and will stick to the debate.

Ms Ritchie: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. So, we now hear that the Minister of Finance is very happy to administer Northern Ireland on behalf of the British Government based only on the actual resources that he is given. Therefore, he is not prepared to look at other possible resources that could make the debate much wider while staying within those necessary parameters.

Mr Hamilton: Mr Deputy Speaker, given that you are indulging this conversation, can I ask the Member whether, if she is talking about increasing resources, she will outline for the House and, more importantly, the people and businesses of Northern Ireland what taxes she and her party propose to put up?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I encourage the Member to stay within the guidelines of the debate and not to be encouraged by others to move outside them.

Ms Ritchie: Mr Deputy Speaker, you know full well that I would not be encouraged whatsoever to go outside the confines of the debate. However, it is important to consider those matters when you are discussing the spring Supplementary Estimates, which reflect the changes that have occurred in departmental expenditure, and the Vote on Account, which makes provision for a proportion of next year's proposed Budget to be allocated so that the Departments can execute their responsibilities.

It is also important for us, as Members of this august Assembly, to reflect on the possibilities of extending the revenue potential for the people of Northern Ireland. I believe that that is our obligation as elected representatives. Therefore, the Minister of Finance's assertion that he does not want any other forms of devolution because, he says, he is a unionist makes me wonder what exactly is going on in that ministerial working group on rebalancing the economy and the possible devolution of corporation tax.

It could also help us to mitigate the harmful effects of welfare reform that are coming down the line. I am sure that he would want to join us in doing that so that we are able to have greater benefit for the citizens. Why would we not want greater financial control? Why would we not want more devolution? We want more devolution because we believe that we have the confidence, and I am sure that the Minister of Finance —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member will not be surprised to know that my indulgences are all gone. Please get back to the debate.

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that the Minister of Finance would agree, as would you, Mr Deputy Speaker, that we want the ability to raise taxes to ensure that we have a better story to tell about the spring Supplementary Estimates. We also want to be able to raise taxes to ensure that we have more money on the Vote on Account so that we have a greater amount available to enable Departments to execute their responsibilities, whether that is health provision for the wider citizens, getting tourism revenue, job creation, employment provision, improving roads infrastructure or implementing major new roads schemes.

That is what we are about: providing a better way of life for the people of Northern Ireland. We must be prepared, irrespective of our political affiliations or identities, to be able to cater for the needs of the wider population in Northern Ireland, which are now much more acute as a result of the economic downturn. I hope that the Minister will give cautious heed to those words and be able to report to the Assembly in due course on the ministerial working group on corporation tax and on all possible means of raising revenue in Northern Ireland, so that we can implement all possible programmes throughout the spectrum, whether they be for health, education, the economy, job creation, tourism or children and young people, that improve lives.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes it ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Social Care

1. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how he plans to address the shortfall in social care provision. (AQO 1270/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I recognise that the social care system of support is coming under increasing pressure because of a range of factors, including demographic pressures, increasing service user expectations and a challenging financial climate. That is why I intend to reform adult social care to ensure that resources are used to maximum effect, with care provided at the right time and in the right place. To that end, I will shortly write to my Executive colleagues to set out a three-stage process of reform to begin in the spring.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the actions that he has taken so far in this area. Does the Minister acknowledge that as health trusts now fund only critical care, many older people who would previously have received some form of care now face the prospect of developing more serious health issues? As a result, more older people are being forced into hospitals than would previously have been the case. Is that the best use of social care?

Mr Poots: I am not sure that there is any empirical evidence to support that. In December 2011, there were 204 patients waiting in hospital for longer than the 48-hour target for a care package in the community, and that compares favourably with other parts of the United Kingdom. However, we should not be complacent about that. The Compton review identified that that was not the way in which we wanted to go and that we should try to keep people out of hospitals. We are looking at taking measures to enable that to happen and at how we can better support people in their own homes and provide them with the appropriate care.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important that we have a focused view on and approach to the provision of social care. Does the Minister accept that different criteria are used in different trusts and even in some districts within trusts to decide what level of social care is provided, whether that is community care or care for the elderly?

Mr Poots: Yes, I do. That is one of the reasons why we are looking at a three-stage process of reform, subject to Executive approval. The first stage will be to bring forward a discussion document in which we will highlight the current challenges and seek to build a consensus for change while setting out a high-level vision for the future of adult social care in Northern Ireland. The second stage will be to move to a proposals document that will set out a range of potential options for change. The final stage will be a

strategy for adult social care that will set out the agreed future direction and a fair and sustainable funding model for the future of adult social care in Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: The Minister has touched on what I wanted to ask. What consideration will be given to existing practice in Great Britain during the current review of social care?

Mr Poots: We will look at good practice wherever it happens to be. We have just concluded the Compton review, and we had the expertise of Chris Ham from the King's Fund and Dr Ian Rutter, who brought with him a great deal of experience of how things are done in other parts of Great Britain. We will take advice from areas where good qualitative work is being done so that we can make real improvements in Northern Ireland. Ultimately, the goal must be to keep people out of hospital and to provide the appropriate care that will allow that to happen. Nobody wants to end up in a nursing home or a hospital. People would much prefer to be in their own home, and we need to support them in that.

Ms Ritchie: In light of the outworkings of the Compton review, which emphasised the possible provision of services by the community and voluntary sector, will the Minister indicate what discussions he has had with other agencies and Departments about providing better quality social care throughout Northern Ireland and particularly in rural areas?

Mr Poots: I have regularly met people from the community sector, in particular from organisations that specialise in mental health and learning disability care, who are very keen to assist us in reaching our goals and achieving our vision. The Compton report clearly set out the need to move people out of long-stay mental health facilities into more community-based facilities. I support that, and we will need to work very closely with such organisations to achieve it in the not-too-distant future.

Residential Nursing Homes

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what contingency plans his Department has put in place to provide nursing care for elderly people who are living in residential homes that fail to meet the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority's standards. (AQO 1271/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is not my Department's policy to provide residential nursing care in homes that are not nursing homes. An investigation into a residential home in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area is still under way. Although there are contingency arrangements to cover a range of potential situations, they are constantly under review. Where homes fail to comply with regulations, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) has a number of enforcement tools available to it. However, the main aim is to bring the service back up to standard, and inspection reports will highlight what improvements are required. The home must respond to those reports with a quality improvement plan that explains how it will meet those requirements.

Dr McDonnell: Thank you very much, Minister, for your reply. You will be aware that there are a number of families, carers and relatives who are put under severe stress. We have residential homes and we have nursing homes, but if there is no nursing support going into the residential homes,

those who are in the residential homes who need nursing support, in turn, are cast out or pushed aside, and there may be no nursing home available. For many years, Minister, although I would not attribute it to you or to the Department today, this has been a contentious point around the health service.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Dr McDonnell: Minister, I would appreciate it if you could tell us whether there is any support that your Department can give to people who fall between two stools.

Mr Poots: First, where a home fails to comply with regulations, the RQIA has a number of enforcement tools available to it. However, the main aim is to bring that service to a standard, and the inspection reports will highlight what improvements are required. Importantly, the Member raises the issue of what happens if an individual is moved beyond residential care and needs nursing care. There is a course of work to be done in that instance to ensure that the appropriate nursing care is needed.

I can think of one particular facility in the Foyle constituency, which has seven patients who require nursing care. There are nine nursing home places available in that constituency, but those may not all be suitable for the people who need to move on from residential care, and there needs to be a degree of support to ensure that that is in place until that movement takes place.

Ms Lewis: What potential is there for international collaboration in the remote telemonitoring of patients in their own homes and the use of other technology?

Mr Poots: Telemonitoring will greatly assist us in ensuring that people can stay in their own homes. The Transforming Your Care report identified that there are 4,000 people in residential care, but that is not the future direction in which we are headed. We want people to receive residential care in their own homes. Telemonitoring is particularly effective in dealing with people who have illnesses such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, asthma and diabetes, and it can greatly reduce the number of hospital visits or admissions for such patients. By monitoring individuals' key health points, the relevant professional support can be brought in quickly to ensure that people are treated early, very often before they realise that they have a serious illness coming on. That ensures that the individual has a much better prospect of remaining in their own home.

Mr Kinahan: The personal social services research unit showed that between four hours and 20 hours per individual member of staff were needed to relocate an elderly person to another care home. Has the Minister costed this and built it into budgets or has he created an emergency team to carry out that work?

Mr Poots: Obviously, it is something that goes on all the time. Given that my Department is responsible for health and social services, we are at a much greater advantage than, for example, people in other jurisdictions and, indeed, those in other parts of the United Kingdom. In Great Britain, the councils happen to be responsible for social services, and that creates many problems, particularly when cuts are coming from Westminster and many councils respond with cuts to social services, which ensure that people stay in hospital much longer. In Northern Ireland, we can respond

much more quickly. We have one system, and it is far more expensive to keep people in hospital than in a care facility. Indeed, the former is generally not as good an outcome. So, we want to move people on quickly, and it is incumbent upon the trusts to ensure that that happens.

Private Clinics

3. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on referring patients to private clinics in the past three years. (AQO 1272/11-15)

Mr Poots: The five health and social care trusts spent £60 million in 2008-09, £57.5 million in 2009-2010, and £24.7 million in 2010-11 on independent sector provision in the health service. Supplementing healthcare capacity through the use of the independent sector is used as a short-term measure to deliver improvements in waiting times. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) grants approval for such expenditure to ensure that patients do not have to endure unacceptable waits.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. How do we ensure that good follow-up of private operations takes place? What are we doing to build capacity to avoid the need for independent providers?

Mr Poots: Contracts for follow-ups are agreed with the HSCB in the first instance. Pre-contract quality assurance checks are carried out. Those contracts require providers to deliver minimum quality outcomes, as defined by the Independent Health Care Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005, which also require them to have complaints procedures in place.

The Member asked about the capacity within health and social care to avoid having to send patients to the independent sector in future. One of the specialties that consistently encounters problems is orthopaedics. The HSCB has invited recurrent bids from trusts to help to bridge the gap between elective supply and demand for that specialty. It anticipated that around £5 million will be committed recurrently within the next two years, subject to the trusts' ability to recruit additional consultants and other specialist staff, which will greatly help us to reduce our requirement for the private sector. It should also, at the same time, ensure that people's treatment and care paths are provided more speedily and in a more structured way.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister have a figure in his head as to the optimum level of private sector involvement, which would get the balance between doing it in-house and not building a huge backlog of patients?

Mr Poots: I do not think that there is necessarily an optimum level as regards the money spent on this. What is optimum is that people receive the appropriate care at the right time. For example, we have close to 1,500 people who require cardiac surgery in Northern Ireland each year. We provide around 1,000 of those operations and have to buy in the rest. I would have thought that we would have been better operating closer to capacity, not exceeding it. So, I think that we should be heading, in general, for at least 85% to 90% of our requirement, and perhaps looking at buying in services thereafter. Once we go over that, we are probably running at an excessive cost. Certainly, we should be aspiring to get as close to it as possible.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the Minister say how much the Department has spent on referring patients for treatment in other jurisdictions within the same three-year time frame?

2.45 pm

Mr Poots: I am less inclined to lose too much sleep over those issues. What is important to me is that people receive the appropriate care in a timely way. We need to ensure that we challenge those areas in which we are weak and not using the capacity. I had discussions with folks on the cardiac side, and I know that progress is being made there, and I believe that there will be considerable progress in future years.

Work is being done to carry out more orthopaedic work in Northern Ireland. That is very important, but there will always be a requirement to use other providers. It is important that when we use other providers, we achieve good value for money from their work, we ensure that they provide a quality service for the individuals who receive care and we get to a point in Northern Ireland at which people do not have to wait for inordinate periods to receive the surgery that they need to recover from something that is quite serious or has a hugely negative impact on their quality of life.

Alcohol and Drug Misuse

4. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans for tackling the misuse of alcohol, especially underage drinking and binge drinking. (AQO 1273/11-15)

11. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans to tackle the adverse impact on our society arising from drug and alcohol misuse. (AQO 1280/11-15)

Mr Poots: Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will take questions 4 and 11 together.

On 26 January 2012, I launched the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2, which is a cross-sectoral strategy to reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse. Approximately £8 million is allocated to its implementation each year, and additional funding is provided through the mental health budget for the provision of treatment and support services. The new strategic direction (NSD) seeks to direct action across five pillars: prevention and early intervention; harm reduction; treatment and support; law and criminal justice; and monitoring, evaluation and research. A specific priority is to address underage and young people's drinking. I am particularly concerned about how some alcohol is priced, promoted and marketed, and NSD phase 2 raises those issues. Therefore, my Department has been working closely with the Department for Social Development, which led a joint consultation on the principle of introducing minimum unit pricing in Northern Ireland. Following a consultation, we are looking at commissioning research to model the likely impact of that in Northern Ireland, which will help to inform our future decisions. However, minimum unit pricing is only one part of our approach, and it is important that we take a range of actions to address alcohol misuse across the population.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for his response. The Minister will be aware that, last week, the Minister for Social Development was moving towards banning drinks promotions, which are mainly targeted at young people. Will the Minister continue to work with the Minister for Social Development to apply a minimum cost to a unit of alcohol to discourage underage drinking?

Mr Poots: The Minister for Social Development and I are working very closely together. I have also had conversations with the Minister of Justice and other Ministers, because alcohol misuse is so prevalent in our society and crosses so many boundaries. The Minister for Social Development and I are leading research, with the support of DSD, and it is important that we get to a point at which we can present proposals.

It will be of great interest to the House that I have also engaged very closely with Róisín Shortall and Minister Reilly in the Irish Government. They are also keen to introduce minimum pricing for alcohol and to do so at a similar time as we introduce it here in Northern Ireland. That is completely rational, as it will ensure that we do not have a situation in which alcohol is very cheap on one side of the border or the other, as people would take the opportunities that that presented. So we are all working quite closely together on that issue because we cannot afford to be spending £250 million on the health service or £900 million annually to address the abuse of alcohol.

Mr Craig: Is the Minister aware of any research that links substance abuse, including alcohol and drugs, with suicide?

Mr Poots: A considerable amount of work has been done by various organisations. Substance abuse is thought to be major factor in youth suicide, and research from America has shown that one in three young people was intoxicated at the time of their suicide attempt. Alcohol and drugs can affect people's thinking and reasoning ability, and they can act as a depressant. They decrease people's inhibitions, increasing the likelihood of depressed young people attempting to take their own life. That reinforces my determination to push ahead with those activities that seek to educate young people about the risks of substance misuse. The Public Health Agency, for example, has piloted four one-stop shop drop-in services for young people, which provide information, education, signposting and referrals. The services recognise that substance misuse is often one outcome of a range of underlying issues. Therefore, those services also cover suicide and self-harm, mental health and well-being, sexual health, relationship issues, resilience and coping with school and employment. Those pilot projects have now been evaluated, and consideration is being given to rolling them out across Northern Ireland.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister for Social Development in respect of shops that sell alcohol putting their names on bags?

Mr Poots: We are looking at a range of measures and, in particular, we have talked about social impact bonds being applied to shops that sell alcohol. Very often, social impact bonds are applied to pubs, and pubs are sometimes considerably less responsible for the cause of the problems than many shops. People who own pubs, for example, say that they have serious problems with people arriving at their

premises already heavily intoxicated from cheap alcohol that they obtained elsewhere. Going after shops that sell alcohol has to be done sensibly and rationally. They provide a service to people who want to have a drink, and we are not concerned about that. We are concerned about people who abuse drink, and minimum pricing, social impact bonds and the Member's suggestion of labelling bags are all things that we can do to seek to improve the situation.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answers to a very important issue. Minister, you mentioned general costs. Do you have any details on the cost to the health service of alcohol abuse by young people specifically, and are there any particular black spots?

Mr Poots: I do not have details for young people specifically. The cost of alcohol to the Northern Ireland economy is around £900 million, and when drugs are included, it is over £1 billion. The cost is £250 million to the health service directly, and it is considerably more to my colleague the Minister of Justice. We need to work with the community to explain that it is not about making life miserable for people but is about dealing with a problem in our community. A number of years ago, we took a strong position on secondary smoke and second-hand smoking. Problems arise as a result of second-hand drinking, such as violence from people drinking and people who take up a lot of space in our health system, thus displacing others. Those problems are far more significant, so it is incumbent on us to take steps to ensure that people are not discriminated against because of the current way in which people abuse alcohol and expect others to pick up the tab.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's comments and, in particular, his proactive response and that of his Executive colleagues. Every one of us knows the awfulness that alcohol brings to an individual, a family and a community.

Does the Minister believe that the current budgetary allocation for the strategic plan against alcohol and drugs is enough to meet the target that the Department set?

Mr Poots: We have set aside £8 million to kick the plan off, and I believe that that is useful. We have a challenge in competing with the slick marketing of the organisations that are involved in selling alcohol. This is not in my Department's control, and we need to talk to those who do have control of it, but we need to get to the point in the future where we have equal time with those who are advertising alcohol so that we can point out the detrimental aspects of abusing it. That would be a game changer and would significantly challenge people's thoughts on the matter, because although it can all look very glamorous in the adverts, it is not so glamorous when somebody is lying in the gutter being sick, when someone who is abusive comes home and beats their wife and children, or when young people end up in brawls and fights that hospitalise many of them. Those issues need to be highlighted. It is not glamorous that 355 people now have an incurable disease called cirrhosis of the liver. So, we need to challenge people about those things and make them aware of the dangers.

Community Health Services

5. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what additional services could be provided in the community, rather than in hospitals, in the future. (AQO 1274/11-15)

Mr Poots: The new model for the delivery of health and social care services set out in 'Transforming Your Care' will encourage a significant shift from the provision of services in hospitals to provision in the community, GP surgeries and closer to home, where it is safe and effective to do so. The distinction in where services can and should be delivered is important, as, for too long, we have relied on the belief that certain services should be provided in a hospital setting. The new model challenges us to develop services around the needs of patients and to separate the institution providing the service from the care and treatment that the patients need.

Under that model of care, service providers should regard home as the hub and should ensure that people can be cared for at home, including at the end of their life. Where specialist hospital care is required, it will be available, and patients will be discharged into the care of local services as soon as their health and care needs permit.

The types of services that could be provided in the community include health and well-being advice; optometry; dentistry; antenatal and postnatal care; access to therapy and rehabilitation; diagnostics; outpatients; and 24/7 urgent care, including GP mental health crisis response and minor procedures.

Local commissioning groups (LCGs) will be tasked with translating the proposals in 'Transforming Your Care' into more detailed population plans that will set out the specific changes to be taken forward in their respective areas so that local needs can be met while taking account of the principles and criteria set out in the review. In developing population plans, LCGs will engage with local communities, councils, health and social care trusts and others to ensure the full representation of views in the development of the plans.

Mr Ross: The Minister will know that the fuel payment initiative has assisted many cancer sufferers in the local community. What information can he provide on the uptake of the cancer payment so far?

Mr Poots: The scheme is being initiated by and will operate through GP practices, which will identify the patients from their cancer registers. GPs have been asked to write to each eligible patient to seek their consent for the Business Services Organisation (BSO) to use their personal information to enable a payment to be made to them if they so desire. There are 353 GP practices in total. To date, we have been advised by the BSO that 220 claim forms were submitted by GP practices by 3 February for payment of the allowance that is available to carry out the work. Those will be paid in February 2012. Further claim forms have been received by the BSO but have not been actioned as yet. So, by 8 February, approximately 4,500 claim forms had been submitted by eligible cancer patients for the payment, which I am sure will be greatly received.

3.00 pm

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 7 and 14 have been withdrawn. They require written answers.

Criminal Justice: Time Limits

1. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice to outline his plans to implement the recommendation contained in the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report 'Avoidable Delay: A Progress Report' to introduce statutory time limits for criminal cases. (AQO 1285/11-15)

9. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the recommendation, contained in the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report 'Avoidable Delay: A Progress Report', to introduce statutory time limits for criminal cases. (AQO 1293/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I shall answer questions 1 and 9 together.

As Members will know, on Monday of last week, I announced that I would be introducing statutory time limits within the lifetime of this Assembly and that those time limits would apply to cases in the youth court. I made the announcement after careful consideration of the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) report on delay, which was published on 24 January 2012.

Dr Maguire's report provides a useful, independent and objective perspective on the longstanding problem of delay. I am grateful to him and his team for their work in producing the report. Indeed, I continue to be grateful for their ongoing support and advice in that critical and difficult area.

CJINI found that, although criminal justice agencies have made strenuous efforts to improve timeliness of criminal cases, not enough has been achieved. It concluded that the time had come for more fundamental change.

As I previously announced to the House, I have asked the Criminal Justice Board (CJB) to develop detailed proposals on how statutory time limits should work in Northern Ireland. In doing so, I was clear that, although statutory time limits must be underpinned by effective penalties, adequate safeguards must also be in place to protect the interest of victims and to ensure that offenders cannot unfairly escape justice.

The introduction of statutory time limits will fundamentally reshape the justice system in Northern Ireland. I am in no doubt about the challenge that that represents, but it is a challenge that must be met if we are to deliver a faster, fairer justice system.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answer. He previously said that he was opposed to statutory time limits because the system was not ready. What has changed, and if the system is now ready, why do we need statutory time limits at all, given that England and Wales have reformed without introducing them?

Mr Ford: I made it clear on previous occasions that I did not believe that the system was in a fit state for statutory time limits. Indeed, I do not believe that the system would be fit for statutory time limits at this stage. That is why I have talked about a two- to three-year process in the period of this Assembly to introduce statutory time limits for the youth court. However, what is absolutely clear is that the efforts that have been made by different agencies across the justice system have not yet produced the step change that

this society needs, and that is why I believe that statutory time limits now need to be considered.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will have heard families of victims involved in recent cases express their views about the added anguish that unavoidable delays bring. Can he do all in his power to ensure that the measure be implemented as quickly as possible?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr Bradley's question. Part of the point of statutory time limits is to make things better for victims, not worse. Delay means that victims suffer considerably. What we need to do is ensure that we do not try to introduce statutory time limits until the system is ready for them. That is why I talk about a lead-in time of perhaps a couple of years. However, I am fully aware of the effect that delay has on victims, and one of my priorities in recent months has been to address that concern.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you have assured the House that it will take some time before you can introduce statutory time limits, and then perhaps only in the youth court in the first instance. Can you assure the House that you will be taking all practical steps to speed up the process in the meantime?

Mr Ford: I can assure the House of that. The announcement that I made last week followed detailed consideration at the CJB, and that followed intensive negotiations among the different agencies and examination over a couple of years of what was possible.

The introduction of statutory time limits is not an alternative to the necessary work that is being done; rather, it is to reinforce the necessary work that is being done and has to be done by all the criminal justice system's agencies.

Maghaberry Prison: Colin Bell

2. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the length of time it took the PSNI to investigate the death of Colin Bell in HMP Maghaberry on 31 July 2008. (AQO 1286/11-15)

Mr Ford: The timing of the police investigation is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). The matter is subject to a criminal investigation and an industrial tribunal, so I cannot comment further. I caution Members against making further comment as well.

Mr Spratt: I am not surprised at the brevity of the Minister's answer.

Given that the unfortunate incident took place in August 2008 and that the Prison Ombudsman carried out an investigation and reported in January 2009, does it not concern the Minister that it took PSNI CID until November 2011 to investigate? Does that not indicate that CID is not fit for purpose? Will the Minister ask Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary to carry out a thematic inspection?

Mr Ford: I can say only what I said in answer to the substantive question. Mr Spratt has colleagues who serve on the Policing Board, and that is where the Chief Constable should be held to account.

Mr Eastwood: What lessons have the Prison Service learnt from that report and from other reports?

Mr Ford: Mr Eastwood makes a fair point, but he is certainly aware of much of the discussion that has happened around the prison reforms, the reports that have been convened and the action that has been taken. I am absolutely certain that lessons were learned from the tragic death of Colin Bell. It is clear that that was one of those defining moments that helped shape some of the reforms that are now under way. Members may question the length of time over which that has happened, but all that we are doing in the current strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme is designed to ensure that we provide the best possible care for vulnerable prisoners, alongside providing constructive activity to reform prisoners in general. From that, we have seen improvement in the training of prison staff and in working methods, and I trust that that will be a legacy.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given what the Minister said about the case at the outset, is he satisfied that the recommendations made after the death of Colin Bell have now been implemented?

Mr Ford: In so far as I can say that in the context of the overall prison reforms, yes, I do believe that lessons have been learnt and recommendations are being carried out. However, we must acknowledge that there are many vulnerable prisoners, not just in this jurisdiction but in every jurisdiction in these islands, and, with limited resources, there are major difficulties in managing vulnerable prisoners. We have seen very positive work done, for example, with the opening of the Donard Centre at Maghaberry prison, but there is no doubt that we need to continue to focus our work to ensure that we protect those vulnerable prisoners at risk of self-harm.

Mrs Overend: Unfortunately, self-harm is often a way of life for prisoners, and its effects on staff and the prisoners themselves are profound. Will the Minister provide us with some detail about what he is doing to reduce the culture of self-harm and to support prison officers who must deal with the consequences?

Mr Ford: As I just said, one of the key issues is the provision of care in the Donard suite at Maghaberry jail. It provides care to those who are most vulnerable, including, in particular, those who are vulnerable and at risk of self-harm. If one looks at the prison population overall, it is clear that a significant number of prisoners have mental health issues and personality disorders. It will always be an issue to which attention needs to be paid. Similarly, it is an issue of good management practice to support staff in best practice and in dealing with the difficult issues that they have to face.

Office of the Police Ombudsman: Interim Chief Executive

3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the role his Department had in appointing an interim chief executive to the Office of the Police Ombudsman with responsibility for the operation of investigations into the conduct of police officers. (AQO 1287/11-15)

5. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the independent legal guidance or opinion

which is claimed by the Police Ombudsman to have advised that the appointment of an interim chief executive was a legal requirement. (AQO 1289/11-15)

Mr Ford: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 5 together.

The Police Ombudsman approached my Department in November 2011 to ask for assistance in identifying an interim chief executive. The request was made at a time when the ombudsman envisaged leaving office at the end of January 2012 and when neither the chief executive nor senior director of investigations posts was filled substantively. Although there was, and is, no legal requirement for an interim chief executive to be appointed, I agree that it was a sensible step to ensure stability and reduce risk during an undefined period in which there will be no fully functioning ombudsman.

My Department sought assistance from the head of the Civil Service and the Department of Finance and Personnel. When a potential secondee had been identified, my Department put the ombudsman in touch with the individual.

It is also worth reminding Members that my Department played a similar role in assisting the Policing Board to identify an interim chief executive at a time when the board was facing significant change. I believe that that step has been highly beneficial to the Policing Board, and I hope that the Office of the Police Ombudsman will benefit similarly from that arrangement. I am unaware of any independent legal guidance or opinion advising that the appointment of an interim chief executive was a legal requirement; neither am I aware that the Police Ombudsman has said that his decision to appoint an interim chief executive was informed by legal advice.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. At this stage, I am sure that the special relationship between the Department and the outgoing Police Ombudsman is very well known. On what date was the business case for this new post of interim chief executive approved by the Minister's Department? Does the Minister recognise the widespread concern that the integral role played by his Department in the creation of this position and the appointment to it is further evidence of the interference of his Department in the independence of the Office of the Police Ombudsman?

Mr Ford: No; I absolutely do not recognise any suggestion of interference. The ombudsman requested the assistance of the Department of Justice, and the Department quite properly sought the assistance of the head of the Civil Service and the Department of Finance and Personnel in identifying a suitable candidate and put that candidate in touch with the ombudsman. So a vacancy was filled, and no business case was required. That does not constitute interference by the Department; it constitutes assistance.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Given that the Minister's Department has had sight of legal advice from the Attorney General and alternative legal advice relied upon by the outgoing Police Ombudsman, will the Minister explain the difference between them? Will he also explain to the Assembly which legal advice his Department is relying on in relation to

the current operational arrangements for the discharge of responsibilities within the Office of the Police Ombudsman?

Mr Ford: I have had sight of two sorts of legal advice, and I am not relying on either, since the issue of the appointment of an interim chief executive and the arrangements for filling the post until a substantive ombudsman is appointed were arrangements for the ombudsman, not for my Department. He acted in accordance with the advice that he received.

Mr Kinahan: It seems inconsistent that the Minister's Department has a role in appointing the chief executive but does not have a role in appointing the Police Ombudsman. Is the Minister looking at a way of clarifying that so it can be more firmly set for the future?

Mr Ford: The legislation is quite clear: the appointment of the ombudsman is the responsibility of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. The only role that my Department had was in assisting the ombudsman, who was seeking a secondee as an interim chief executive. We have no role in appointing a chief executive substantively.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister indicate to the House whether he is in support of the call by the current ombudsman to increase the powers of investigation, in particular, the power or the right to question retired police officers?

Mr Ford: Mr Byrne raises a very valid point. It is, however, an issue that is now out for public consultation, and it would be a foolish Minister who would put proposals out for public consultation and then declare his opinion on them while that consultation is proceeding.

Mr Allister: Would the Justice Minister like to take the opportunity to repudiate the suggestion from the outgoing ombudsman in his call for an amnesty for historic crimes and agree that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Allister: — that would be an unbearable imposition on innocent victims —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Minister does not have to answer that question if he does not wish to, because it is not relevant.

Magherry Prison: Illegal Drugs

4. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Justice whether, in the past two years, any illegal drugs have been discovered during searches of prisoners in Roe House, Magherry prison. (AQO 1288/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service takes the problem of illicit drugs and substance abuse seriously. The three elements of addressing the problem are: reduction in demand through education; reduction in harm through treatment; and reduction in supply through searching and drugs testing. Searching is essential in all prisons to maintain security and protect the safety of prisoners, staff and visitors. It acts as a deterrent, detects and recovers illicit substances and disrupts the movement and supply of drugs and other contraband. In the past two years, there have been eight finds of illicit drugs in Roe House, all of which were in Roe 1 and 2.

3.15 pm

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that there is zero tolerance to drugs by inmates in Roe 3 and 4. There have been no finds of illegal drugs in Roe 3 and 4, so why has such emphasis been placed on the need for full-body searching for drugs of prisoners in Roe 3 and 4, even for internal movements in the prison? Surely that is gratuitous.

Mr Ford: I do not think that it is gratuitous. Indeed, there has been a reduction in the amount of searching in respect of internal movements in Maghaberry prison by separated prisoners, whether from Roe House or Bush House. However, various types of contraband are found in different parts of the prison, including Roe House, and that is why in all parts of Maghaberry, as in all other prison establishments in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom, full-body searching is carried out on entering and leaving.

Members will be aware that I have talked about seeking an alternative, but I suspect that I might annoy another Member if I go too far down that line at this point.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. In relation to the latter part of the Minister's comments, is it now time to implement recommendation 8 of Anne Owers report, if one of the three legs of trying to suppress the entry of drugs into any prison in the North is that we get a technological replacement to full-body and strip searching?

Mr Ford: I am at a slight loss, since I fear that I am about to intrude on another Member's question, which follows shortly afterwards. However, I believe that we are carrying out what is necessary under that section of the report from Dame Anne Owers and her team, but I am not sure whether I should necessarily intrude on another Member's question by answering that in detail at this stage.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Minister aware that drugs are common currency in prisons and that many of our prisoners enter taking soft drugs but end up using hard drugs because they are more difficult to detect? If so, what is he planning to do about it?

Mr Ford: The Prison Service here, like the Prison Service elsewhere, seeks to take action to counteract the smuggling of drugs of any kind. The Member makes a valid point about the ease of detection of some drugs compared to others, but that does not mean that we should let down our guard. It means that we should address the serious issue of those who are vulnerable to drug use and the problems that it creates for them, whether in their life in prison or outside it.

Mr Givan: Does the Minister agree that the abuse of prescription drugs is a major problem in our Prison Service? Will he undertake to work with the Health Minister to ascertain the level of abuse in the administration of prescription drugs?

Mr Ford: I take Mr Givan's point that there is a problem with a wide range of drugs. I am not sure whether prescription drugs in particular are more of a problem than illicit drugs, but the responsibility for dealing with prescription drugs lies with the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, which provides healthcare services to the Prison Service. I am

convinced that the Prison Service will continue to work with the South Eastern Trust in dealing with such problems.

Television Licences: Non-payment

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Justice how many people were convicted and prosecuted for the non-payment of television licence fees in each of the last three years. (AQO 1290/11-15)

Fine Default

11. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work being carried out to reduce the impact of the high level of fine default on the justice system. (AQO 1295/11-15)

Mr Ford: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 11 together, since the answers cover closely related issues. In 2009, a total of 4,906 television licensing cases were prosecuted at court, 3,821 of which led to convictions; in 2010, there were 5,126 prosecutions, with 3,752 convictions; and in 2011, there were 4,905 prosecutions, with 3,415 convictions. On average, about 150 people a year end up in prison following non-payment of a fine for television licence evasion.

I recently published proposals designed fundamentally to reform how the justice system deals with fine defaulters. My proposals include the development of a civilian fines enforcement service; greater use of community-based penalties as alternatives to custody; and new powers to allow for deductions from income in appropriate circumstances.

A number of important initiatives are already under way. A fine collection scheme has been operating since 2009 to remind those approaching their fine payment deadline of the consequences of default. That has resulted in a 29% reduction in the number of warrants needing to be issued and over £3 million in fine receipts.

Greater use of community penalties is also under way. The supervised activity order is now in place in Newry court, and the first two SAOs were made in the past fortnight. SAOs are an alternative to prison for fine default, and a person subject to one will undertake a set number of hours of work in the community instead.

As regards the specific issue of imprisonment for non-payment of TV licence fines, TV licensing is a reserved matter. I have written to the Minister for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to explore the potential for enforcement to be dealt with by way of civil action as opposed to a criminal prosecution.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his response. I appreciate that TV licensing is a reserved matter, but he has indicated that he has been in correspondence with the Minister responsible. Can he ensure that communication and information on the concern that many people in parts of Northern Ireland have about some areas being unfairly and unduly targeted, at the exclusion of or in deference to other areas that are not being targeted for TV licensing evasion, will go back to TV licensing, to ensure that there is an even spread across Northern Ireland and that everyone

everywhere who evades TV licence fees is equally targeted to ensure that the conviction rate drops correspondingly across the Province?

Mr Ford: As somebody who does not go out with a TV licence detector van, I am not sure that I can answer the question as to exactly what areas are targeted or not targeted. I can only say that, going by the number of prosecutions, it appears that significant action is being taken by the TV licensing authorities. The precise geographical areas in which they operate are their decisions, not mine.

Mrs Cochrane: It is staggering that some 30% of all receptions into our prisons in 2009-10 were for fine default. Presumably, that means that 30% of all receptions into prisons were for only a few days. Can the Minister tell us what proactive steps are being taken to reduce the number of those defaults and, thus, reduce the impact of fine defaults?

Mr Ford: Close on 10% of that 30% was for the non-payment of TV licence default fines. We have to be careful and say that people do not go to prison for not having a TV licence. They go for not paying the fine. It is a very significant figure.

Fine default generally needs to be addressed, and that is why we have announced various proposals. In my answer, I referred to the supervised activity orders, which can result in somebody being given a significant number of hours of community service, for example. The minimum number of hours of activity is 10 and the maximum is 100 for fines of up to £500. That is a significant penalty as an alternative to non-payment of a fine, and certainly more significant than the number of people going to prison.

We also have a number of other options under way with regard to improving the information that is given on defendants' means to pay fines and improving the forms that are provided and the guidance that is given to courts. As I said earlier, we have been operating the fine collection scheme, which has resulted in a 29% reduction in the number of fine warrants issued. I believe that we have shown a degree of activity in that area, but it is also clear that some of the other proposals being made at the moment in the consultation, such as the attachment of earnings, may well have a further part to play.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister gave percentages, and a high percentage of them are women who go to prison for the non-payment of TV licence fines. A lot of those women have young children. Does the Minister feel that it is time that that process stopped and that women who have children and have committed a first offence should not be sent to prison for non-payment of a TV licence fine?

Mr Ford: I certainly appreciate Ms McCann's question. My understanding is that of those 150 television licence defaulters who end up in prison every year, roughly 50 of them are women. That is a very significant proportion, in relation to the total number of women in prison. I need to be careful about second-guessing the decisions of judges. However, we are seeking to provide alternatives to fine defaulters going to prison at the same time as looking at decriminalising the issue altogether and having TV licence default dealt with by civil means, as applies for other utilities. Without questioning the decisions taken by individual district judges, what the Department is putting

forward should have the potential to significantly reduce the number of women in particular who go to court for TV licence fine default. Ms McCann correctly highlighted the issue that arises when those women are mothers of young children.

Mr Swann: Does the Minister agree that a viable and more pragmatic alternative to custody for people who default on TV licences and end up with fines would be to use the Probation Board, as it would be more capable? I encourage the Minister to go out with the TV detector vans to see what areas of the country they cover.

Mr Ford: I have been out and about with certain operational agencies that relate to the Department of Justice. However, I think that TV licensing would be overstepping the mark slightly. Mr Swann is correct in highlighting the issue of finding better ways of dealing with fine default. Whether that is through the Probation Board's operation of supervised activity orders, the restraint of wages, or whatever, we need to find something that is more creative and likely to be better for the offender and society than sending people to prison for a few days.

Prisons: Full-body Searches

8. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on his Department's efforts to find a technical replacement for full-body searching of prisoners, as outlined in recommendation 8 of the review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service. (AQO 1292/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I previously advised the Assembly, I recently received the Prison Service report on the use of full-body imaging scanners and am considering its findings and recommendations with a view to determining whether there is scope to conduct a pilot of alternative search technologies in the Northern Ireland Prison Service. In addition, I intend to visit Portlaoise prison to look at its search measures.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. I had every confidence that he would reach my question. Does he agree that a technical replacement for full-body searching, or strip-searching, would be less degrading and humiliating for prisoners and would lead to more rehabilitation and less alienation?

Mr Ford: Mr Brady makes a very serious point, and I agree entirely that a technological solution as an alternative to full-body searching would provide greater dignity for prisoners and prison staff. That said, unless we have the appropriate technology, we cannot move in that direction. However, I have already informed the House that I am keeping in touch with developments at Holme House prison in England, which is piloting the possibility of licensing for a particular form of search technology. If it is possible to provide an alternative that enhances security and dignity at the same time, I assure the House that the Prison Service will be up for taking that action.

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's announcement that he intends to visit Portlaoise prison, which, as the Minister will be aware, uses a model of searching techniques that receives almost no complaints. It is a hugely emotive matter. An SDLP delegation visited the prison recently and addressed some of those concerns. Alasdair McDonnell

referred to internal searches when people are moved between their cells in Roe House and the prison play area —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question please.

Mr P Ramsey: Why is it necessary for those searches to continue when people move only 20 yards and are accompanied by heavily armed staff in riot gear?

Mr Ford: Searching is carried out internally on the basis of a security assessment. I cannot answer for every individual decision. However, I repeat the key point about the Prison Service's efforts to find an alternative. I am going to Portlaoise prison because some Members believe that it has in place better systems that are not currently available to us; other Members have expressed doubts about that. Therefore, I have decided to visit Portlaoise prison in person.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-12 and Vote on Account 2012-13

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum not exceeding £15,244,040,000 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 2012 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,220,944,000 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 2012 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 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.— [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,987,469,000 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 2013 and that resources not exceeding £7,451,346,000 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 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012. — [Mr Wilson (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 motions. The Department of the Environment's (DOE) budget is not a large

one compared with that of some other Departments, but that does not make it any less important.

The Committee gave its support to DOE's proposed budget at the start of the year and welcomed the general direction of expenditure and priorities. However, it was concerned that £4 million worth of environmental protection work was dependent on the income from the single-use carrier bag levy. Stakeholders who were happy with the levy in principle told the Committee that they were concerned about the contradictory message of important environmental work being dependent on a levy that, if it works, will be less and less lucrative. I agree. It really does seem perverse that the more successful the levy is in changing behaviour, the lower DOE's income will be.

Ms Ritchie: Does Ms Lo agree that given the importance of the debate, it is essential that the Minister is present? Perhaps, Mr Deputy Speaker, you can advise us why the Minister is not present and when he will be.

Ms Lo: Thank you. I agree. I had not actually noticed that the Minister is not here. Shall we pause to wait for him to arrive?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, we can continue. I do not know where the Minister is but I am absolutely confident that he will return to his place.

Ms Lo: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Delays in other areas of work have resulted in DOE giving money back during the year. Lack of progress in local government reform is one such example, and the Committee is constantly urging for that to be progressed.

Staffing difficulties in planning continue to concern us. When income from planning application fees drops, as it has continued to do, the impact falls directly on staff. The Committee welcomed the redeployment of 102 administrative staff to other parts of the Civil Service, and in response to the reduced income last year, it supported the temporary transfer of professional planners to other Civil Service Departments. However, it was disappointing to subsequently see planning targets deteriorate and to hear that remaining staff had disproportionately high workloads. Planning officials who are out on loan to other Departments are due to return gradually this coming year. I hope that we will see the impact of that in improved targets, but I also hope that any pressures placed on the Department's existing budget as a result will be carefully managed. The Committee recently had an opportunity to see DOE's planning workforce model. I hope that that will help it to plan and to manage its planning staff more effectively.

More recently, our concerns focused on the easings proposed by DOE in the January monitoring round. Having become familiar with pressures on its budget as planning fees decline, it seemed incongruous to us that the Department should be in a position to hand back £3.3 million. Some of those easements have arisen as a result of slippages in projects, but a significant amount is due to delays in recruitment and the deferred return of some staff on loan. Of DOE's budget, 54% is for staff costs, so fluctuations in income have a significant impact on people, as we have already seen in planning.

The Committee notes that funds surrendered in January are likely to be needed in due course, and it urges the Finance

Minister to ensure that those funds are made available to DOE when required.

In closing, the Committee has largely been supportive of the Department's bids and surrenders during the past year. However, in considering the Vote on Account, the Committee stresses the importance of making sure that the necessary funds are made available to DOE so that it can continue to deliver effective planning functions.

On behalf of the Committee, I support the motions.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I note that the Minister is back in his place. I am sure that he is taking all the issues on board. I am confident that he was taking them on board even when he was not in the Chamber.

I will make a number of comments as Chairperson of the Committee. In-year, the Committee was briefed by the Department on its monitoring round returns and proposals, which underwent significant scrutiny. In July 2011, the Committee was briefed by the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Department on the qualification of its resource accounts for 2010-11. The report by the Comptroller and Auditor General identified three key areas of concern.

The first issue highlighted concerned weaknesses in sponsor control arrangements for directly funded bodies. The Audit Office identified deficiencies and inconsistencies in its arrangements for funding certain directly funded groups and verifying their spending. The Department commissioned an internal audit review of the area to establish in some detail the weaknesses. That audit found a number of issues that were exactly the same as the ones that the Audit Office had identified. Those included weaknesses in the approval process. The contents of letters of offer to the groups were sometimes not as precise as they could have been. There was a lack of checking when grants had been paid. The internal audit made a number of recommendations, the majority of which the Department accepted and implemented.

The second element of the qualification concerned irregular consultancy spending. The Comptroller and Auditor General identified three instances in which business cases should have been submitted to DFP but were not. DFP did not give retrospective approval when that was applied for. The Committee was assured by the departmental accounting officer that the Department sought to strengthen its internal control procedures for the approval requirements for business cases.

The third element of the qualification was a breach of approval granted by DFP for spending on the Maze/Long Kesh remediation phase 2 project. The Department had sought and obtained approval for spending up to £3.5 million. However, the Department was unable to tender at that amount, and the contract was awarded at £4.9 million. Again, DFP refused retrospective approval for the uplift, which meant that the whole amount was deemed to be irregular.

At the briefing, the Committee was assured by the departmental accounting officer that appropriate action had been taken to remedy the concerns and that processes had been put in place to prevent those issues arising in future. In answer to questions from Members about whether the Department had responded appropriately to

remedy deficiencies, the Comptroller and Auditor General assured the Committee that the Department had responded positively to all its points.

The Committee agreed to request a mid-year update, which was provided in November by the departmental accounting officer and dealt with the progress that the Department had made to improve processes and to ensure that necessary approvals are in place when required. The Committee will continue to monitor that closely and receive regular briefings on governance issues.

The Committee has taken a particular interest in the Department's capital projects and understands the importance of maintaining momentum in regenerating sites to attract investment and to provide jobs for local areas. It visited a number of the sites to look at the progress made and to hear further about the plans for the coming Budget period.

In September 2011, the Department took control of the Shackleton Barracks site, and the Committee was briefed on the decision of the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in November. Obviously, there was a ministerial direction in that case, much of which surrounded the estimated costs for clearing the area. The running costs of the Shackleton site, and in particular the ongoing cost of pumping water at the site, is an issue of interest, and the Committee has agreed to visit the site later this month. It has asked the Department to provide the maintenance costs for all the transferred sites.

Although OFMDFM has a relatively small budget compared with other Departments, it plays a key role in the delivery of cross-cutting priorities, such as children and young people, social exclusion, good relations and tackling poverty. It is the people and families affected by those cross-cutting priorities who are feeling the effects of the economic downturn most. That is evidenced by the latest child poverty figures in Northern Ireland, which show that 28% of children are growing up in poverty. That has increased by 3% and the figure for the whole of the UK is 20%. Therefore, it is crucial that spending is targeted effectively and that the Executive deliver services in an efficient and effective manner. It is on those important strategic issues that the Committee provides scrutiny of OFMDFM.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you. Last week, during Question Time, Minister Wilson rubbished claims that welfare reform would take money out of the Northern Ireland economy. Looking at the spring Supplementary Estimates, with respect to DSD, one can already see stark evidence that the Minister's complacency is unfounded.

We have a £15 million reduction in disability benefits, a £20 million reduction in pension credit and a £28 million reduction in income support, jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance (ESA), and that is before some of the more draconian aspects of welfare reform have been even introduced. I do not want to get into an argument over parity, but there is a glaring need for greater resources to be allocated to some sort of discretionary and sustainable fund to ameliorate the impact of welfare reform on those most in need. I welcome the fact that money was directed to winter fuel payments through the social protection fund, but we need something more sustainable.

Although I recognise the need for all Departments to reduce expenditure, I note the dramatic reduction of around £9 million in allocation for social security administration and I would love to know how that was realised. It is to be welcomed that they realised it but what impact will it have on not only the service but on the morale of staff as we enter a period of unprecedented upheaval in the system and an expected massive increase in appeals.

Looking at the Estimate for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcome the additional resources that have been allocated to the Department, provided they are used wisely. I have a slight concern that the request for resources A-1, entitled "Policy Development, Hospital, Community Health and Personal Social Services and Family Health Services", is a bit wide-ranging. We would like to see a more detailed breakdown of the reduction of £638 million within that section.

A lot of reallocation in the Department's budget, as well as, hopefully, new money, will be required to ensure that the transition from our current model of healthcare to that envisaged by Compton is as smooth as possible. I wonder whether the projected £1 million in savings that we are told that the business service transformation programme will realise is incorporated into those figures. I urge a bit of caution around that. In the rush to get this through by the end of this year, people are being asked to make decisions on their futures and to consider voluntary redundancy without any concrete proposals in front of them. I would like to see that rolled through to next year.

Mr Allister: One thing that has surprised me in coming to the House is that whereas we have a very defined budgetary process and framework, within it there is a remarkable degree of laxity in that it appears possible, despite what the House may have approved from time to time, to move money to destinations not anticipated from destinations where, we were told, it was all required.

Of course, a degree of flexibility is necessary. In even this debate, however, there is an issue that focuses attention on that, in that we have gone through three monitoring rounds during this year. The House was never asked to approve them. It was never asked to vote on them. Now, almost at the end of the financial year, it is given that opportunity retrospectively, to such worth as that is because, of course, the process is de facto concluded. Therefore, it surprises me that budgetary arrangements are such that that degree of flexibility can go on in the monitoring process without requiring any assent from the House whatsoever.

3.45 pm

If one picks up the booklet, one does not have to go very far into it before beginning to see the level of indiscipline in spending. It struck me most, perhaps, as I turned through it and came to page 6 to see, in respect of resources for OFMDFM, that although we set a figure of £82 million for that Department, it has, in fact, spent £104 million. There is not much point in our saying that its budget is £82 million if that can, at a stroke, be increased by 25%. That is the sort of thing that surprises me with regard to the indiscipline and lack of clarity in the budgetary arrangements.

The Minister said of the monitoring round that he was surprised by the level of surrender. Those are my sentiments entirely. In many fields, I am surprised by the level of

surrender. For a moment, I almost empathised with the Minister in that regard. Then I remembered the political party that he represents. I realised that I should not be surprised at all. He is surprised by the level of surrender in the monitoring round. Yes; it is quite phenomenal that in the previous monitoring round, we were told that Departments were in a climate in which austerity was the order of the day. Things were tough. No one in government, public bodies or arm's-length bodies could make ends meet. You name them, they were all struggling to make ends meet.

Lo and behold, there is £40 million that they cannot spend. They cannot even think of ways to spend it because they can make bids to the value only of £20 million. Therefore, I share the Minister's surprise about the level of surrender in that regard. It underscores my point about the lack of certainty and foresight in the budgetary arrangements.

Of course, what do we do now? Well, for next year's Supply resolution, we say, "Never mind how wrong you got it in the past: we will give you a down payment of 45% to keep you going from now until the Budget Bill goes through the House properly. Not that you need worry about that actually setting definitive parameters; it will not." We have a wonderful knack of finding money down the back of the sofa or wherever. We will do so again. Therefore, I must say to the Minister that for all his stern words that we hear from time to time about the level of austerity and the need for prudence, when you look retrospectively at how things have progressed, that is not always borne out.

There are, of course, some particulars on which I want to comment. I have commented on the fact that OFMDFM seems to be a law unto itself when it comes to spend. In these austere times, all Departments can still find remarkable sums of money. Answers to recent questions indicated that they can find £5 million to spend on their spin doctors. We are told that education and health are under huge pressure. However, to find £5 million for spin doctors is no problem.

I turn to the hospitality budget. Invest NI, which, as Mrs Overend said, had to hand back £39 million, has spent £2 million on hospitality since devolution was restored. Recently, it spent £200-plus a plate when it took people to listen to Van Morrison. It spent more than £4,000 in one night.

Are we seriously meant to tell our constituents that times are hard and that their school may have to close or that their hospital may not be able to retain its full range of acute services when, since 2007, we can find £5 million for spin doctors, £2 million for hospitality in Invest NI and £750,000 for hospitality in OFMDFM?

If that is not good enough, we also have a marvellous equality industry, on which we can spend endless sums of money. Looking at the figures in the document, we discover that £10 million was transferred from OFMDFM to the equality industry, £8 million to community relations, and £6.5 million to the Equality Commission; yet the Commission for Victims and Survivors must make do with £1.1 million. It is that sort of thing that undercuts the credibility of much of what is said in the House on occasions.

That is without coming to the extravagant North/South bodies; they are also a bottomless pit of expenditure that

provide very little return. Some £100 million a year is spent on those predominantly useless bodies. They are part of that special species that is the political architecture and, therefore, must be cosseted and sustained at all costs. One wonders where the prudence and austerity are that we are told about.

The Minister told us today that to help to deal with the shortfalls, an additional receipt-based programme had been established. However, he did not tell us how it is going. Will the Minister give us an update on how much has been raised through that programme as opposed to how much they thought it would raise? I would be interested to hear. The Minister also told us that additional headroom has been built in, but he did not tell us how much. Perhaps he will tell us in his winding-up speech. Can the Minister give us any assurance that, in the year ahead, we will begin to tackle the squander on some of the issues that I have mentioned and that we will not compound it by going for political projects such as the A5 in a reinvigorated or rejigged form? We must have sensible, rational and necessary expenditure on our roads rather than the political agenda that has driven some of it to date. If the Minister could address some of those issues, it would be useful. Thank you.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank Members for their contributions today. Some were relevant. Indeed, Mr Cree, a Member for North Down, was given a glowing report card and was told that his speech was exemplary. On the other hand, the leader and the former leader of the SDLP seemed to have a contagion that stopped them being at all relevant. Perhaps they should have taken the advice of Mr Bradley when he said that we did not want people doing "a Tom Buchanan". At least Tom Buchanan's speech was three quarters relevant; the speeches by Mr Bradley's party leader and former party leader were 100% irrelevant. Perhaps he should have a quiet word in their ear.

I now turn to Members' points. First, I acknowledge the confirmation by the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel, Mr Conor Murphy, of the role that the Committee played, the consultation on the spending plans, which is reflected in the motions, and the fact that it is content for the Budget Bill to proceed under accelerated passage. However, I will address a number of points that Mr Murphy raised.

As did other Members, he talked about the lead-in time and the fact that the spring Supplementary Estimates were not available and were not laid with the Assembly until 6 February, which had not given time for Committees to properly look at the information. He was hoping, as did other Members, that the review of the Budget process would change that situation. I want to be blunt about that; the spring Supplementary Estimates, which approve the spending that took place in the particular year in which they are laid — this year being 2011-12 — are laid so late because all the information that is needed would not be available until then. For example, we have to get through the January monitoring round because that is reflected in the spring Supplementary Estimates. We also have to leave to the last possible moment the demands that there may well be in Departments so that we can build in the headroom that a number of Members have spoken about. It does not matter what budgetary process we put in place; that situation will always exist.

Given the work that has to be done on the Vote on Account and the Budget Bill and the fact that we have to get Royal Assent and what not, we cannot start the process any sooner than we do. However, I point out to Members that as far as the information from the monitoring rounds is concerned, and despite Mr Allister's point, which is quite correct, that the Assembly does not vote on the monitoring round allocations, Committees will be informed of the nature of the reduced requirements from Departments in June, October and January and of the bids that Departments are making. Of course, there is an opportunity to question me in the Assembly when the statements on those matters are made. The Member is quite right; the final authorisation can only come at the end of the process when we bring the spring Supplementary Estimates to the Assembly.

Mr Buchanan raised a number of issues. He talked about some Departments feeling undernourished and said that, perhaps, not enough money had been allocated to them, but I suppose that everyone could make that complaint. Nevertheless, the Departments have worked their way through the Budget this year very well, and I would point out to the Member, as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, that the Department for Employment and Learning had an increase of just over 3% in its budget this year and, during various monitoring rounds, was allocated an additional £16.4 million for the Steps to Work programme and other measures for the employment service.

Mr Buchanan raised the issue of youth unemployment. We all have to be sympathetic to the difficulties that young people in Northern Ireland are experiencing at present. That is why, in the most recent monitoring round, the Department for Employment and Learning was given £12.7 million for the Steps to Work programme. However, youth unemployment in Northern Ireland has fallen by about 2% over the past year.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister not accept that while the unemployment rate has fallen, one of the reasons for that is that so many young people, including my neighbour's children, have now emigrated?

Mr Wilson: There are a number of reasons for it. We measure the claimant count in Northern Ireland, and it has fallen. Of course, we do not want people to leave Northern Ireland, especially those who have skills and whom we see as the future. One of the reasons why the Minister for Employment and Learning is drawing up a strategy for youth unemployment — he has been speaking to the Executive about it — is to deal with that particular problem.

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

4.00 pm

Mr Cree, who has been at the top of the class, gave a fine example of how Members should conduct themselves in this debate. He raised a number of issues. He talked about Invest Northern Ireland; indeed, a number of Members mentioned Invest Northern Ireland's underspend. At least Mr Cree got his figure right. The SDLP, which is not the best at budgeting, as we may have guessed from some of its members' speeches, could not even get that figure right. I do not know where the figure of £54 million, which Mr Bradley threw out on to the Floor of the Assembly, came from, but it is certainly not based in reality. Invest Northern

Ireland has had to surrender money, and the reason for that is very well known. A lot of its spend is demand-led. If the demand is not there because firms do not have the confidence to invest or cannot match the money that is required by Invest Northern Ireland for any investment grant, because of the banks or whatever, of course that spend is not going to materialise. This is still at the front of the Programme for Government. The fact that we have built in headroom for Invest Northern Ireland this year in case projects do materialise indicates that the commitment is still there that, when the funds are demanded and when the need arises, we will provide them.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. I accept his point about Invest NI and about making sure that it is at the forefront of the Programme for Government (PFG). Does he accept that Invest NI may be required to change some of its criteria for investment and for bodies to access money?

Mr Wilson: That is an issue that I think would best be taken up with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I know that Invest Northern Ireland is continually looking at the appropriateness of how it allocates money and what it does to attract firms to Northern Ireland and to support firms. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment continually holds discussions around that. I know that she is well aware of some of the kinds of changes that may well be required, because she is close to the ground and listens to the various trade bodies as well as individual firms.

I claimed that although money was taken from Invest Northern Ireland in monitoring rounds, it went towards job creation. Mr Cree asked where. A number of other Members also asked about that. When we spend additional money, for example, on roads maintenance, it goes into job creation and keeps jobs in the construction industry. Roads maintenance itself is quite labour intensive. When we put money towards the insulation of homes, as happened with the Department for Social Development (DSD) through the £4 million that it got during the period in question; that creates jobs. When it goes towards first-time homebuyers through the Co-ownership Housing Association, that again, creates jobs in the construction industry. So, the money is actually going into job creation, albeit, not through the schemes that Invest NI hoped would take place.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Minister for giving way. Just on a point of information for him: I did not actually mention Invest NI once during my speech, but I did mention the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). The figures that I quoted are from a table supplied by the Minister's officials at last Wednesday's meeting of the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

Mr Wilson: If it was DETI he mentioned, rather than Invest NI, I stand corrected. I had written that in my notes, and the figure I had written down was £54 million, which he is not denying talking about. Maybe in the mass of stuff that he put forward, I misheard him. If I did, I accept that, as I always do. Although, I think he should check as to whether he mentioned Invest NI. Mr Bradley also talked about the Budget review and the PFG relationship.

Again, I think that he misunderstood my comments about not needing a Programme for Government. In fact, I think that he did not, or chose not to, hear properly the point I made during the previous Budget debate, which was that

we did not need a new Programme for Government because there was already a Programme for Government in place. Indeed, the priorities that were set in the old Programme for Government are the same as the priorities in the current Programme for Government. Therefore, the Budget allocations that were made when we discussed the 2011-12 Budget fit in well with both the previous Programme for Government and the present Programme for Government.

Mr Bradley also raised the issue of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) monitoring round surrenders and asked for some explanation as to why DFP had surrendered some money. I am sure he will be pleased to know, because he raised it later in his speech, that one of the reasons for that was that we had fast-tracked the sale of a property at Belt Road in Londonderry, and that resulted in a reduced requirement of £0.6 million. We raised a further £1.2 million from the sale of the Andersonstown Road jobs and benefits centre. The Member for West Belfast Mr McCann lobbied me to get that sold quickly, because it was an eyesore in the area and was causing grave social problems, so he wanted it fast-tracked. As a result of fast-tracking it, we received a receipt, hence we had the money ahead of time. There were also savings as a result of our reducing accommodation costs, by looking at how we could use the estate better, and we also negotiated a better price for gas.

I think that the Member and some other Members have misunderstood this: surrenders of money do not mean that Departments have been negligent or inefficient or have not dealt properly with the money allocated to them. Very often, surrenders of money are a result of Departments doing the job that we want them to do, and doing it properly and efficiently. I am glad the Member raised the issue of my own Department, because I would have been too modest to raise it myself, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, as I am sure you will understand. As a result of our looking for better prices for gas and for accommodation efficiencies, and as a result of our fast-tracking the sale of properties, we have actually made savings. I would have thought that should be applauded. Indeed, on many other occasions with other Departments, that has been done as well.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of the assets management unit and its performance. He pointed out, as I think Mr Allister also did, that although we had budgeted for £10 million this year, we had raised only £1.3 million to date. We are hopeful we might be able to raise £4 million to £5 million before the end of the year; however, we cannot be absolutely certain of that. Indeed, Mr Bradley then sought to project from that, saying that if we can only get 13% this year, what hope have we of getting the £100 million that has been projected over the four years of the Budget?

First of all, Mr Bradley and others need to recognise that we are dealing in a difficult property market. This was the start of a four-year Budget period. Properties have to be identified and then put up for sale, and the process gone through. The thing is, the properties have not disappeared you know; they are still there, they will still be available for sale. The fact that they have not been sold this year means that the receipt may come in next year, but at least the properties are still there. Despite the difficult property market, we still believe that, since we have back-loaded this, most of the sales will be towards the end, when hopefully the property market will have picked up.

The one good thing is that we actually own the properties that we have put up for sale and have decided we are going to raise money from. If we followed the SDLP's advice in the Budget last year, we would be trying to sell properties we do not even own.

It had receipts for properties that belong to Londonderry council and Lord knows who else. Before he starts preaching about asset sales, he should perhaps look at his own party's record when it comes to receipts from property sales and see —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I am quite happy to give way, because I would like to hear his explanation.

Mr D Bradley: I do not think that the Minister is in a very strong position to attack the SDLP on the issue, since he said during his original introduction of the draft Budget that he would take, I think, £125 million from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. He did not realise that he was not in a position to do that in the absence of legislation. He has still not got that legislation.

I will return to the question of land sales. One of the points that I made in my speech concerned the delay involved in valuing land. By the time that those valuations get back to the asset management unit, the market has often moved on. In some cases, the land is overpriced, so developers are unwilling to buy. If we had a more realistic and speedy valuation system, we might realise much more from the sale of assets.

Mr Wilson: I suspect that I know the asset that the Member is speaking about, because half the SDLP has lobbied me on its sale. I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to mention it here, other than to say that we have no intention of giving assets away. It would be most imprudent of the Executive to do that simply because one bidder comes in at an unrealistic price. However, the SDLP expects us to sell the property to that person. If that were to happen, it is very likely that, in about three years' time, Mr Dallat, who usually sits in front of the Member, would be hauling some poor official before the Public Accounts Committee and demanding an explanation as to why we gave away assets when the market was not there. I do not want the Member to go down that road. I know what he is lobbying for, and I will not enter into a public debate on it.

Mr D Bradley: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. May I clarify that this is not a lobbying exercise and that the point that I made was raised by Members from other parties in Committee as recently as last week?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Your point has been put on the record, and I am sure that it will be reported in Hansard. Perhaps we can return to the debate.

Mr Wilson: I was really only referring to a point that the Member made.

He also mentioned the schools' end-year flexibility (EYF) scheme. I am glad that the misunderstanding about that has also been cleared up in the Member's mind and that, although he claimed during the January monitoring round that that money had been lost to schools, he now understands that it has, of course, not been lost to schools.

Schools got access to all the money that they required this year. The money was returned, albeit, I have to say, rather late in the day. I have already put on public record that the money will be available to schools for next year.

Judith Cochrane and Chris Lyttle, as always happens, raised the question of the cost of division and how we could reduce spending in that regard. There is an absolute commitment from the Executive to build a stronger, more united and diverse community. It is one of the key priorities in the draft Programme for Government. I always urge Ministers to look at how their Departments spend money. Where there is duplication that can be reasonably eradicated, they should, of course, do it. It makes good economic sense, but it also makes good societal sense. I want to give Mrs Cochrane that assurance.

Mr Lyttle spoke about the decrease in community relations Estimates. I am aware of today's press coverage, where it was reported that £1.2 million of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) community relations budget had been left unspent.

That is not quite accurate, because much of that reduction was due to transfers to other Departments and to those within OFMDFM to address community relations issues. For example, £400,000 of that £1.2 million went to the Department of Education for the summer scheme initiative, which is part of that Department's cross-community work.

4.15 pm

Mr McLaughlin raised the issue of in-year surrenders and asked for confirmation of the reasons for those surrenders. I am not fully aware of the reasons. In the Budget review, we will look at the allocations made at the beginning of the year and at the out-turn, the figures for which we will know in May. One reason for that review is to examine the difference between the allocations and the actual spend to see whether adjustments are required. I have to say that the surrenders are at the margin. I have been able to explain some of them, such as those for DETI. However, the reasons for the other Departments' surrenders are not so apparent, and the Budget review process will hopefully address that. I welcome that Mr McLaughlin has given his support to the Budget review, as has the Committee.

I just want to check one point that Mr Humphrey made, because I do not want the House to be misled by it. He counted up the figures that I had given for the cash, the resource and the capital money and said that it came to £33 billion.

Mr Humphrey: Billion?

Mr Wilson: Yes, £33 billion: £15 billion; £16 billion; and £2 billion. Maybe I should have made it clearer in my speech that there is an overlap between the cash and the resource money. The £16 billion includes the £15 billion cash, plus the money that is available for resource for, for example, non-cash items such as depreciation etc. So, the total is actually £18 billion rather than £33 billion. I wanted to make that clear just in case there had been some misunderstanding.

Mr Humphrey, of course, pointed out that, of the full £10 billion allocated to us, which we were responsible for spending, we surrendered only £1 million. That is good

financial management over the year. Although I would love to claim the credit for that, it was down not to me but to the very hard work of departmental officials, Committees and Ministers in ensuring that we spent the money rather than return it to Westminster.

Mr Kinahan thinks that I have some kind of magic wand that can wipe away all the economic difficulties that we face. He did, however, raise a number of issues that I want to deal with. First, he raised the issue of the green new deal, for which £12 million has been set aside. We said that that money will be released once there is an appropriate business case. However, some money has been released to some extent through the monitoring rounds for work that is normally associated with the green new deal. For example, money has been released for the insulation of Housing Executive houses, which is green new deal-type work, even though the funding that was to be raised through the plastic bags tax was not raised this year. Nevertheless, we found money from other resources. That money is going into the kinds of initiatives that Mr Kinahan, I think, will welcome and that will help us to achieve, as other Members pointed out, a whole host of other objectives, such as better thermal insulation of houses, construction jobs and dealing with fuel poverty etc. I do not care for the name "green new deal", but its objectives and outcomes are important.

Mr Kinahan also raised the issue of Department of the Environment (DOE) funding, as did Ms Lo. I apologise to Ms Lo for not being here for the beginning of her speech; I am suitably chastised for arriving late. The Department of the Environment registered only one bid in the June monitoring round, and that was partly met. No further bids have been received from the Department of the Environment. Some money was surrendered but, as the Member for South Belfast will know, just because the money was surrendered did not mean that the DOE could have used it elsewhere. If it was not being used for the purpose for which it was allocated, it had to be returned to the centre for reallocation.

Mr McDonnell's speech was totally irrelevant. He seemed to want to reopen the Budget debate and point us to the two documents that the SDLP produced. As those documents were so roundly shredded in Budget debates this time last year, I would have been embarrassed to mention them. However, he seems to keep coming back to them. If he wants another round of that at some time, I am sure that the Assembly would just love to have the opportunity to go through them. He said that he was not going to vote for something, but I was not quite clear what. He said that his party did not want to deny Departments the funds that they needed. From that, one might assume that the SDLP will vote for the motions, because it would be voting to authorise the expenditure and make sure that the expenditure to date has not been illegal. The Vote on Account gives money to Departments for the next three or four months. However, no sooner had Mr McDonnell said that than he said that he would not vote for something that was "damaging". I do not know, and I suppose that we will not know until the end of the debate — maybe the SDLP will not even know until then — what way it will go. It is that kind of mixed-up approach that makes the SDLP more and more irrelevant in the political debate. It says that it wants to play an active part, but I do not know what active part it plays. If the leader of the SDLP cannot even understand what the debate is about, dear help us if it comes to looking to him for proposals that can guide the economy. I do not know how many times the

simple words of the motions were explained by the Speaker, by me and by other Members. Mr Cree can understand them — I was going to say, “Even Mr Cree can understand them”, but I did not; I pulled myself back — but the leader of the SDLP still does not know what they are all about. Yet he wants to tell us that he has a better plan for the economy than that agreed by the Assembly. I must say that his record on this is not very good.

Mr Campbell identified the additional money for roads and housing, as did a number of other Members, and I dealt with Mr Lyttle’s point.

I do not know what it is about leaders and former leaders of the SDLP Ms Ritchie started by saying that we had “missed a trick” with the SSEs because we did not consider any tax-raising powers. She said that had we considered tax-raising powers — we do not know which taxes because, although Mr Hamilton tried to draw Ms Ritchie on that, she would not be drawn — we could mitigate the effects of welfare reform. According to Ms Ritchie’s party — it is wrong on this as well, but let us just use its figures — that would produce £600 million a year. On top of that, she said that we could spend more money on health, education and major road schemes. I do not know what kind of tax-raising powers the SDLP has in mind. I do not know, if we get those tax-raising powers, how much the SDLP intends to put up taxes to find all the money to mitigate the effects of welfare reform and spend more on health, education and major road schemes. I think that Ms Ritchie then ran out of breath, because she was going to go on to do more after all that. The people in Northern Ireland might just like to know where the hundreds of millions of pounds required for all that would come from if those tax powers were devolved.

The only tax proposals that I have heard so far from the SDLP have been to get corporation tax back — not to increase it, but to reduce it — and to get air passenger duty back — not to increase it to raise revenue for welfare reform, health, education and roads, but to reduce it. In the debate on student fees, the SDLP wanted not to raise more money from student fees but to take student fees down.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will be more generous to the honourable lady than she was to me, and I will give way.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for giving way. Since the Minister is talking about the mitigation of welfare reform proposals, will he tell us exactly what plans the Executive have in store for such mitigation? There is absolutely no doubt that it will have a detrimental impact on many working and workless families throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Wilson: At the risk of being chopped down by you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, since the Member has raised the issue, I am sure that you will indulge me so that I can give her a quick answer. On the basis of the information that has been provided by the Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions — so, not my information — between now and 2014-15, the amount of money spent on welfare in Northern Ireland will be £5.739 billion. By 2018-19, it will go up to £6.023 billion, so there will be an increase in spending over that period. Some groups may be adversely impacted, but other groups will benefit.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No; I said that I would deal with this one point. There will be groups that will benefit from it, and of course the Executive have the opportunity to look at whatever limited resources are available to them and how they might mitigate the impact. We have the social investment fund and the social protection fund. Incidentally, the SDLP opposed both of those funds, saying that they were pointless and everything else. We have that money, and we will have some money over which we will now have total control, such as housing benefit and the social fund, and we can make decisions on how that will be used. Nelson McCausland is discussing those kinds of things with the welfare reform group in the Executive at present.

Ms Lo raised the issue of the DOE handing back money, and I hope that I have made it clear that some of that money had to be handed back because it could not be transferred within the Department. Any bids that it made were partially met, and it made only one bid. Mr Elliott raised the issue of consultancy spending and the fact that a business case had not been received for that. There is still work to be done on consultancy spending, and some Departments still have to get procedures properly done, whether that is in the presentation of business cases or in the analysis afterwards of how the money has been spent. Consultancy spending has dropped significantly over the past number of years, and last year, indeed, it fell by 38%. The fact that Ministers now have to approve consultancy spending has helped to bring some of that under control.

Mr Swann raised the issue of funding for DCAL projects. I cannot make any commitments beyond this Budget period, but there will be a review of the Budget for the past two years. We are looking at where Departments have underspent and overspent, and that will present opportunities for all Departments to show where pressures arise as well as where there have been reduced pressures. The whole point of the review is to make adjustments there.

4.30 pm

Mr Swann: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will, yes.

Mr Swann: I wanted clarity about the overall stadium allocation and the six-year funding package. If we take out money at the start, how can you guarantee that money will be there in next year’s budget?

Mr Wilson: If money cannot be spent in a particular year, it has to be surrendered, and that is the right thing to do. Obviously, the money could not be spent in that year. A sum of money has been allocated for stadium development, and it is in the Programme for Government. It may be that some of the money has to be surrendered this year to be spent in different years when the projects are ready to be up and running. The point that I will make later in the debate on the Budget process is that one way to make decisions on in-year monitoring allocations is to ask how a Department’s bid fits into the Programme for Government. Where there is a Programme for Government commitment, as there is for stadia, if money is not used in one year because it could not be spent, there will be a strong case in later monitoring rounds. That is probably all that I can say about the issue.

Mr Givan raised the issue of legal aid. Reforms have already been made to legal aid expenditure, an example of which

is the introduction of the revised Crown Court remuneration rates, and further reforms are under way. The Department of Justice continues to work with the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission to monitor legal aid and to forecast spend. He also raised the issue of the Probation Board budget. DOJ officials are working closely with the Probation Board in setting its budget, and more than £1 million of additional funding was provided to reduce the impact on front line staffing.

Mr Durkan raised the issue of the reduction in DSD benefits. I know that these documents are complicated, but before a Member stands up and makes all kinds of allegations about the cost of welfare reform, if he is not certain about the figures, he should at least ask. He quoted figures for reductions in various benefits in 2011-12. He then said that that is before welfare reform has even happened. It is either due to welfare reform or it is not. He will know that the payment of benefits is demand-led. We do not finance them out of the block grant, and, indeed, one benefit of keeping in step with welfare reform at Westminster is to ensure that Westminster continues to finance benefits on the basis of demand. If there are reductions in the figures, they are there because demand has gone down, not because of welfare reform. Welfare reform has not impacted yet, but AME spend is demand-led, and if the demand is there, the payments are made. If the demand is not there, the payments are not made, and the reductions will reflect that demand rather than be a change in policy.

Mr Durkan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No; I do not have time. I want to come to Mr Allister's points. He talked about flexibility and about how this seems to be a feast that you can dip in and out of and that, despite rigid rules, money could be allocated here and there. It is a good story, but he knows that it is not like that.

He talked about the amount of money. We have reached the end of a difficult year in which we had £10 billion to spend and have found that we could reallocate £117 million. That is all that we had to do, albeit during a time when Ministers said that their budgets were to be very tight. That is good financial management by Departments. He also said that things were so bad that we could not even give the money away and that we had £40 million-odd but had bids for only £17 million of it.

I think that the one thing that he would not want us to do would be to allocate money to things that are not priorities. Again, this comes back to the kind of flexibility that he has suggested. Departments are now becoming aware of the fact that there is some rigidity. There is no point in them bringing forward Mickey Mouse proposals just to absorb money at the end of the year. If those proposals do not fit into the priorities and targets that we have set in the Programme for Government, they will not be accepted. The benefit of that is that we have actually been able to carry money over into next year, which will deal with some of the pressures that we are already identifying — pressures that relate to the Programme for Government next year. I hope that the fact that we have had £117 million reallocated this year, and that we have had to carry some money forward because people did not make bids for it, will not be seen as some kind of fiscal laxity. Indeed, it is an indication that we have been fairly rigid in the way in which we have adhered to our fiscal rules.

I think that I have already dealt with the matter of accountability. The Member is right: it is now that the House will vote on the allocations that we have made through the year, but that is not to say that the House has never been consulted on them. Committees have been consulted on them, there have been opportunities for statements to be made here and for those to be questioned, and Ministers and officials have had to justify reduced requirements and bids to their Committees. There are lots of other ways in which accountability can be adhered to.

The Member raised the issue of the savings from North/South bodies and the fact that we spend a lot of money on those bodies. I find it difficult to disagree with him on that, as does my party, as he knows. It is the same with issues such as the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council, etc. They are part of the structure that, unfortunately, we have inherited. They will require change, but that change requires consent in the House. My view is that the more that we can make government more relevant in Northern Ireland, the less need there will be for money to be spent on those things. However, I will point out that there have been savings of £5.6 million on North/South bodies.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: I just want to finish because I have only got about a minute left.

Mr Allister also talked about OFMDFM costs and how those have increased. They have increased for a number of reasons.

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

Mr Wilson: Money has gone to sites — £27 million. That was a non-cash impairment that did not take money away from front line services. The social protection fund, the £22 million that he referred to, went to other Departments — DSD and DHSSPS — for delivery to people.

I thank Members for the contributions that they have made, the relevant and the irrelevant ones. Perhaps the irrelevant ones were better fun. I look forward to Members giving support to the Vote on Account.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before we move 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 £15,244,040,000 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 2012 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,220,944,000 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 2012 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 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will now move to the motion on the Vote on Account, which has already been debated.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum not exceeding £6,987,469,000 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 2013 and that resources not exceeding £7,451,346,000 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 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 4 and 6 of table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

Budget Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Budget Bill [NIA Bill 4/11-15], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2012 and 2013; 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 2012 and 2013; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2012.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I inform Members that confirmation has been received from 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.

Committee Business

Committee for Finance and Personnel: Executive's Review of the Financial Process

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 1 hour 30 minutes for this debate. As the motion relates to a Committee report, the proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr D Bradley (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the Report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Response to the Executive's Review of the Financial Process in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with relevant Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate the Committee's report on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process. This is a timely and topical debate, given that we are in the midst of the annual Estimates and Budget Bill process.

The main aim of the Executive's review is to create a streamlined process that is more efficient, transparent, open to public scrutiny by and accountable to the Assembly, and which takes the needs of the Assembly into account. A DFP discussion paper setting out 15 recommendations was subsequently issued to key stakeholders, including all Members, on 10 October 2011. In line with convention, the Finance Committee has co-ordinated the Assembly's response to the review.

At the outset, I will highlight the recommendations in the Committee's report and emphasise that they reflect a collective response from all relevant Assembly Committees, including Statutory Committees, the Public Accounts Committee and the Audit Committee, as well as the Northern Ireland Audit Office. In addition, the Committee endorsed recommendations at the start of this mandate that were made by its predecessor in respect of the Budget process. Consequently, several of the report's recommendations are aimed at addressing long-running issues that were recurring themes in previous mandates.

The review's recommendations were broadly welcomed by the Committee and by other Assembly Committees and key stakeholders. It is expected that they will go some way to increase transparency and enhance scrutiny by and accountability to the Assembly and to the wider public.

The Committee took evidence from DFP officials on the Department's initial response to the Committee's report on 25 January. The officials indicated agreement with the Committee's response to nine of the review recommendations. However, they raised queries or concerns with five aspects of the Committee's position on the remaining review recommendations: the timing and relevance of the Budget review group's review of arm's-length bodies; the relationship between the Programme for

Government (PFG) and the Budget; the Scottish experience of outcomes-based budgeting; provision for pre-Budget consultation; and the role and capability of Account NI. I will briefly address each issue in turn.

The Committee strongly supports the consolidation of Executive non-departmental public bodies within the accounting boundaries. On the basis of submissions received from other Committees, the Committee recommended that other types of arm's-length bodies, which form a significant part of some departmental expenditure remits, should be included within the scope of this reform.

4.45 pm

In their evidence to the Committee, DFP officials confirmed that all of what they describe as central government bodies will be brought into the accounting boundaries, with only local councils and a few public corporations not being consolidated. In that respect, it would be useful to have a definitive list of public bodies that will be included within the consolidation boundaries, together with those that will be excluded.

The Committee also felt that consolidation should be informed by the outcome of the Budget review group's review of arm's-length bodies, which would avoid unnecessary use of time and resources should any bodies be later merged or wound up. In their evidence, DFP officials pointed out that to await the outcome of the review of arm's-length bodies would delay progress on the consolidation, as the target date for completing the review is not until 2015. The Committee believes that it would not wish to see the progress of the consolidation stalled as a result of that matter. Nevertheless, it is important that the Assembly is provided with an assurance that there will be no unnecessary work or expense in the consolidation if the proposed reform of financial process proceeds ahead of the review of arm's-length bodies.

Perhaps the most contentious recommendation from the DFP discussion document is recommendation 7, which states:

"Performance outcomes and the delivery of the Programme for Government should not be directly attributable to allocations in budgets but should be monitored and delivered regardless of budget inputs."

It was noted that that is an apparent about-turn in DFP thinking from recommendations that it previously made in the review of the Executive's 2008-11 Budget, in terms of identifying the level of public expenditure required to underpin actions to deliver public service agreements (PSAs) in the Programme for Government. It is not clear what substantive evidence there is to support that policy change.

The Committee felt strongly that there should be clear, visible links between the Programme for Government and the Budget, as did the majority of Committees that responded to the DFP discussion document. It was a view that was also echoed by the Audit Office. Without links, it is not possible to identify how much funding is being channelled to key commitments or objectives that are not being achieved or, conversely, where additional funding may make a significant, positive difference to the outcome of a particular programme.

In their evidence, the DFP officials advised that they had concerns with the Committee's position on that issue. It was noted that many of the milestones in the draft Programme for Government are high level and hard to measure. As an example, it was suggested that only 10% to 15% of the budget for health could be mapped on to the commitments for that Department. The implication of that is that 85% of the budget of our largest spending Department cannot be linked with the commitments or milestones underpinning the Executive's priorities.

A particular issue of concern for the DFP officials appeared to be the Committee's stated intention to further examine outcomes-based budgeting, specifically with reference to the position in Scotland. Following publication of the Committee's report, a helpful response was received from the Scottish Government, which explained their longer term endeavours as regards outcomes-based budgeting, with the aim of aligning expenditure to priorities and performance.

In light of the initial response from departmental officials, perhaps it is important to be clear on the distinction between, on the one hand, establishing a full outcomes-based budgeting system and, on the other hand, creating clear linkage between the underpinning objectives or actions required to deliver high-level PFG priorities and the associated budget allocations and expenditure.

A switch to a full outcomes-based budgeting system would be a considerable step change and should, therefore, be considered as a longer-term measure. In the meantime, as an interim measure, I believe that consideration should be given to constructing a future Programme for Government and Budget framework in which the objectives and actions underlying the high-level Programme for Government priorities are defined in tangible and measurable terms and clearly linked to resource allocations. Perhaps the Minister will pick up on that issue.

I turn now to consultation. The Committee is pleased that the importance of an early pre-draft Budget stage has been recognised by DFP and the Executive. I must stress that that is considered to be an essential requirement rather than something that will be fulfilled if circumstances and time permit. In that regard, DFP officials pointed out that they were accurate in their forecasts about the outcome of the October 2010 spending review and indicated that they would expect to be able to provide accurate forecasts for future spending reviews. As such, external factors such as later-than-usual spending review announcements would not be an impediment to an early pre-draft Budget stage.

As outlined in its report, the Committee intends to further examine whether a pre-draft Budget scrutiny stage would be best formalised via an agreement between the Assembly and the Executive or by statutory provision. Further discussions on the actual shape of the early scrutiny phase should, therefore, be deferred until the outcome of the Committee's investigations in this regard.

In their discussions with the Committee, departmental officials queried whether the Committee considered that the time afforded to the public consultation on the draft Budget could be reduced if there was sufficient and robust consultation with key stakeholders and Committees at the pre-draft Budget stage in the process. It will be clear from

the report that members considered the early stage to be a more productive and effective approach to consultation.

I am also aware that during the previous mandate, a senior DFP official noted that the changes between the draft and final Budgets tend to be minimal, as the hard work is done at the early stages. It may, therefore, be possible to compress or dispense with the public consultation between draft and final Budget, but confirmation would be needed in respect of the intention to consult publicly at the early stage. Additionally, there is a need to ensure that any necessary legal obligations are fulfilled.

Finally, I will touch briefly on the Account NI system. The Committee believes that, as far as is practicable, NDPBs and arm's-length bodies should be integrated within the system. If full integration is not possible in the health financial systems, say, connectivity between the systems should be developed. That would enhance transparency and enable public spending to be examined in its entirety. In addition, previous DFP advice indicated that Account NI had the capacity to map expenditure to outputs and outcomes. It was disappointing, therefore, to hear DFP officials confirm that although the system may have that capacity, the data is not there, so it is currently of no use in facilitating the link between expenditure and objectives or in practical applications, such as ensuring complete figures on the payment of government invoices. The Committee firmly believes that all efforts should be made to exploit that system to its full potential to enhance transparency, scrutiny and accountability.

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, by implementing the recommendations in the Committee's report, DFP and the wider Executive will establish a financial process that is tailored to the Assembly's needs and will provide greater transparency and understanding, together with enhanced scrutiny and accountability. Ultimately, it will lead to a more efficient and effective use of public expenditure and have the ultimate aim of improving the quality of the lives of our people.

Molaim an tuairisc don Tionól. I look forward to hearing the contributions of other Members. I commend the report to the House. Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Mr Girvan: I agree, in principle, with the majority of the report as presented. I appreciate that some aspects and a number of areas about which we had concerns were discussed at the Committee. I know that we will go into some detail on those at a later stage.

One concern related to outcomes-based budgeting. Some people said that we should follow the Scottish model. The feedback from the Scottish model is that they have tried two different types and they do not work: they are not as effective as they could have been.

There is wide support for 10 of the 15 recommendations put forward at Committee, and we have no major issues with another three of them. As regards the other two; recommendation 7 is linked directly to the Programme for Government, which makes it somewhat prescriptive in some of its approaches. For example, there was a debate about money that had to be allocated for railways — the Coleraine to Londonderry line — and money was put aside to deal with that. So, unless major projects are included in the

Programme for Government, they might not get funding, and there is the possibility that that could cause problems. On reflection, and with adequate information, the result might be slightly different if that one area were brought back to the Committee. By and large, it has been a necessity for us to streamline the process so as to ensure that it gives adequate time for the analysis of budgets, Estimates and expenditure with adequate time to come forward to deal with budgets in a timely fashion.

I appreciate that there is an element of crystal-ball gazing when it comes to our Estimate process. A lot of people say

Mr Allister: I have been trying to follow what the Member is saying. If I discern correctly, he is distancing himself somewhat from some of the recommendations, particularly recommendation 7. However, unless the minutes in the report are in error, the Member was present on 18 January, assented to the very proposals that he is now dissenting from, and does not seem to have had any difficulty indicating that assent and voting for it. Today, for some reason, he has a difficulty. Will he explain what has changed?

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

Mr Girvan: I appreciate the Member's intervention. We were led to believe that there was merit in following the Scottish model. To a large extent, part of our process is similar to that in Scotland. However, the Scottish model stated that there were differences, and that is why I have some difficulty with recommendation 7. By and large, the majority of the report is acceptable and should receive wide support in the Chamber. However, I have a concern with that one area. That does not mean that everybody else will be concerned about it, but that is by the way.

I appreciate that we need to make changes to the process, and this is a way of trying to streamline some of that and give adequate time for scrutiny to take place with the Estimates put forward for the Budget process. I rest my case.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the motion. The Health Committee considered the matter at its meetings on 26 October and 29 November. Like other Committees, we welcome the fact that DFP has decided to look at how the Assembly handles the Budget process. It is fair to say that it can be complicated and hard to follow. If Committees are to be able to scrutinise Departments and hold them to account, we need to be able, at the very least, to have a clear understanding of how and when they intend to spend the money allocated to them. However, this is not just for the benefit of Committees and individual MLAs. The public that we represent also have a right to be able to follow what is going on so that they can fully engage and give their views on how they think government should be spending their money.

5.00 pm

The Committee has views on a number of the recommendations put forward for reform. We believe that there must be early consultation with Committees and other stakeholders, including the public, before a draft Budget

is produced. If Departments are to carry out meaningful consultation, people need to be able to put forward their ideas on how public money should be spent while budgets are still being developed. Related to that point was the suggestion that Committees should be responsible for conducting public consultations on the draft Budget. The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety was against that. It is not the responsibility of Committees, not least because we have no authority to make decisions on how money is spent by the Department.

The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) recommended that the Programme for Government not be directly linked to budget, but the Health Committee completely disagreed. We think that money should follow the priorities set out in the Programme for Government (PFG). That is important, as we need to be able to demonstrate to communities that we are funding those issues that are a priority for the people. If DFP is saying that that is too difficult, it needs to look again at what sort of targets are in the Programme for Government and make sure that they are the sort of targets that can be linked to spending.

The Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety welcomes the Finance Committee's report. It is a good piece of work, and I support the motion.

Mr Cree: A review of the financial process in Northern Ireland has been talked about for many years. It was, therefore, gratifying that the Executive agreed, about this time last year, its terms of reference. The Department was to produce a new financial framework that was:

"more efficient, transparent, open to scrutiny by and accountable to the Assembly".

The strategic aims of the review were:

"To align the Budget, the Estimates and the Accounts ... to improve transparency; and

To synchronise the presentation of the Budget, the Estimates/departmental expenditure plans, the Budget Bills, the Rates legislation and the Accounts in order to create a single co-ordinated public revenue and expenditure process."

The Department produced a paper that contained 15 recommendations, and Members have referred to those. Those were broadly welcomed by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, the various parties and others. However, some recommendations need to be improved, and recommendation 1 is one of those:

"departments budget against one set of controls within the Budget, but account for spend against different controls set in the Estimates."

Therefore, it is the Committee's view that:

"relevant financial documents ... are simplified and harmonised to increase transparency."

That will assist the general public and the Committees, in particular, in their statutory duty of scrutinising the budgetary process.

Recommendation 2 addresses Executive non-departmental public bodies being consolidated within the Estimates and

accounting boundaries. I support the view that other types of arm's-length bodies also need to be included.

The fifth recommendation does not go far enough. It is essential that there are adequate safeguards to ensure that firm control is maintained over the use of income by Departments.

Recommendation 7 falls far short of what is needed. The Department, I have to say, appears to be reluctant to move in that area. Clear, visible linkages between Budget allocations and the Programme for Government are vital. Budget allocations should be driven by priorities, not the other way round. The draft Programme for Government must be developed prior to the draft Budget, and recommendation 9 needs to reflect that.

It is essential to have an early strategic phase to allow sufficient time for consultation by Committees and with the public. In recommendation 10, the Department suggests that that should happen:

"if circumstances and time permits".

That is not acceptable. The Committee suggests that the public consultation be conducted at pre-draft Budget stage, as in Scotland. I think that that is, perhaps, where Mr Girvan got it slightly wrong. The discussion must take place at that pre-draft Budget stage. That would reduce or remove the time required for public consultation once the draft Budget has been agreed by the Executive. It tends to be front-end loaded.

The Budget process agreement to which review recommendation 12 refers has merit, but so has the option of statutory provision. More work needs to be done in that area.

The reform process to which review recommendations 13 and 14 refer is necessary to obviate the convoluted and repetitive nature of the Budget process, particularly in the later stages. That is also work in progress.

The integrated approach to considering revenue and spending plans in review recommendation 15 is welcome. The Committee has undertaken considerable work in that important area, but the existing system has been tolerated for too long. We have a system in which there is no direct read across, approximately 25% of all expenditure is not voted on, and parts of government expenditure are outside the Estimates and accounting boundaries.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel's report is a major step to improve the situation, and I am therefore pleased to support it on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Mrs Cochrane: I also welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue, given the timing of the debate alongside the annual Estimates and Budget Bill process.

As Members have said, the main aim of the Executive's review of the financial process is to create a streamlined process that is more efficient and open to scrutiny. Given that the Assembly uses Statutory Committees to hold the Executive to account by scrutinising the work of Departments and Ministers, including how they spend their budgets, I fully support any improvements to the financial process that will assist Members in carrying out that important role.

Many of the points that I was going to raise have been dealt with by other Members. However, I draw specific attention to the concerns in review recommendation 7, which states that performance outcomes and the delivery of the PFG should not be directly attributable to allocations in budgets and should be monitored and delivered regardless of budget inputs. There should be clear and visible linkages between the PFG and the Budget. How else can we hold a Minister to account unless we know what is being committed to which objective and how effective that spend has been? How else can our constituents understand and be confident that public money is being spent effectively?

Although I understand that the draft Programme for Government has been written in overarching, aspirational language, with many high-level milestones that could be hard to measure, it is imperative that there are clear linkages between the PFG and the Budget. Is there an opportunity to map the Budget closer to the key commitments of the PFG and lower-level monitoring targets and departmental operational plans? If that can happen, it might allow Committee members to consider better and to advise on departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocations.

Another key issue that has been raised and needs to be addressed is whether the budgetary consultation process should be in legislation. Wales uses standing orders, Scotland uses an agreement, and the Executive appear to use whatever they can manage. A Budget agreement is OK if it is adhered to at all times and not just when time permits, as is suggested in review recommendation 10. Assembly Committees are an important part of the checks and balances that are built into our system of devolution and should, therefore, be given their place and time to scrutinise the Budget.

Is there a cost to the reform process? If so, will that cost be outweighed by the benefits? Will the changes mean that more detailed information will be provided in a timely manner to allow a process of proper scrutiny? Will there be more accountability?

I hope that the implementation of the report's recommendations takes into account the issues that we debated today.

Mr Hilditch: I am one of the newer members of the Finance Committee in this mandate, which gives me the opportunity to serve on the Committee for the first time.

That said, the Committee considered and endorsed previous work and recommendations in earlier reports such as the 'Report on the Executive's Draft Budget 2011-15' and the 'Third Report on the Inquiry into the Role of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Scrutinising the Executive's Budget and Expenditure'. Those reports provide a useful insight at the outset of this session in particular and a prelude to the review paper's proposals.

Those papers focus mainly on recommendations aimed at Committees and Members, timelines, the provision of good financial information and scrutiny. It is a given that all Members, and, indeed, laypeople, will strive for increased scrutiny, transparency and accountability in all aspects of governance.

Soon after the review paper was published in October 2011, I was pleased to chair the event hosted by the Committee on 18 October in the Long Gallery, which took the form of a workshop on the overview of the public expenditure system.

Committee members and staff throughout the Assembly had the opportunity to attend that event and hear departmental officials provide an overview of the public expenditure system and budgetary control. That was a useful exercise in taking us to where we are in the process.

From those initial steps in the process, to where we find ourselves in the House today with the report, the majority of the review, as already identified, has been welcomed and generally well received, with much agreement on the 15 or so recommendations, including on the important areas of Bill passage, alignment, transparency, departmental spending plans being restructured and non-voted issues. Probably the most important area of today's debate, however, will centre on the response from the Minister and the Department. Although many of the Committee's recommendations are understandable, and perhaps take us to where we want to be in the process, there may be practical difficulties or technical matters requiring further consideration.

The most interesting issues have been clearly identified by the vice-Chair in moving the motion and by other Members who spoke. I look forward to the response on how other jurisdictions deal with some of the matters under consideration around draft or pre-Budget consultations, in particular those jurisdictions that were mentioned, and also the Department's view on the early recommendations on the future process regarding arm's-length and non-departmental bodies. We should also have a look at cleaner, clearer and easier-to-read lines across budgets to make them more understandable. It seems that most stakeholders were in general agreement with the report.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

A number of issues have been raised, and I do not wish to repeat comments made by others. However, I wish to speak briefly on two issues that came before the Committee. The first is aligning the Programme for Government with the Budget. I understand perfectly that there are other variables such as the comprehensive spending review, the timing of general elections at Westminster or things that can throw the best-laid plans awry. Nevertheless, there is a feature of the Assembly that should be considered in how we would manage those variables; namely, that we are a fixed-term Assembly. I mentioned that in discussions with officials at the Committee. The possibility of going for an overlap in a Programme for Government period should be explored. That mirrors the convention elsewhere.

I recognise that for an incoming Administration elsewhere there is less predictability about when there will be an election and, at times, even less predictability about who will win that election. Here, however, we know how long an Administration will be in place and who will be the partners in Government. With regard to establishing a four-year plan, the last year could overlap into the incoming period, which would allow for a degree of continuity in spending projections and programmes. I will not bounce the Minister

for an answer on that today, but I hope that he will give it consideration.

The other issue is about relating outcomes to the budgeting and Programme for Government processes. A particular example may help to eliminate some of the confusing and, perhaps, contradictory opinions that emerge from the evidence that we got from the Department and the discussions that emerged on that issue publicly and within the Committee. Different views are fine, but we have to process them to an agreed conclusion.

I welcome the commitment from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on social clauses spreading across all Departments, particularly with regard to the commitment section of the Programme for Government. However, when one reads the economic strategy and the investment strategy, there is no mention of social clauses in them at all. That seems to me to be a degree of ambiguity that should be removed.

5.15 pm

The Minister could consider the following issue, which is specific to today's debate, and come back to either the Assembly or the Committee on it. We discovered during our discussions that the Department of Finance and Personnel considers or defines social clauses as including standard provisions for equality, health and safety, and so on. One would expect such issues to be reflected in all public contracts already. Theoretically, that means that the Department could meet its commitment to ensuring that social clauses are included if it is restricted to the definition, rather than through tailored clauses that establish requirements for apprenticeships, jobs for the long-term unemployed and environmental provisions, all of which are issues that, I believe, the Assembly wants to address.

I hope that the Minister can give the Committee some comfort by saying that he is prepared to consider such issues seriously. The standard template for health and safety and equality provisions is in statute as far as the Assembly is considered. Therefore, those provisions very much form part of the standard approach. We seek a new approach. We want to extend what exists. Social clauses that would address, in particular and where the opportunity presents itself, apprenticeships, environmental issues and the long-term unemployed being given the opportunity to return to economic activity are ways in which the Assembly might tailor —

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

Mr McLaughlin: — its output to discussions on the Budget and the Programme for Government. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Humphrey: I, too, am a member of the Committee for Finance and Personnel. As a relatively new member, I believe that the Committee's recent deliberations have been helpful and productive. There has been broad agreement across parties on the Committee, for which I must commend members. Clearly, there is broad agreement on 10 recommendations, considerable agreement on three and concerns about a couple.

My colleague Mr Girvan mentioned the concerns around recommendation 7. Mapping budgets for key government commitments and the Programme for Government is

absolutely crucial. However, by definition, a Programme for Government is an aspirational-loose document compared with the Budget, which is a detailed cost-strategic document. Obviously, the Budget comes to the House with its commitments costed.

The reason that we have concern about that is because the Committee has written to the Scottish Executive —

Mr A Maginness: Can the Member explain to me the relationship, as he sees it, between the Programme for Government and Budget funding?

Mr Humphrey: The Minister will deal with that in his concluding remarks. I think that the Member is trying to cause mischief. Perhaps he should sort out differences in his own party before he asks us questions.

On reflection, the Committee had concern about certain issues in Scotland because some of what was done there simply did not work. Therefore, it is prudent that the Committee discuss the reply from the Scottish Executive. I have said that it has not done so yet. That is a sensible approach for us to take. We cannot be expected to take a position on something that we believe not to work when, to be fair, we have not even discussed the Scottish Executive's response.

It is important to map out budgets in the Programme for Government. However, we must consider entire budgets when we make those decisions. In the draft Programme for Government 2011-15, those commitments do not cover services that Departments deliver on a day-to-day basis. One example of that in the draft Programme for Government is the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) targets to eradicate brucellosis, tackle rural poverty and relocate its headquarters. Where is the reference to its important daily services, such as the Veterinary Service, the Forest Service and those that deal with rivers, fisheries, delivery of the common agricultural policy, flood protection, and so forth?

That is the point that I am making. Therefore, how could one map the budget for DARD or any other Department from the key commitments in the draft Programme for Government?

Let us look at evidence of Scotland's approach to outcomes-based budgeting and agree that it is similar to our own. The 'Scottish Spending Review of 2011 and Draft Budget 2012-13' acknowledges that the Scottish Programme for Government and strategic priorities shaped their spending plans. However, it also recognised that:

"money is only one of the tools available to government."

The portfolio chapters in the document, which are the equivalent to the departmental chapters in our draft Programme for Government, show that Scottish spending allocations are not linked directly to their Programme for Government outcomes or targets. The text states — at a very high level — that the portfolio of health, for example, "made a significant contribution to" and "has a major role" in achieving outcomes from the Programme for Government. However, that hardly allows for mapping budgets to outcomes.

After due consideration has been given by the Committee, I hope that it and the House will give their broad agreement

to the 15 recommendations. As I said before, the Committee needs to discuss the Scottish reply, but it has not had an opportunity to do that as yet. When it has had that opportunity, I hope that the Committee and the House can come to a unanimous position.

Mr Kinahan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): As you said, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will speak as the Chair of the Audit Committee. However, I will also make a few comments of my own.

The Audit Committee welcomes the report on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process in Northern Ireland. The Audit Committee responded to the consultation by the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the review, and I want to take this opportunity to set out its position.

First, I want to address the strategic objectives of the review. It is right that we should seek to simplify and streamline the Budget process, which is outdated and overcomplicated. The current misalignment between the Budget, Estimates and accounts boundaries makes the Assembly's scrutiny role much more difficult than it needs to be. Therefore, the Audit Committee supports the principle of the greater alignment of those boundaries and frameworks, as that will improve transparency and will enable the Assembly to scrutinise more effectively the financial planning and performance of those who use public money.

DFP's discussion paper on the review recommended that the Budget should be developed in the context of a Programme for Government that was agreed by the Executive, and that proposal is sensible. However, it must be noted that previous Budgets have included expenditure that falls outside the remit of the Executive, its Departments and the Programme for Government. Indeed, previous Budgets have included expenditure for the specific purpose of holding the Executive and its Departments to account, including, for example, the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Audit Office. Let us remind ourselves of the position of the Audit Office: it is entirely independent of the Executive and its Ministers; it serves the Assembly. The core purpose of the work of the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Audit Office is to ensure that the Assembly is provided with an effective and truly independent audit assurance on the use of public funds.

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 provides for the Audit Committee to agree the annual estimate of the Audit Office. The Act took that power from DFP and gave it to the Assembly, because it is a fundamental principle that an Executive should not control or direct an audit institution's access to resources. That principle is recognised, observed and upheld across the world, and it is obvious why that should be the case. How could an audit institution truly scrutinise and hold an Executive to account if that same Executive directed its access to resources? The answer is that it could not. Its independence would be compromised and its effectiveness diminished.

The Assembly values the Audit Office's independence. Over the past few years, the Audit Office has identified savings of tens of millions of pounds. Its work has allowed the Assembly and, in particular, the Public Accounts Committee to examine practice in all Departments. We especially appreciate the Audit Office's value-for-money reports, which examine the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with

which public funds have been used. Previous reports have looked at the public-private partnerships, large capital and reform projects, procurement of IT and other systems and services, inward investment, fraud, and the use of consultants.

Only last week, the Audit Office's report on the use of external consultants by Departments was considered by the Public Accounts Committee. The Audit Office's report highlighted how, in the Finance Minister's own Department, an Account NI contract with the original value of £0.97 million ended up costing £9.6 million, more than four years after the original completion date. Such revelations are difficult and uncomfortable for the Departments concerned. Who would rather that their financial mismanagement never came to light? However, the Audit Office's independence allows it to ensure that the Executive and their Departments are held to account by the Assembly for their financial performance.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Kinahan: It is not enough that that financial independence from the Executive be recognised and upheld in the annual Estimates processes. The Audit Office needs to remain independent and be allowed to act as such. We support the motion.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): From the outset, the basic principle should be that the Executive and Departments are accountable to the Assembly. The Assembly is not accountable to the Executive. Sometimes, I get the impression that Ministers think that the Assembly should be accountable to them.

I have to praise the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for its collective approach to the issues that are before the House this afternoon. The Committee considered DFP's review of the financial process at its meeting of 17 November 2011, at which members broadly welcomed the findings of the review and agreed that many of the recommendations will assist in streamlining and improving the efficiency of the financial process.

The Committee had concerns about some of the recommendations in the DFP report, and those concerns have been brought to the Committee for Finance and Personnel's attention. I am happy to say that the Committee's concerns are reflected in the recommendations from the Committee for Finance and Personnel, which Mr Bradley outlined comprehensively.

DFP's recommendation 7 proposes that performance outcomes and the delivery of the Programme for Government should not be considered to have any direct link to funding inputs. Are we really saying that we should be able to achieve any outcome that we desire, regardless of how much or how little funding we allocate? Allocation of resources is an integral aspect of any strategic planning process, so the link between expenditure and outcomes and performance is unavoidable.

In its consideration of the Programme for Government, the draft economic strategy and departmental business plans, the Committee has always encouraged a more outcomes-based approach to objective setting and to efficiency of

delivery against planned expenditure. That link should extend to public service agreement (PSA) targets. The consultation document states that the driver for PSA targets should be performance and the efficient delivery of the target. A key aspect of efficiency is delivery against expenditure, and, therefore, budgets. It is common sense that, if you plan to achieve certain outcomes, you must know what resources you need to allocate in order to achieve those outcomes. The Programme for Government is a road map.

The Budget funding is the fuel by which one tries to reach the destination. Therefore, the two are inextricably linked and should be meshed.

5.30 pm

DFP recommendation 10 states:

"the Budget timetable should include an early strategic phase, allow sufficient time for consultation by Committees and with the public".

However, it also states that that should occur "if circumstances and time permits". The addition of that phrase suggests that that aspect of the timetable is not absolutely necessary. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment recommends that that phrase should be removed in order to ensure that Committees are always afforded sufficient time for scrutiny. The role of the Committee is a scrutiny and advisory one, rather than a consultation one, and the Committee believes that the phrasing of the recommendation should therefore reflect that.

The issue of consultation by Committees arises again in the DFP report, where it states in paragraph 89 on page 40 that consultation with key stakeholders should take place by Committees. It is the role of Departments to consult on policy. As I said, the role of Committees is to scrutinise and to advise on that policy. Therefore, this proposal and the related reference in the Budget timetable at recommendation 11 should not be included.

DFP recommendation 12 proposes a Budget agreement between the Assembly and the Executive. As the Committee for Finance and Personnel is working on proposals for a Budget process agreement, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment agreed to reserve comment on that recommendation until the outcomes of that Committee's work are known. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment therefore welcomes the undertaking in the report that the Committee for Finance and Personnel will further explore the merits of the Budget process agreement, and we look forward to its discussion paper on that matter.

I believe that the financial process should be streamlined, transparent and more intelligible to everybody. Clearly, it should be linked to the Programme for Government. That is a fairly logical and —

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

Mr A Maginness: — reasonable proposition, and it should be formally adopted.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): The Committee for the Environment considered a Department of Finance and Personnel discussion paper on the Executive's review of the financial

process at its meeting on 27 October 2011 and agreed to respond via the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

The Committee for the Environment commends the Executive's initiative to create a coherent financial framework with greater transparency of its public revenue and expenditure. In general, the Committee welcomes the 15 recommendations, which indicate a direction of travel for improvement.

However, on behalf of the Environment Committee, I will make the following comments regarding specific recommendations. The Committee is keen to see clearer linkages made between spending proposals and specific outcomes, and it is disappointed that recommendation 7 stopped short of that.

The Committee believes that greater opportunity for engagement in and scrutiny of the Budget process is essential. Therefore, the Committee welcomes recommendation 10, which calls for the Budget timetable to include an early strategic phase to allow sufficient time for consultation by Committees. Committee members are concerned, though, that that recommendation is completely undermined by the caveat that it should be provided "if circumstances and time permits". Committee members would like to see an unequivocal requirement for enough time to be given to Committees for comprehensive scrutiny.

Members also made the point that, because summer recess commences in July, there should be a requirement for Departments to submit budget information in advance of summer recess.

Stakeholders and NGOs have voiced to the Committee their common frustration at the serious lack of consultation on their perspective budgets and funding. In the current financial climate, a lack of consultation and rationale causes great uncertainty. That uncertainty can seriously undermine the services provided by NGOs and stakeholders and can, unfortunately, threaten jobs.

To help alleviate that frustration, the Committee feels that review recommendation 11, which provides for the advance publication of a Budget timetable and includes the requirement for Departments to reach agreement by December, would enable Departments to forward plan budget allocation, both internally and for arm's-length bodies, well in advance of the new financial year. That would greatly diminish the uncertainty that NGOs and other stakeholders currently experience.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel recommended the formalisation of the process in legislation or in the Assembly's Standing Orders, as in review recommendation 12. In the light of my previous comments on the timing of the process, the Environment Committee is supportive of the Finance and Personnel Committee's recommendation that the Budget process be formalised in legislation. However, the Committee also feels that proposals to reinforce the approach in Assembly Standing Orders could provide an acceptable alternative. On that basis, and on behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome these regulations and support the motion.

Mr Allister: I have no doubt that the financial process needs reviewing to add and build more transparency into it and, indeed, to make it more intelligible, frankly. When I look at

the budgetary expenditure lines in some budgets, such as that of the Department of Education, and I see that it has a single figure for capital expenditure and a single figure for resource expenditure, they tell me nothing. I want to know, for example, how much the capital figure is for the various sectors in education. I want to know how much the capital figure is for the controlled sector, the maintained sector, the integrated sector, the Irish-medium sector, etc, and, likewise for the resource figures. However, in the Budget, as such, you see none of that. So, yes, of course we need to find some greater transparency so that the process can be more intelligible and more relevant to need.

I had some expectations of this report, given the content of the Department's paper last October. I will admit to being somewhat disappointed that the report is not very forensic in its approach and that it is quite vague here and there. It takes refuge many times in saying, "We need more information." The review has been published since October and here we are in February, but, instead of being able to progress the matter definitively today, we are in a scenario where the Committee is saying that, on a number of issues, it needs more information and that it needs to look at that information.

In this debate, we have had what appears to be a quite surprising scenario of people in groups repositioning themselves. Although the minutes suggest anonymity in the endorsement of all these recommendations, when it comes to some of them today, various individuals and parties have been noticeably repositioning themselves. Whether that is indicative of the issue's not having been particularly interrogated at Committee level, indicative of new information or indicative of some people today wanting to sing off the Minister's rather than the Committee's hymn sheet, which they previously had, I do not know. However, one thing is clear: it is giving a fairly muddled approach, which goes with the muddled content of some of this report.

On the issue of alignment and tracking between the Budget and the Programme for Government, of course it would be nice to have that capacity. However, the Programme for Government that we have is not a definitive document; it is an aspirational, feel-good, cuddly document that really does not address delivery with any certainty and commitment. I am not too sure how this House would ever hope to begin to match what has to be definitive in Budget lines with what is deliberately non-definitive in a Programme for Government.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr A Maginness: If you had a real Programme for Government in the manner that the Member has just described, would the Member agree that it should be tracked to the Budget?

Mr Allister: Yes. If you had a Programme for Government that was definitive and capable of being tracked, a Budget and a process to track it would be all to the good. However, that would not suit the arrangements of this House, where, of course, when it suits, some want to take refuge in ambiguity as much as possible. How would you do it in the set-up of this House, where it is six months after an election until you even get a draft Programme for Government, never mind putting in place a twinning arrangement with a Budget?

Of course, we have a Minister who famously told us that we do not really need a Programme for Government anyhow and that the one from four years ago would do us fine. That underscores the point that the Programme for Government is a farcical document. It is not a document capable of being tracked and marked against a Budget, because it lacks the certainty and delivery that you would look for in that regard. I question how that could ever be attained under these arrangements.

The other paragraph of the report that greatly puzzles me is paragraph 13. The ambition is expressed that:

"the Committee calls on DFP to extend consolidation beyond Executive NDPB's to include other types of ALBs, which form an important element of some departmental expenditure remits."

Not being a member of the Committee, how am I meant to interpret that? What sort of bodies are we trying to bring into this? I heard Mr Bradley say that virtually everything except councils will be included. Really? Is that the proposal being made, or is it another indication that the Committee has not really thought out its position? Are we in a position where this matter —

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

Mr Allister: — will have to be referred back to the Committee and more months will be lost as we fail to get to where we need to get to?

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I thank all those who have taken part in the debate. I will make something clear at the very start. This whole process was initiated by my Department, because we want the Budget process and how money is spent to be better understood by the Assembly and more open to scrutiny by the Assembly to ensure that the money that is spent is spent properly and on the priorities that have been set by the Assembly. I have no difficulty with the points that have been raised, and, as I said, we initiated the process.

I welcome the Committee's report. It is the very nature of a debate such as this that Members will highlight the areas of disagreement. However, I should point out that there is no disagreement between the Department and the Committee on 10 of the recommendations. The agreements on some recommendations have caveats, but two particular areas have been mentioned: recommendation 7 and recommendation 13. A number of other issues have also been raised. I will quickly dispense with those and then deal with the two most contentious recommendations.

Mr Bradley raised the issue of the bodies to be included. We can provide the Committee with a full list of all the executive NDPBs that would be covered. However, as Mr Allister pointed out, as it stands, all bodies but local councils will be included in the consolidation.

I will turn to the two points about which there has been greatest contention. The first one is around the whole area of consultation and when consultation should take place. As I understand it, the Committee's report indicates its wish for consultation to happen at an earlier stage, before we actually come to the draft Programme for Government. To a certain extent, a lot of consultation takes place at that stage. Officials from my Department meet and talk to the

various interested groups, and that shapes what goes into the draft Budget.

5.45 pm

If the Committee is saying that it would prefer a full consultation at that stage, I would have no difficulty with that. However, I would have difficulty with a full consultation at that stage, then a draft Budget and then a full consultation on the draft Budget before we reached the final Budget, because that would unnecessarily elongate the process and be quite expensive, as such consultations are, of course, very resource-intensive. The Chairman might clarify that when he responds. If the Committee is happy for the full consultation period to be pre-draft Budget, I think that the area of disagreement between the Department and the Committee on that recommendation could be sorted out quickly. The Chairman might want to take that issue back to the Committee, and I am happy to look at it.

The second, more contentious area is what the relationship between the Budget and the Programme for Government should be. Should the Budget be tracked through the Programme for Government? Should all the targets in the Programme for Government have a set budget? Should the high-level strategic aims of the Programme for Government have a budget attached to them? There seems to be some misunderstanding here. Such a model has been adopted elsewhere, and Scotland was mentioned. There were a couple of low-level pilot schemes involving partnerships in Scotland, but they were certainly not on the kind of basis that the Scottish Government accepted. Indeed, two community planning partnerships explored that model to investigate investment patterns. However, the Scottish Government indicated in their Programme for Government that strategic priorities and economic strategy shaped their spending plans. Nevertheless, they recognise that money is only one of the tools available to the Government. The Scottish spending document states that, at a very high level, contributions are made to the relevant national outcomes and Programme for Government objectives, but that those contributions are not quantified in funding terms. I am not too sure, but I think that Mr Cree or Mr Bradley quoted from the Scottish example. If that is the case, there is a bit of a misunderstanding. Its Programme for Government certainly shapes and reflects, but specific funds are not attached to it, and there are very good reasons for that. I will address those reasons and then look at a way forward. The Chairman will, I trust, respond to that when he sums up at the end.

There are particular difficulties with attributing funds to the Programme for Government at that strategic level, because, as Mr Allister pointed out, strategic aims, by their very nature, have to be in broad terms and, therefore, attaching funds to them is not possible. Indeed, if you look at the broad terms and strategic headlines in the Programme for Government, you will see that they do not totally reflect the operational service delivery that Departments undertake. There are also particular difficulties with attaching funding even to specific targets in the Programme for Government, which has been tried in the past. Departments tried to match funds to their PSAs, and many of them commented that it was a meaningless exercise. The Department of Education, for example, said that it was unable to complete the required mapping. If we were to go down below the strategic level and map those targets, we would disaggregate the Budget to a level at which it would become

impossible, and it would not be a practical or even efficient use of resources.

Also, when you try to link funding to particular targets, the danger is always to suggest that if you are missing a target, you should stick more money into it and you will achieve it. Of course, that is not always the case. The target could be missed for a whole lot of reasons. Indeed, it might be that the target is not being met because resources are not being used efficiently or wrong processors are being used, so throwing more money at it would only reinforce that.

Many of those targets are not dependent solely on money. Some might be dependent on legislation, others on a change of culture. Let me give you an example: the setting of a target for the number of youngsters in schools doing STEM subjects will have a resource implication. If there are not enough science teachers or labs, or the facilities in schools are insufficient, you might not be able to attract youngsters to those subjects. However, there are many other reasons why we do not meet, and have not met, our targets for STEM subjects. Some are cultural, some are connected to the advice that careers teachers give, and some are associated with the opportunities that people see beyond school and degrees. Others relate to the attitude of parents who say that they do not want their youngster going into a dirty job. Some parents think that STEM subjects lead eventually to engineering, and you have to get all clattered in oil, etc. Those are the kinds of things that can impact on the ability to meet targets. Simply saying that we should track money to targets, put the two together and, hey presto, we will be able to see whether resources are being used efficiently and whether we are capable of meeting targets is a misunderstanding of the way in which the Programme for Government can work.

That is not to say — this is where there might be some agreement between the Committee and me — that it is not possible to have a meaningful relationship between the Programme for Government and Budgets. Budget allocations and savings plans should not be clearly focused on the outcomes planned in the Programme for Government. Outcomes-based budgeting is an ongoing process. Aligning additional allocations and Departments' savings to the Executive's priorities and Programme for Government outcomes, while measuring achievement and outcomes over time, is one way of looking at Budgets and their allocations to Departments.

As I said earlier, when it comes to the monitoring rounds, in which we look at how we allocate available money, we marry that money to specific bids. Here is a bid made by one Department, there is a bid made by another, and here is what it says in the Programme for Government. We ask ourselves which bid most reflects what we want from the Programme for Government. If one of two competing bids is more likely to help us to meet a target in the Programme for Government, the resources will be allocated to that bid.

So I still think that we have the ability to look at the strategic aims and targets set in the Programme for Government and, in that context, make Budget allocations. However, that is not the only basis on which Budget allocations will be made, and it is not the only way in which we can measure outcomes. The measuring of outcomes and Departments' delivery should be done regardless of the Budget allocations

made to them. That is the job that Committees should understand.

I will be interested to hear the Chairman's response. These are two fundamental things: there are resource implications, timing implications and, indeed, there is the issue of the practical ability to marry budgets to the Programme for Government and the targets in it. I really do not want to reject the Committee's report out of hand on the basis of those issues. There are points on those two recommendations on which there could be further discussion between the Committee and my officials about when the consultation will take place and whether it will replace the current consultation arrangements. Secondly, can we reach agreement that budgets and the Programme for Government can be viewed in the context of one and other, as is the case in Scotland? If that could be done, we could come to a view that the Department has no difficulty with the Committee's report.

I look forward to the Chairman's response on those two points. I trust that, if needed, further clarification can be given on some of the other points that Members have raised, especially in relation to the bodies that will be covered, and so on. I am sure that it is not the Committee's intention to bring in councils and consolidate them in the Budget process, and I think that councils might also have something to say about that. I look forward to what the Chairman of the Committee has to say, and I trust that he can take my remarks in a positive way and accept them in the way in which they have been offered.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank all the Members who spoke, and indeed the Minister, for their contributions to what has been a useful and timely debate on the Committee's report on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process. It is perhaps worth pointing out that the terms of reference for the Executive's review stated that the overall aim will include enhancing:

"scrutiny by and accountability to the Assembly, taking into account the needs of the Assembly."

Most Members will agree that the financial processes that we have inherited do not take into account the needs of the Assembly; hence the process from the Executive and the input from the Committees of the Assembly to try to change that and to bring some order to it.

The Committee's co-ordinated report, which sets out the collective position of the Assembly Committees for the debate, serves the purpose of establishing and communicating the needs of the Assembly in that regard. I am grateful to the various Committee Chairs who spoke on behalf of their Committees during the debate. As the Deputy Chairperson who launched the debate explained, the Committee broadly welcomed most of the review recommendations in the DFP discussion document and put forward additional recommendations aimed at enhancing the future Budget process. The current process is outdated and convoluted, and although the work required to move us forward may be difficult and complex, it should greatly improve the transparency of our budgetary and financial arrangements and allow for greater scrutiny of the use of public money. Having said that, I think that it is important

that a clear analysis of the overall cost implications for the proposed reforms be established in the period ahead, and Judith Cochrane referred to that point.

In the Committee's report and during the debate, a number of issues were raised that highlight the need for change. Although the relationship between public finance and policy delivery can be complex, it is not rocket science, and, after all, we are only governing a small region with a population that is comparable to that of some local authorities. Surely, therefore, we can design and tailor processes to suit local circumstances.

Committees have stressed the vital importance of making firm provision for a form of pre-draft Budget stage, which would enable the Assembly and other stakeholders to exercise real influence before the draft Budget is agreed by the Executive. The Minister made a specific point about how that would impact on, if you like, post-draft Budget scrutiny, and the Deputy Chairperson made it clear that the Committee was quite prepared to look at the length of the consultation period and at whether that time would be better spent in a pre-draft Budget stage that would allow Committees to get a real involvement in setting the budgets of Departments. There is an acceptance, even among departmental officials, that consultation on the draft Budget alters it very little and only at the margins. A strong desire was expressed across all the Committees to have an earlier input into the process and to shape the process better.

6.00 pm

On a separate but equally important issue, the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, Danny Kinahan, raised an important point about the role of the Audit Office as an independent audit assurance and the necessity for its financial independence from the Executive. The proposal for independent input into the Budget from those oversight bodies that fall outside the Executive's remit but which are included in the provisions of the Budget has considerable merit, and I urge the Minister to take that on board as part of his review.

The principle behind the proposals for aligning the various budgetary and financial documents and consolidating NDPBs within the accounting boundaries has been generally welcomed by the Assembly Committees, and a number of Members spoke about that issue today. With reference to the proposals for consolidating NDPBs within the Estimates and accounting boundaries, I will briefly touch on the Account NI issue. Members will be aware that the Public Accounts Committee heard last week how the cost of that service had multiplied. Indeed, it is my understanding that although the total lifetime costs of the 12-year contract were expected to be £113 million at the time of the outline business case, they are now anticipated to exceed £180 million, which is £15 million for each year of the contract. Members will agree that that is a significant investment. In view of the sums involved, it is imperative that the system be exploited to its fullest and that it delivers best value for money. Indeed, as far back as December 2007, the previous Finance Committee called for the roll-out of Account NI and the other shared services to NDPBs and other public bodies and for suitable contractual arrangements to be established with the providers in that regard. Although assurances were received from DFP, it appears that little progress has been made on the matter.

At various points, the Committee received contrary advice from senior departmental officials on the suitability and capacity of Account NI to support the consolidation of NDPBs within an integrated accounting system and on facilitating greater linkage between performance objectives and spending. Jim Allister was critical of that vagueness, and I appreciate that the report does not come up to his high standards. However, at times, we have received conflicting evidence, and, therefore, the Committee was not able to be definitive about how that will be managed and about the range of bodies that could be brought in underneath that. Further work needs to be done on that. Although the Committee was keen to bring a report to the Assembly as part of the process, a continuation of work is clearly required in some areas of it, and I am pleased that the Minister expressed a willingness to continue to work on areas that are still points of contention between us and the Department.

In recent weeks, the Committee has been advised by senior officials responsible for Account NI that there is no practical reason why NDPBs and arm's-length bodies could or should not be consolidated in the system. At a very early stage, the previous Committee identified the benefits of increasing the customer base of Account NI to maximise efficiencies across the public sector. More recently, the current Committee has reiterated the call for the system to be extended as far as possible, including to prevent unnecessary duplication of costs when other parts of the public sector wish to move to shared financial services. Clarity is required, and answers will be needed on whether there are contractual barriers that prevent the cost-effective incorporation of NDPBs into Account NI. If that is the case, why did the Department not have sufficient foresight to build flexibility into the contract conditions at the procurement stage? Clearly, other areas need to be explored and work needs to continue. Members of the Committee and of other Committees have expressed the ambition to have a greater clarity.

Mr Bradley referred to the prompt payment issue, which was a very valued message in relation to the improvements that are being made under the prompt payment scheme across Departments. However, only those Departments and those public spending bodies that are under Account NI can be measured, and a substantial section of them are outside it. So when the Minister comes to give a view on how public spending is performing across any area, it is restricted to those areas in Account NI, but substantial sectors of public spending lie outside that. Therefore, we are unable to report the sort of progress that we want from those bodies towards the direction in which the Executive and the Assembly want them to move.

The need to move towards a position where there is clear read-across — again, that is a contentious issue and one that I am pleased that we will continue to work on — between the Budget and the Programme for Government has been a recurring theme in co-ordinated responses from Assembly Committees over the years, and the issue has featured again in this debate. Most Members referred to that. Committee members talked about the practical difficulties, and I do not think that anyone underestimates those.

I think that the Committees themselves accept that the necessary improvements are something that cannot be

realised in the short term. I also believe that we need to be clear on precisely what we should be aiming to achieve in both the medium and the long terms.

In the medium term, clarity and transparency on the level of resources allocated to achieving each output or commitment underpinning the five high-level Programme for Government priorities would facilitate greater understanding of the Executive's relative priorities and demonstrate how the Budget is being used as a tool to achieve those priorities. Indeed, an integrated approach, with a more visible linkage between the outputs needed to achieve our priorities and the associated allocations, could assist in facilitating and smoothing the process for developing and agreeing the draft Programme for Government and the draft Budget.

From its discussions with DFP officials, the Committee is mindful that the establishment of visible linkages between the Budget allocations and the key commitments or outputs in the Programme for Government will require the latter to be fine-tuned and costed over time, including for the purpose of assisting in the measurement of departmental performance. For the longer term, there is the aspiration of achieving an outcomes-based budgeting system, with full alignment between expenditure, priorities and performance and achieving high-level outcomes. That view was reflected by various members of Committees who spoke today. I believe that that would assist us in robustly measuring and assessing the performance in achieving the five Programme for Government priorities.

As the Deputy Chairperson mentioned at the start of the debate, the Committee has received helpful advice from the Scottish Government on their longer-term move towards an outcomes-based approach. The Scottish pilot may or may not offer some learning opportunities for us, but there are examples from further afield of alignment between government performance and Budgets. I accept quite clearly, as the Minister and others outlined, that the Scottish example was not put forward by the Committee as a model of good practice but rather as one that may offer some lessons. Indeed, the Finance Committee in the Scottish Parliament has also called for a closer linkage between spend, performance and outcomes.

Although there is an acceptance that that is an interesting area to look at, there are other interesting areas further afield. There is no established model of good practice, but there is, nonetheless, a growing sense of an aspiration for closer linkages that will bring clearer transparency and accountability through measuring the Budget against the targets in the Programme for Government. As I said, there are other examples, including in some EU countries and the United States.

There are likely to be initial resource implications in moving towards such a system and there will be longer-term benefits in transparency, scrutiny and accountability. I think that it will contribute to efficient and effective use of public money. As I said, I have listened to the Minister's concerns in relation to this. I say very clearly that the Committee was very firm in its view, whether or not people agreed completely with recommendation 7. There was a firm aspiration that this is an area of work that will help us regarding the whole process in which we are engaged. The review of the financial process is about bringing greater transparency, so that people can measure it.

The debate earlier today on the Supplementary Estimates made it clear that there are still anomalies between voting various things through and aspects of the Budget that are not voted on at all in the Assembly. We are trying to improve transparency, accountability and clearer understanding for all Members — and I do not think that there is any Member here, perhaps even the Minister included, who could not do with a clearer understanding of how the budgetary process works and how that process, which we have inherited and which suits a different system, needs to be changed to suit our own system and meet the Assembly's needs. The remit given for the review was that the process was to meet the Assembly's needs. Building into that process clearer linkages between the Programme for Government and the Budget will certainly help in that regard.

I thank all the Members. People raised very genuine concerns. They raised issues that clearly demonstrate that although there is a strong measure of agreement on going forward with a lot of those points, there are still areas to be worked through. There is still conflicting evidence coming forward, which needs to be sorted out. There is still detail, but I certainly think that, however we feel on all the points of detail, everyone shares the longer-term aspiration of having a clearer Budget process, one that is accountable, that gives Members, Committees, and, indeed, the public, more ability to scrutinise and clearly follow through on lines of expenditure, Programme for Government priorities, accountability and transparency in the spending of public money, across the broadest range possible of publicly spending bodies, and, in doing so, to improve the system that we have here and improve the services that we, in turn, provide to the general public in looking after public finances.

I commend the report to the House and ask for support for the Committee's motion. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the response to the Executive's review of the financial process in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with relevant Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 February 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

Financial Allocations

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Finance and Personnel wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome the opportunity to update the Assembly on the outcome of the Executive's deliberations on how to address the financial consequences of the Irish Government's decision to materially revise their funding commitment to the A5 and A8 road schemes.

As Members will be aware, the Irish Government had committed to providing a total of £400 million towards the completion of the A5 and A8 road schemes. Nearly all that funding — £378 million — was to be provided in the 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16 financial years. The difficult economic circumstances facing our Southern neighbours are well known, and, in that light, the Irish Government have now revised their contribution to £50 million, which will be spread evenly over the 2014-15 and 2015-16 financial years.

The Irish Government's decision to materially reduce their original contribution clearly left us with no choice but to reconsider how to take forward the capital investment in the affected years. In considering how best to respond, the Executive were particularly mindful of the need both to balance the allocations against the regional impact and to consider how best to maximise the economic and social impact of the revised allocations.

Against that background, I am pleased to announce that the Executive have now agreed to commit funding for the following projects within the next four years. There will be an investment of £330 million to upgrade two sections of the A5: that from Londonderry to north of Strabane, and that from south of Omagh to Ballygally. Secondly, there will be £57 million — *[Laughter.]*

Mrs Foster: Ballygawley.

Mr Wilson: Arlene Foster has tried unsuccessfully to correct my pronunciation of that area. I thought that I had it right, but anyhow. Linking east and west is an idea. There will be £57 million for the A2 Greenisland road scheme; £105 million to take forward the A8 Belfast to Larne dual carriageway; £28.5 million towards the next phase of the Altnagelvin Hospital refurbishment; and £63.2 million to allow acceleration of the new Omagh Hospital and phase B of the Ulster Hospital.

The Executive recognised the need to reduce journey times between our two largest cities and the west of the Province. The planned upgrade of the A5 road will do just that and will have significant economic benefits for Northern Ireland. That represents a key step towards improving our strategic roads infrastructure. It has also become increasingly clear that a considerable bottleneck exists along the A2 between Belfast and Carrickfergus. I witness that bottleneck daily, although that did not influence this decision, Mr Speaker; let me emphasise that. The A2 road scheme will address that issue and will ensure faster journey times on that key commuter route.

The new commitments to investment in our roads network will significantly improve key sections of our strategic roads infrastructure and demonstrate the Executive's commitment to promoting our long-term economic growth prospects. It will also provide a significant boost to our construction industry at a time when the wider economy is still recovering from the economic downturn.

The delivery of quality healthcare services remains a key priority for the Executive. The hospital allocations announced today inject an additional £91.7 million into our health infrastructure over the next three years. The decision to invest in the three key hospital projects will enhance our health sector's capacity to deliver quality healthcare services in Londonderry, Omagh and Belfast. That will have significant benefits for patients in those areas. Like the roads investment, it will also provide much needed employment opportunities for our construction sector.

In total, the projects announced this morning will generate in excess of 2,500 construction sector jobs. Proceeding with those funding commitments will have implications for the funding available in each of the next four financial years. Although the impact for next year — at less than £1million — is negligible, the position for the following three years is that we range from having some resources unallocated — just under £80 million in 2013-14 — to an over-allocation of some £185 million in 2014-15.

The issue is material but manageable. It would be easy for me simply to sit back and say that we must only ever allocate exactly what we have available in any one year and that we must similarly plan to spend up to that limit, regardless of any mature consideration of the economic or social value of such spend.

Although we must deliver spend to those constraints, it is important to take a much more pragmatic and flexible approach to planning, particularly when responding to

issues such as the Irish Government's late reduction of their funding promise to us.

We have a number of safety valves open to us, not least the general variation in departmental spending against plan, demonstrated again in this financial year, and the fact that, since Budgets were set, I have secured some measure of automatic end-year flexibility (EYF) from the Treasury for Northern Ireland. That has not yet been factored into spending plans. We also have capacity to accelerate spend from years when overcommitted into years where resources are available. For example, our commitments to the three sporting bodies as regards stadia developments extend into the next Budget period, and there is scope to bring that forward.

I will be returning to the Executive with further specific proposals on that issue in the near future, but the key point at this stage is to provide certainty for the public and the construction sector about our commitment to proceed with high levels of investment. Such investment brings major economic social benefits for the whole of Northern Ireland and will help to provide a boost to our construction industry in these difficult times. I, therefore, commend these additional allocations to the House.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas. I thank the Minister for his statement, and I welcome it. I see that he continues to struggle with Ballygawley. Given that his colleagues appear to be warming to our national game, perhaps he could use the term "Errigal Ciarán country" from here on in.

Nonetheless, I very much welcome the statement that the Minister has made this morning. It is significant good news, particularly at this time, when, even in my constituency, we have had announcements of job losses. Today's announcement will help to lift the mood again in relation to that.

Will the Minister outline for us how these funding announcements align with and support commitments in the draft Programme for Government and the economic strategy? The Minister said that there would be a significant boost to the economy with in excess of 2,500 construction jobs. He will obviously be aware that that will provide significant opportunities, through the use of social clauses, to ensure that there is a significant social output and an output in respect of the Executive's priorities for the recruitment of apprentices from our long-term unemployed. Can he give assurances that Central Procurement Directorate in his Department will be ensuring that the multiplier benefits of those construction jobs reach areas in which the Executive have an interest, through social clauses and in ensuring that there is equality and fairness in how the benefits of today's announcement are distributed across society?

Mr Wilson: I assure the Member that I will not attempt the Irish pronunciation. As the First Minister has pointed out; if I cannot get the English right, I will hardly get the Irish right. I will leave it at that.

This announcement fits in with the first priority in the Programme for Government, which is to help the growth of our economy. It helps in a number of ways. First, as the Chairman has pointed out, in dealing with long-term unemployment and youth unemployment, there will be social clauses in the contracts, which will, of course, help

the Minister for Employment and Learning with some of the targets that he has set regarding youth unemployment and bringing people back into work.

Secondly, it will create 2,500 jobs in the construction industry, but that is not the end of the matter. There is a multiplier effect for this. It is reckoned that the £500 million that we will be spending will, in turn, generate additional spending, which, because of the multiplier effect of about 2.8:1, will be nearly £1.6 billion over the period. The people who get the jobs will spend money in local shops and buy goods and services, etc. That is good news for the wider economy.

Thirdly, it will help infrastructure. I am going to mention one section of road, particularly because I want to get the word right. The section from Omagh to Ballygawley is particularly important from the trade Minister's point of view. She wants to see better links for the west of the Province with the port in Belfast, for example, so that engineering firms that manufacture goods in the west of the Province will have easier access. Such links will make her task of promoting jobs in manufacturing in the west of the Province much easier.

This morning's proposals will have an immediate impact on each of these areas, but they will also have a long-term strategic impact in ensuring that we have an infrastructure that will enable us to attract industry across Northern Ireland.

Mr Buchanan: I welcome the Minister's statement to the House. I suppose I was straying into this area yesterday, when the Speaker pulled me into line. This is one of the largest investments into roads infrastructure and health that we have seen in the west for quite a long time, and that is to be welcomed. Does the Minister agree that it will have a huge impact on manufacturing, trade, business and commuting to and from Belfast and that it will open up the entire west of the Province for future development and job creation?

10.45 am

Mr Wilson: I knew that the Member would get a second bite at the cherry today, Mr Speaker. Even though he was ruled out of order yesterday, I knew that he would get good news when he raised the issue today. Therefore, it was worth waiting for.

Of course, he is exactly right. It is an important infrastructure development for the west of the Province. I emphasise again that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was keen to have that kind of linkage, because it is important to have contacts between those areas. I have visited many of the manufacturing firms in the west of the Province. There, strong manufacturing firms are doing business right across the world, and an infrastructure that enables them to transport their goods that much more easily to the port in Belfast will be of immense benefit. I know that there was a strong lobby for it. However, there are those who will say that the decisions on the two sections of the A5 were simply political. They were not political decisions; they were made on the basis of good economic judgement and arguments. The infrastructure will benefit the west of the Province and help to sustain some of the firms that are already there doing international business.

Mr Cree: I also welcome my good friend the Finance Minister's statement. The Minister, in his statement, used the term "generate" when referring to the 2,500 jobs. Will

he clarify whether that is generating new jobs or supporting existing jobs?

I was pleased that he referred to the Ulster Hospital project. Will he confirm that it is ready to go, and has he any indication of its likely phasing?

Mr Wilson: The jobs that will be created may well sustain jobs in existing firms for which work is running out. In some instances, new jobs will be created in firms that did not have a work stream here in Northern Ireland. It will be a combination of the two. Nevertheless, it ensures that people who are out of work or would, potentially, be out of work because work is drying up for some firms, are guaranteed an income into the future, and that income will generate additional spin-offs in Northern Ireland.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has said that it is ready to go ahead with the project at the Ulster Hospital, a section of which needs refurbishment. As a representative for the area, the Member will know the problems that have been caused. The hospital has a brand new wing, beside which is a wing that is probably 30 or 40 years old. It is in a considerable state of disrepair and requires maintenance. He will need to take up the exact phasing of the project with the Health Minister, who can give him more detail on the profile of the spend. However, the anticipated spend on the Ulster Hospital is £22.5 million in 2012-13, £7.5 million in 2013-14 and a further £7.5 million in 2014-15. Most of the work will start and be carried on in the next financial year.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. It is a positive and welcome story. The upgrade of the A5 ends the uncertainty, and that is very welcome. I also agree with the Minister that it is an important economic kick-start for the local economy, particularly the construction industry in the west. Are the Minister and the Executive still committed to completing the remaining sections in the long term, given the uncertainty created because of Irish Government funding? It is important for us to reaffirm our position on the overall scheme.

Mr Wilson: As I said in answer to an earlier question, as far as I, as Finance Minister, am concerned, the decision on any roads scheme must be based first, on the priorities in the Programme for Government and, secondly, on how the scheme fits into the priorities that Departments have set for themselves. There must be objective criteria on which such investment decisions are made. There are schemes for parts of the A5, two of which have been mentioned, that, under any Department for Regional Development (DRD) measure, would have gone ahead anyway because they met the criteria. There are other parts, and the Member will know them, that have had a far, far lower priority.

The second thing, of course, as the Member will know, is that I cannot possibly make any commitment for the next Budget period, because I do not know what the Budget is likely to be or what other schemes this would be competing with. At the same time, I do not want to give any commitment today that would take the pressure off the Irish Government to make a contribution. I think that the Member will recognise that it would be very foolish to do that. We have a £50 million commitment from the Irish Government. If I were to signify that we were quite happy to continue with the rest of the road, no further money would be forthcoming.

It is my job to maximise the amount of money that comes into the purse in Northern Ireland so that we can maximise our spend.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement. In the round, it is a very welcome and very sensible way forward. I particularly welcome the schemes for the A2 Shore Road and the A8 in the East Antrim constituency and the amount of work that will be done on those. Some of us have been waiting for over 30 years for work on the A2 to be done. The Minister is to be congratulated on making his decision on that.

Minister, is there really a role for the Regional Development Minister now that you have made that decision? Or is his job just to get on and do it?

Mr Wilson: Let me make something very clear: this was an Executive decision. There were discussions with Executive colleagues. I discussed it with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister, the Minister with responsibility for roads, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, and the Health Minister. All these things were discussed with Ministers, and the Executive made and endorsed a collective decision this morning. Of course, the priorities and the information that the Minister with responsibility for roads provided was an important input in deciding where the money should go. Primarily, most of the money was roads money. Therefore, you would have expected that the Department for Regional Development would make a claim on that money. Although I would love to take all the credit for the way in which the money was spent and allocated this was a collective decision that was made on the basis of the kind of arguments that I mentioned. What is the economic potential of this allocation? What is its social potential? How does it fit in with the priorities in the Programme for Government? How does it measure up against other demands for money in the system?

Mr Ross: I warmly welcome the statement this morning, and I particularly welcome the two projects in the East Antrim constituency. I am sure that the Finance Minister agrees that, although the A5 project is important to the west, the A8 project is strategically very important for businesses across Northern Ireland, given the volume of freight traffic going through the Port of Larne.

Mr Wilson: One reason why the A8 is a high-priority road scheme is because it is one of the Trans-European Network road schemes, and, for that reason, it is an important strategic link for businesses in Northern Ireland in getting to the Port of Larne. Equally, it is an important strategic link for goods coming from Stranraer and Cairnryan into Northern Ireland for distribution. Again, it was chosen on the basis that it is a strategic scheme. The Minister still has to see the commissioner's report. I do not know what variations there may be to the scheme as a result of that, but, ultimately, the Minister will be able to decide how to proceed once he has received the commissioner's report.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and thank him for it. However, I have one slight reservation. I hope that the consultant engineers, particularly the contractors, understand that the project is for the Omagh to Ballygawley section rather than Omagh to Bally-whatever-Sammy-called-it.

Will the Minister confirm that the work that he announced on the upgrade of two sections of the A5 will start this autumn?

Will he confirm a date for the start of the work on the new hospital in Omagh?

Mr Wilson: First, the spend on those two sections will start this year. In fact, the projected spend for the next financial year, 2012-13, is £40 million on the section of the A5 from Omagh to Ballygally — or Ballygawley; I will get it right — and £35 million on the section from Londonderry to Strabane. So, there is a substantial spend. The heavier amounts will fall in years 2 and 3, but the spend will start this year.

The proposal on the new Omagh hospital will mean that there will be less time between the enabling works being carried out, which I understand are being done, and the hospital's being built. There was going to be a bit of a gap there. There will be substantial spend of nearly £10 million on the Omagh hospital this year.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I give it a very warm welcome, particularly the announcements on the A2 and A8 schemes. If there is one going to Ballygally, we will take it too, Sammy. Will the Minister indicate the benefits of his announcements to wider job creation and economic development in east Antrim?

Mr Wilson: The immediate impact will be on the construction jobs that result from the A2 and A8 contracts. Those schemes will generate a substantial number of construction jobs in the area.

As the Member will know from travelling on the road between Carrickfergus and Belfast every day, the improvement of that road will open up huge possibilities. For example, I suspect that many firms are put off locating at the Courtaulds site outside Carrickfergus because the difficulties in travelling from the site in the evening or to the site in the morning are such that people can spend an hour sitting in traffic jams. Such delays add to the costs that a business would face if it were to locate in the Carrickfergus area.

Hopefully, once work on the road is completed, those costs will be substantially reduced, which will mean long-term possibilities of and potential for job creation. Again, that is the kind of argument that the Enterprise Minister would have been making to us when we looked at the scheme.

Mr Beggs: As an East Antrim MLA, I welcome the new funding that has been allocated to easing congestion at Greenisland and the ongoing funding that has been allocated to the A8 scheme. However, all the necessary permissions have to be in place before public money can be spent. Will the Minister acknowledge and confirm that the A2 scheme has its permissions, meaning that vesting can take place and a contractor can be appointed but that the public inquiries still have to be completed on the A8 and A5 schemes?

Mr Wilson: As far as the A2 is concerned, the Member is quite right: the public inquiry has been completed. Much of the land has been bought. I think about £16 million has already been spent — I could be wrong, but it is somewhere around that — on purchasing properties along the route. All that has to be done now is to put the scheme out to tender. The procurement will start and should be completed sometime in the middle of the financial year so that money can be spent in 2012.

Due to the lead-in time with the tender and whatnot, it is estimated that a very small amount will be spent this year

on the A2 scheme. That is because by the time a contractor is put in place and whatnot we will be getting towards the end of the financial year.

As far as the A8 is concerned, the Member is quite right. Again, all the permissions are in place. A contractor has been appointed, but the Minister still has to receive the report from the public inquiry.

I do not know what changes the report may recommend, because I am not privy to it, or indeed whether the Minister will accept any of the recommendations from the public inquiry. However, I understand that he is to receive that fairly soon.

11.00 am

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister and welcome his decision and statement.

The Minister will be well aware from the One Plan of the strategic importance of the A5. His announcement is an obvious commitment to the One Plan and will be very welcome in Derry. I am sure the Minister is aware of an important event in Derry tonight in relation to the regeneration of Ebrington Barracks and four or five Executive Ministers are coming down. So, I would say you would be a very welcome visitor tonight, and we would even allow you a mispronunciation of “Derry”.

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

Altnagelvin Area Hospital is listed in the statement as a refurbishment. Will the Minister confirm that there will be a newbuild on the site as part of that process?

Mr Wilson: I had hoped to attend the event in Londonderry this evening, but I suspect, given how long-winded Members will be in the Budget debate, and if some contributions I heard yesterday are anything to go by, I and others may well be here long after the opening of the square. I have met representatives from Londonderry chamber of trade, Ilex, the council and a wide range of representatives on a number of occasions. In fact, I think I have visited that city more often than anywhere else.

There is a very positive attitude in the city. I hesitate to say it, but sometimes there was a reputation of maybe a wee bit too much whinging. However, I have detected a very positive attitude. The One Plan, of course, was important. The whole idea was how to maximise whatever spend was undertaken by public bodies to ensure that it had the greatest economic impact. Altnagelvin hospital will get new wards to replace those in the tower block that have become not really fit for purpose. I trust that the spend on the road to Strabane and at Altnagelvin hospital will not only create jobs but improve the infrastructure, which will enable the other spend that will be going into the city to be maximised.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I pay tribute to my colleague Joe Byrne, who has been assiduous in his pursuit of the A5 project. Will the Minister, in anticipation of the UK Budget on 21 March, suggest whether he can see or project any possible readjustments to that as a result of the out-turn of the UK Budget? Will he also have discussions directly with the Minister for Regional Development about the Ballynahinch bypass, since the line has been prescribed for it but no funding identified?

Mr Wilson: I know that the Member thinks that her party can magic money out of thin air, although it never materialises. We have used and maximised the money we have available. Of course, Ministers will have other capital schemes. In due time, if money becomes available, I am sure she will make representations very strongly on that issue, as she has done to me on other projects.

As far as what will happen in the UK Budget, I do not have a crystal ball. I do not know what the proposals or implications are likely to be. Listening to the Chancellor this morning on the radio talking about the threat of the United Kingdom's credit rating maybe being reduced in a year-and-a-half's time, I suspect that he is not going to loosen the purse strings a great deal. Of course, if that is the case, there will be implications for Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the planned investment announced. What is the timetable for new works at the Ulster Hospital? What significance will those works have for areas such as north Down, which lost its local hospitals many years ago?

Mr Wilson: The exact timetable is something that the Member needs to raise with the Health Minister. As far as the Ulster Hospital is concerned, we will spend £37.5 million on two main blocks. Those are the ward block and the acute block, which will then be completed. The ward block work is already going ahead. That new money will make possible the second part of the acute development at the Ulster Hospital; namely, the accident and emergency department, theatres, and so forth. The Member needs to take up the issues of exact timing and completion dates with the Health Minister.

Ms J McCann: Like other Members, I thank the Minister for his statement. It is a welcome announcement, given the jobs that will be created. However, I cannot help but notice that the Belfast rapid transit system is not mentioned in the statement. Given that it would connect two of the most deprived areas — north and west Belfast — to jobs, which are extremely important for people who live there, can the Minister please update the House on the project?

Mr Wilson: Again, that is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development. All that I am doing is announcing where the £583 million that is available to us as a result of the decision to withdraw funding from the A5 project will be spent. I am not sure where exactly the rapid transit system sits in the regional development strategy. From my days on Belfast City Council, it has always been my understanding that a substantial amount of private money has to go into that project. Of course, that is the responsibility of developers at the Titanic Quarter.

Mr Frew: I certainly welcome the statement. In the light of the Irish Government's decision to withdraw funding, this has been a sensible allocation of money. I welcome the answers that the Minister has given on future strategic decisions, because the A26 project and improvements that are needed on that stretch of road will come into play for the entire Province.

I ask the Minister to highlight again the importance of the decision to the construction industry. It will benefit not only one section of the industry but a wide spectrum: building contractors; electrical contractors and engineers;

mechanical contractors and engineers; and all specialised subcontractors.

Mr Wilson: It will indeed. Of course, it will also benefit support industries, such as architects, quantity surveyors, surveyors, and so on. The entire construction industry will benefit. As I pointed out in earlier answers, the total impact should be 2,500 jobs, which will be in existing small and large firms throughout the industry. A wide range of skills will also be involved, from roads construction — civil engineering — to the construction of hospitals, which will require all the skills that the Member mentioned. The construction industry has told us that it wants certainty. We have now told it how we plan to spend money over the next three years. That will enable the industry to plan its investment and training. The important point to make is that we want to see continuity of work for the construction industry so that it can, in turn and with certainty, take on people, train them and retain a skill base for the industry in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the funding commitment to various projects, particularly for phase B of the Ulster Hospital in my constituency. However, I am concerned about the implications for future years, given the other pressures that we will face with continued UK budgetary cuts. Given the already apparent over-allocation, can the Minister give any indication of ideas that he might have to deal with those other pressures and proper long-term budgetary planning?

Mr Wilson: I have been upfront with the Assembly this morning. I did not have to go into the figures in as much detail as I did, but I was upfront in indicating that there is an overcommitment in the final year of the Budget. That can be dealt with in a number of ways. First, we could re-profile some of our capital spend. We should not forget that, in the second year of the spending plan or the third year of the Budget, we will have a surplus of £78 million. We could bring some of the spending from year 4 of the Budget or year 3 of the spending plan into that year to reduce that overcommitment.

We could also use end-year flexibility or carry money forward. Frankly, rather than working to a timetable of spending only the money that we have and then finding in the final year — we found that this year — that we are carrying over more money than the Treasury allows and having to give that money back, I would prefer to have three years to plan for how we deal with that overcommitment. In that way, we will be able to keep the money in Northern Ireland. There are other means of dealing with that overcommitment that I will bring to the Executive. In fact, I made it clear to my Executive colleagues this morning that, to deal with that overcommitment, we will have to look at making other decisions. However, I do not think that those decisions will be particularly painful.

Representatives of the construction industry have said that the industry is reliant on government spending. Hopefully, that situation will change during the next three years and more private spend will come through. However, given the plight of the construction industry and the need to create jobs, I think that it is a risk worth taking. It is not a massive risk; it is calculated, and I believe that it can be dealt with. It is worth re-profiling some spend that will leave us with an overcommitment in the final year, but with three years to deal with it.

Mrs Overend: I look forward to the time when Mid Ulster becomes a priority for the Finance Minister, but I hope that the construction jobs that will be created will help the constituency. Will the Finance Minister detail what proportion of the jobs created will be Northern Ireland jobs? Have contracts been awarded? Where will those contracts go?

Mr Wilson: Some of the contracts have been awarded, and contracts for two parts of the A5 and for the A8 were awarded to Northern Ireland firms. The contracts for the hospitals and the A2 have not yet been awarded.

The Member will know that, under procurement rules, we cannot show favour to Northern Ireland firms. However, I hope that the success that Northern Ireland firms have had in tendering for some of the major schemes will continue and that the contracts for the other schemes will go to firms based in Northern Ireland.

At the end of the day, we have to get the best value for money through procurement; you would not expect anything else. There are strict rules for procurement, so I cannot predict the outcome of the procurement exercises on the outstanding schemes.

Mr Spratt (The Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is evidence of a considered and pragmatic approach, and it is welcomed by the Committee for Regional Development. Will the Minister confirm whether the criteria that were used for the two sections of the A5 that he identified will go ahead under normal DRD construction criteria?

Mr Wilson: First, discussions were held with the roads Minister on those schemes. Secondly, all the facts and figures about traffic movements, accident statistics and the kind of traffic that travels on those roads are available to DRD. The two parts that have been chosen would, by any objective roads criteria, have been high up the priority list anyway. The traffic volumes on the A2 and the A8 and the strategic nature of those routes were more than sufficient to justify the expenditure on them.

11.15 am

I want to emphasise that, as I said in the statement and as an examination of the detail of the particular schemes will show, strict economic, social and strategic significance was considered when the decisions were made as to which schemes should go ahead.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fearadh na fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire inniu. The Minister and his Executive colleagues will be all too well aware of the ongoing problem of rising emigration that we face, particularly in rural communities such as Fermanagh and Tyrone. He will also be aware of the impact that this positive announcement about immediate capital projects will have in giving some sort of hope to young people who are choosing to emigrate, particularly to those who have qualified in the fields of construction and engineering.

What is the Minister's assessment of the impact that those project announcements will have, not only on short-term job creation but in the long term in society as a whole, as we seek to move from decades and, in fact, centuries of

historical underinvestment in infrastructural projects west of the Bann?

Mr Wilson: I do not agree that there have been decades of underinvestment. The Executive have spread investment across the whole of Northern Ireland. Everywhere I go, no matter whether it is east, west, north or south, to speak at chamber of trade dinners — the most recent one was in Newry — it never fails to amuse me when I hear the same story about historical underinvestment. People in my constituency of East Antrim tell me that no government jobs are located there, and they talk about historical underinvestment. Everybody will tell the same story, although the reality is something different.

The Member has made an important point, however. I have said this before, but it bears repetition: when we invest in strategic roads, it opens up economic possibilities. Invest NI has already bought sites along the road from Dungannon to Ballygawley — I got it right this time — that will enable economic development there. I have no doubt that the road from Ballygawley to Omagh will do exactly the same. Of course, it is important that the firms that are already established there have an infrastructure that enables them to be sustained and to open up further possibilities.

Yes, there is a short-term benefit, but, if there was only a short-term benefit, this announcement would not represent all that significant an investment, because once the short-term jobs are gone, they are gone. If these are the right investment decisions, and I believe that they are, the benefits will be felt by communities that are impacted by those roads in the much longer term. Hopefully, that will address at least some of the problems. As far as the Executive can do, when we are facing global pressures, it will help to address some of the issues that the Member has raised.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I also welcome the Minister's statement and the green light for two sections of the A5. I am also very pleased to hear about the investment in our healthcare infrastructure, particularly in the Western Trust area.

As the Minister outlined earlier to Mr McCartney, the Altnagelvin hospital investment will facilitate the construction of a new north wing, which will comprise six wards and should greatly enhance the experiences of patients and staff at the hospital. The Omagh investment will bring that project forward by a year. I very much welcome the capital commitment and the jobs that it will create. However, will the Minister tell us whether the Executive will display the same commitment to the retention of health service jobs in the Western Trust area, which is an area of very high unemployment?

Mr Wilson: It is nice to hear the Member welcome something. He usually picks holes in everything that I bring to the Assembly. He has four pieces of news to welcome: that must be a record. I hope that it will keep him happy and off my back for a wee while at least. Once there is investment in the hospitals infrastructure, there will be employment consequences. As for the detail of what is happening with the health spend in the Western Trust, it is more appropriate that that is drawn from the Health Minister than from me.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the money for new projects. May I request that any future moneys — any loose change — are directed to the Regional Development Minister for the upgrade of the A26, where so many fatalities have occurred, and the Dungiven bypass project to alleviate the health risks to residents and commuters alike in Dungiven?

Mr Wilson: As I mentioned, as a result of the statement, there is already an overcommitment in the final year of the Budget that has to be addressed. We have to look at whether the Budget review that we will undertake will release some capital from other Departments for roads, whether additional money will come from other sources, or whether, as a result of Executive discussions, we find that we can draw in private finance for schemes. I have to say that the Executive understand the importance of spending on our infrastructure, not only because of the short-term jobs that that creates but because of the long-term possibilities. Through the Budget review group, we will continue to explore other ways in which we can bring forward more capital projects in the future, if possible.

Mr McCarthy: This is a good news story, and everyone in the Chamber welcomes it. There are some disappointments. Ballynahinch is not mentioned anywhere, even though it has been waiting 30 or 40 years for a bypass. It was interesting that, I think, every Minister, including the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, was in the Chamber this morning to listen to the statement, but the roads Minister — the Minister for Regional Development — was not about.

Some Members: He was.

Mr McCarthy: Was he? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McCarthy: I apologise, but he did not hang around very long to hear the rest of the discussion. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. We are discussing the Minister's statement and not who is here and who is not here.

Mr McCarthy: It is a good news story that comes after a bad news story yesterday, with the loss of 300-odd jobs in Armagh. It is a good news story, which, along with everyone else, I very much welcome. In particular, I welcome the investment in all the hospital sites. As the Alliance Party health spokesperson, I am delighted that that investment is being made. My main concern is the 2,500 jobs that the Minister said that he will try to create. That will not be his job. It will be the Minister for Regional Development's job —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr McCarthy: — to ensure that the work will be given out locally, and there will be no hanging around. Get on with the job, get it done, and create all those jobs.

Mr Wilson: I am not sure what the Member wants. One minute he condemns the Minister for Regional Development for not hanging around and then he says he does not want him to hang around. I wish that he would make up his mind. In defence of the Minister for Regional Development, and in the pursuit of co-operation between the two unionist parties, I will explain that he, along with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Health Minister, is doing a press conference. They left to do the press conference

during questions on the statement. So he did not walk out because he was in bad form or anything like that; he had a commitment to talk about the schemes in his Department's remit.

Mr McCarthy and, I think, a couple of other Members mentioned the Ballynahinch scheme. One of our criteria for spending the money was whether it could be spent in the time available. As far as the Ballynahinch road scheme is concerned, I understand, from speaking to Mr Hamilton, that, even though there is a proposal for a bypass, the land has not yet been bought. The Member may shake his head, but he will know that there is a required process. Given that the scheme has not advanced even to that stage, it is unlikely that we could have spent the money in the time available.

Mr Allister: This morning's announcement about the A5 demonstrates that, in the Executive, what Sinn Féin wants, Sinn Féin gets. Three months ago, after the Republic backed out, the Minister, through the BBC, told us:

"the road cannot be financed and cannot be built ... We're looking at how we re-profile that and what we spend it on."

He went on to say that spending the money on hospitals, schools and houses would be a better spend in any event. Today, he tells us that, though the Republic's Government have backed out, he will build big chunks of the A5 for them anyway. Where is the business case for the A5 project that he has approved? When did he approve that, or has due process simply been trumped by political horse-trading? If due process were in vogue, he would be announcing the advancement of the A26 project this morning, because it meets the traffic volume criteria, which the A5 comes nowhere close to meeting.

Mr Wilson: I know that the Member acts as a kind of lone opposition in this place. However, I would have thought that, on a morning when we have what is generally accepted as good news across the House and will, undoubtedly, be accepted as good news right across the construction industry and the wider economic society in Northern Ireland, he could at least have avoided being churlish. Of course, as the old saying goes, every silver lining has its cloud. I suppose that that has been justified here this morning.

I know that the Member thinks that Sinn Féin wags the dog in this place, but I have been at pains to explain that that is not the case. Sinn Féin made it clear that it wanted the whole A5 done. It wanted all available money from our Budget and that of the Republic to be spent on doing as much work on the A5 as could be done with the £450 million available. That did not happen. We chose particular parts of the road on the basis of traffic volume and economic benefit.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has already made it clear that, as far as she is concerned, the work will help to sustain and generate jobs in the west of the Province. I think that it is important that the economic benefits that stem from whatever actions the Executive take are felt right across Northern Ireland. That is always an important consideration, but not to the extent to which we would go ahead with unjustifiable projects.

The reason why the rest of the A5 is not being done is that it did not stack up. We could have put more money into

that, because we did not spend all the money from the A5 reallocation. The reason why we did not do so was that other projects stacked up and were considered to be of higher priority. I know that the Member will not accept that. However, all I can say to him is that that is the way in which the decision was made.

Lord Morrow: One thing that disappointed me about the Minister's statement was that he was unable to pronounce "Ballygawley". That disappoints me, as it is the town of my birth, so I will have to talk to him to find out what is going on.

11.30 am

In relation to the A5, a sensible decision has been taken to drop the section from Aughnacloy to Ballygawley. From day one, some of us said that it could never be justified, and I am pleased that that has happened. However, as a result of today's statement, something needs to happen, and it is this: we need to get a hold of the public inquiry into the A5. Only the Regional Development Minister knows why he will not release that. Furthermore, we need to remove the blight from the section between Ballygawley and Aughnacloy. There is a lot of farmers' land there, and that land could continue to be blighted if a clear statement of intent is not made soon. I welcome the Minister's statement.

Mr Wilson: Most of what the Member has raised is a matter for DRD. However, I have made it clear that as far as I am concerned, any further work along any section of the A5 will depend on money from the Irish Republic. We want to maximise that. If there are parts of that road that the Irish Republic believes to be of strategic importance to it, that will be the case. The Member is quite right: the stretch from Ballygawley to Aughnacloy was one of those that, on objective criteria, would not have been justified.

North/South Ministerial Council: Education

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the NI Act 1998, regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in education sectoral format. The meeting was held in the joint secretariat offices in Armagh on 1 February 2012. I represented the Executive, as Minister of Education, along with the Minister for Social Development, Nelson McCausland MLA. The Irish Government were represented by Ruairi Quinn TD, Minister for Education and Skills. The statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland and is made on behalf of us both.

I will summarise the main points from the meeting, ranging across all the agreed areas of education co-operation. With respect to the education survey in the border regions, we recognised the importance of facilitating parental preference in participation in schools. We noted the changing population in border areas and the impact that that might have on schools. Taking into account those issues, we discussed how those parents who so wished might be able to send their children to schools on either side of the border.

With respect to taking forward greater parental preference in schools in the border regions, we discussed the developing plans and agreed the next steps for the conduct of a joint survey to inform cross-border pupil movement and school planning. An interim report on the preparation for the survey

will be presented to the next NSMC education meeting. The survey is due to be conducted later this year, and its results and proposals on the way forward will be considered by the Ministers no later than the first NSMC education meeting of 2013.

With regard to special educational needs, the Council reaffirmed its commitment to the future development of the Middletown Centre for Autism. We welcomed the progress made by the two Departments in conjunction with the centre on the development of a multi-annual plan for Middletown. The plan will take full account of developments in recent years. It will also reflect international best practice. It will, of course, be deliverable within the financial constraints faced by both Administrations. Taking account of those factors, we noted that a paper containing proposals on the way forward for the Middletown centre will be brought forward for decision at our next meeting in May. We welcomed the continuing progress made by the Middletown centre in delivering training to professionals and parents, in outreach support for children and in the continuing programme of research.

The Council noted that future meetings of the educational underachievement working group will include an important focus on sharing best practice in raising literacy and numeracy standards. We welcomed the publication of a joint report by the two inspectorates on promoting and improving literacy and numeracy in schools and a commitment by both inspectorates to continuing collaboration.

We noted that Marino Institute of Education in Dublin is considering a proposal from the University of Ulster to deliver a preparatory course to enable students to undertake assessments leading to the Scrúdu Cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge, an Irish-language teaching requirement in the South. We also noted that St Mary's University College, Belfast has expressed an interest in delivering the course.

We noted that an Irish-medium collaborative programme for the 2011-12 academic year to support Gaeltacht schools and Irish-medium schools has been approved and is being implemented.

The Council welcomed the publication of the 'School Leadership Matters' report, which is available on the Regional Training Unit and Professional Development Service for Teachers websites. We welcomed ongoing exchanges and sharing of good practice in school evaluation by the two inspectorates.

As regards school, youth and teacher exchanges, the Council welcomed North/South student exchanges, which are due to take place in March, and we noted that the evaluation of the dissolving boundaries programme has been completed.

In closing, Ministers agreed that the North/South Ministerial Council in education sectoral format should meet again on 30 May in Armagh.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): There is little to welcome in this statement to the House. It seems as though the type on the statement gets bigger but the content gets less. It raises a number of serious issues.

First, I want to raise concern about the comments made in the paper about parental preference for parents from the Irish Republic. When will the Minister ensure that that is

extended to parents in Northern Ireland, given the position that he and his party hold regarding certain sectors of education?

A very serious issue is what the paper describes as the “continuing progress” of Middletown. Minister, Middletown has now become an albatross for your Department. It is delivering nothing for the children in Northern Ireland who have serious problems and challenges. Let me conclude by quoting a parent. Middletown is not supported by autism organisations and the Northern Ireland Audit Office. The parent said:

“Why has there not been a comprehensive review of the value of Middletown? It appears to me as if it muddles on in its development stage. No one is taking any notice of the fact that schools cannot manage children and young people with ASD.”

Minister, when will you stop the charade and put the money to better use to serve the children of Northern Ireland who are crying out for your help? Unfortunately, it seems as though your ears are closed.

Mr O’Dowd: I thank the Member for the series of points that he raised. First, I welcome his comment on the slowness of some of the programmes of work. The wheels of bureaucracy grind quite slowly on both sides of the border. I assure you that there is great cross-border co-operation on that matter. I am of the view, and I think that I fairly reflect Minister Quinn’s point of view, that the programme of work regarding the delivery of services on a cross-border nature in education needs to be expedited. The survey that we are conducting will assist both Departments in bringing forward a planned approach to the delivery of education in a cross-border region, to the benefit of the young people involved.

You raised some more specific issues. I assume that when you talk about parental preference, you refer to academic selection. I wonder how much preference parents had last Saturday morning when they were opening letters to be told that their 11-year-old child was rejected from a school. Where is the parental preference in that? I assume that that was what the Member was referring to.

I can assure you that my ears and eyes are not closed to the issue of Middletown. Minister Quinn and I have had several discussions about that matter. We expect a report from our Departments towards the end of February, and that will involve a number of options on what the future holds for Middletown. I will study that closely, and at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in May, we will announce the way forward for Middletown. As I said in my statement, it will be based on current positions in both jurisdictions, international best practice and the best way forward for young people with autism. That is what the decision will be based on, and I assure the Member that all the views that have been expressed by parents and autism groups will be taken on board. At this stage, my political views and those of other Members should not be taken into account. The decision will be based on service delivery for autism.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Some of the schools involved in the joint cross-border survey will be affected by the Commission for Catholic Education’s report that was launched yesterday. How will the proposals in that report

affect the cross-border flow of pupils? Perhaps he could give his overall view on the report.

Mr O’Dowd: I thank the Member for the question. The Commission for Catholic Education’s report is a comprehensive piece of work that was conducted over a number of years and sets out the future of Catholic education for, perhaps, a generation to come. It deserves close scrutiny. I will await the publication of development proposals, if we reach that stage, for the five proposed closures, and I will make due judgement on those proposals following the consultation process. There are several other recommendations on amalgamations, and so on, that will also require development proposals.

The Member asked about cross-border travel for pupils. Proposals that will come in the later stages of the process, perhaps a year or two from now, may be affected by the cross-border survey and student and parent demand for schools on either side of the border. It is only right and proper that any proposals for the future of a school in that corridor are taken into account and looked at in conjunction with any parental demand for cross-border travel.

Mr Nesbitt: As roads are the flavour of the day, I will couch my question in that context if I may. In the context of parents who wish to send their children to schools on either side of the border, does the Minister see that as a one-way or two-way street, with two lanes heading South to avoid what he sees as the evil of selection, and a hard shoulder coming in the other direction? How would he characterise the potential outcome?

Mr O’Dowd: We are conducting the survey to establish exactly how many lanes we need on the highway. I want it to be two-way traffic, and there is already two-way traffic of cross-border pupil movement. If pupils head from the North to the South, my Department picks up the tab; if pupils go in the opposite direction, the Dublin Department picks up the tab. At this stage, we are not looking to establish any policy until we have the information at hand. The cross-border survey will allow us to see the parental demand for such a network of provision, and we will also see the obstacles for parents being allowed to send their children in either direction. I will wait to see how many lanes we need on the highway, to use your analogy, and then build it accordingly.

Mr McDevitt: In light of yesterday’s report, what message can the Minister send to young people in Garrison or west Fermanagh? Will their future be a 30-mile commute to Enniskillen, or will the report allow them, potentially, to access a school in Bundoran in the foreseeable future? How far away is that foreseeable future?

Mr O’Dowd: It would be inappropriate for me to discuss individual proposals in the commission’s report that may lead to development proposals because I am the person who will have to make the final decision on those matters. That decision can be made only after the consultation process, which has yet to start. So I will not pre-empt any proposal or recommendation in the commission’s report. The cross-border survey will report back to the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education format in 2013, along with proposals on the way forward. If there is a demand for firm proposals, they will come to fruition within that timescale.

11.45 am**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I remind Members that questions are to this morning's statement.**Mr Lunn:** I want to ask the Minister about the section of his statement dealing with teacher qualifications, particularly the work being done to allow all potential teachers to obtain the scrúdú cáilíochta sa Ghaeilge.**Mr McCarthy:** Well done. You are learning.**Mr Lunn:** The trouble is that, when you say that, you lose your thread.

I ask the Minister whether both jurisdictions are really serious about that. It would be a big step forward if that could be progressed to the point at which there was a level playing field for all potential teachers, North, South and, perhaps, from the European Union.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, both jurisdictions are serious about it because teacher mobility is to the benefit of both. The ongoing work by St Mary's in Belfast, other institutions in the North and, indeed, institutions in Dublin to co-operate and collaborate on recognisable qualifications, in the medium of Irish and across education, can only benefit education as a whole. I am confident that Minister Quinn wants his Department to work in that direction, and my Department, along with the enabling bodies, including the qualification bodies, etc, is working towards that goal as well.**Mr Craig:** Minister, I note that you await proposals in May on moving forward the Middletown Centre for Autism. Will you assure the House that that will be done in conjunction with existing charities? Our experience of Middletown in its previous incarnation was that it just copied and then usurped and undermined charities by carrying out work that they were already involved in. The only difference was that its work cost the taxpayer a fortune compared with what had been delivered.**Mr O'Dowd:** There are several different charities involved in autism and several different opinions on how you deliver autism services to young people. I cannot reconcile all those different opinions with the way forward. That would be impossible. I am not saying that there is disagreement, but we certainly cannot get agreement within the autism sector on the best way forward for educational services.

I am of the view that given the 10 years that have elapsed since the original proposal for the Middletown centre, which was based on best practice at the time, the way forward will have to be based on the evidence of the current provision of autism services on either side of the border. We will reflect and learn from best international practice. However, it must be said that the Middletown centre has provided training to thousands of parents and professionals and played its own role in improving autism services on this island. It has not lain dormant, and the building has not been idle. A service has been running.

We have not yet built the accommodation for a residential training model. We will wait for the report's recommendations on the way forward. The Dublin Government and I want to reflect on the best way forward for that residential model and on the training currently provided.

The autism lobby has, quite rightly, made its voice heard on the matter on both sides of the border. We will listen to the views of the autism charities, but no Government should be run on the basis of trying to accommodate every demand. You have to reach a decision and make the best possible proposal on the way forward on the basis of the evidence in front of you.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. The Minister referred to the changing population in border areas and right along the border corridor. We have seen, in the proposals from the Catholic sector, how that has impacted on the future of some schools. Will the Minister elaborate on the outworkings of the survey that the NSMC proposed and outline what we can expect to happen next?**Mr O'Dowd:** At the next meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council on education, there will be a report on how the survey will be conducted. Following that, the survey will be distributed to schools on either side of the border and relevant community agencies, and it will be publicised so that we get as good an uptake as possible. We want people to be able to give feedback because we want a sound information base to ensure that the results from the survey are as broadly based as possible. Then, at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format in 2013, both Departments will bring proposals on the way forward based on the evidence of demand from the survey.

So, we are working to a number of time frames. The next meeting this year in education sectoral format will look at the survey and how it has been conducted. Then, in 2013, we will see the results of that survey and will decide how it will be moved forward.

Mrs Hale: Could teacher qualifications in Irish-medium assessment courses be used as a shortlisting criterion? If so, that could further disadvantage students who choose not to take that course.**Mr O'Dowd:** The objective is certainly not to disadvantage anyone. I want to ensure that the courses are available to as broad a range of people who wish to take them. At this stage, the Irish-language qualification will really be for teachers who are teaching in the Irish-medium sector and those who wish to go down that career pathway. I want to see qualifications recognised on either side of the border not to disadvantage anyone but to promote the employment of as many teachers as possible.**Mrs Dobson:** Minister, you said in your statement:

"The Council reaffirmed its commitment to the future development of the Middletown Centre for Autism."

The Comptroller and Auditor General's 2009 report concluded that, at the Middletown Centre for Autism:

"Key services...are not being achieved".

How can those statements be squared?

Mr O'Dowd: The Audit Office report was factual. The Middletown centre was not developed during the period that the institutions were down. That is a reality. All-Ireland cross-border co-operation stalled, or was certainly on hold, when the institutions went down. So, through no fault of its

own, the Middletown centre was not allowed to progress. The Audit Office report was factual. We are saying that, as a result of our recent deliberations, we want to assess the services that are provided. Excellent training services have been provided for professionals and parents. We want to see what the next steps will be. Will it be the consolidation of that service? Do we need to move to a residential option? What is international best practice telling us? What are the services that are available on the island of Ireland telling us about what the next option should be? So, my statement and the Audit Office report are not contradictory in any way. The next steps will be evidence based. There will then be a full report to the meeting in education sectoral format, and I will report to the Assembly on the way forward for the Middletown centre.

Lord Morrow: Maybe the Minister will make a brave decision on the Middletown development by drawing a line under it, moving on and acknowledging the disaster that it has been.

I am not sure whether the following part of the statement is about the Department for Employment and Learning or the Department of Education. The Minister talked about the University of Ulster delivering on Irish language, and he said that St Mary's intimated that it also wants to do it. The Minister made a significant statement on that that I want to ask him about directly. He said:

"This is an Irish language teaching requirement in the south."

Is the Minister now proposing to also make it compulsory for all students in Northern Ireland?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I am not proposing to make it compulsory for all students. It is a voluntary process in the North, and I see no reason to change that. It is about improving the delivery of Irish-language education in the Irish-medium sector and, indeed, through other sectors, if they so wish. So, I am not choosing to make anything compulsory for anyone.

As regards making a brave decision about the Middletown centre, a decision that is made in the absence of all the information would not be a brave decision but simply the wrong decision. So, let us have all the evidence before us so that we can make the right decision in May, and we will move forward from there.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement. I feel that I have to stand up for the Middletown centre, given all the negative comments. Given the latest announcement about possible job losses in Armagh city and district, of which there have been 340 over the past couple of weeks, I think that the announcement on the Middletown centre is positive and welcome. Could the Minister give us an update on the discussions that he has had with his counterpart, Ruairi Quinn, in relation to the Middletown centre?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, we have to remember that when we are talking about any institution, there are employees and staff behind that, with genuine concerns about their future and the way forward. However, as with any decision, we have to focus on the needs of the client base, which, in this case, is the young people with autism, and we want to ensure that we are delivering the most up-to-date and proper service for them.

Minister Quinn and I have liaised as regards Middletown. Minister Quinn is keen to ensure that he has a modern

delivery service for autism in his jurisdiction, and I am keen that we have a modern delivery service for autism in my jurisdiction. We want to ensure that whatever decision we come to around Middletown is based on best practice. We await the report of our Departments, and our officials are working closely together on that. When that report is available, Minister Quinn and I will resume our discussions around the matter and reach a decision by the May deadline, when the North/South Ministerial Council will next meet in education sectoral format.

We have to come to a final decision on this because, as the Member said, there are staff behind this decision as well, and they want to know what the future holds for them. There are families with young people with autism who want to know the way forward. As has been mentioned by another Member, there are also charities doing very good work as regards autism that want to know what their role will be. All those individuals and bodies deserve certainty on the way forward for Middletown.

Mr Allister: I want to ask the Minister about his enthusiasm for cross-border schooling, which I assume was shared by his unionist minder Nelson McCausland when they committed to the further survey. Does the Minister anticipate that, in due course, from the Northern Ireland Budget we will be providing places and siting schools in order, in part, to facilitate pupils and parents from the Irish Republic? On the question of teacher mobility, did they take time to consider the closed shop arrangement, the Catholic certificate in education, that is a barrier to that?

Mr O'Dowd: The Member will, I am sure, be delighted to know that I do not need any minders no matter where I go. I am more than capable of looking after myself, and I have not met any elected representative yet, including your good self, who is capable of giving me enough problems to make me require a minder.

I do not believe that cross-border mobility will be a cost to the Budget here because, as I have said, we already have pupils travelling back and forth across the border. When students leave this jurisdiction to go to the South, we pick up the bill. When students from the South come to this jurisdiction, the Dublin Government pick up the bill.

There is already a review taking place into the Catholic certificate, and that review will report in due course. As with any review, we will decide the way forward based on the evidence and information gathered by the review, rather than some people's perceptions of what that may be.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education on his statement.

North/South Ministerial Council: Tourism

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in tourism sectoral format.

The meeting was held in Armagh on 25 January 2012. Minister Carál Ní Chuilín MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Leo Varadkar TD, Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, who chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed with Minister Ní Chuilín, and I am making the statement on behalf of us both.

Ministers welcomed the recently appointed chairperson, Mr Brian Ambrose, to his first NSMC meeting. The chairperson and the chief executive officer (CEO), Mr Niall Gibbons, updated Ministers on the work of the Tourism Ireland board, including implementation of the 2011 business plan and the development of the 2012 business plan.

The CEO made a presentation to Ministers on market performance in 2011. The Council noted the success of the 2011 marketing campaign.

That included the historic state visits, which provided a major tourism boost and £250 million of positive publicity; the greening of a number of iconic landmarks worldwide on St Patrick's Day, which reached 250 million potential visitors; and Belfast's being centre stage for the MTV Europe music awards. The performance overview for 2011 showed a growth in overseas visitors for the first time since 2007.

12.00 noon

The Council discussed Tourism Ireland's key marketing campaigns planned for 2012, including the roll-out of a new global destination advertising campaign. Ministers received an update on the planned events and targets for the ni2012 Your Time, Our Place tourism initiative, including the Titanic Belfast Festival 2012; the opening of the new visitor centre at the Giant's Causeway; the Irish Open golf championship at Royal Portrush Golf Club; and the 50th Belfast Festival at Queen's University, as well as the events organised in Northern Ireland in 2013 including the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture and the World Police and Fire Games.

The role of Tourism Ireland in overseas marketing was outlined to the Council. The Council discussed the main priorities for Tourism Ireland in 2012 and reviewed progress on finalising the business plan and budget for 2012. The Council agreed to meet again in tourism format in autumn 2012.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I thank the Minister for her comprehensive report. Tourism Ireland is doing a good job for all parts of Ireland, and it is very important that that job be continued. However, what strikes me in particular is the new global destination advertising campaign, which is particularly significant. Will the Minister comment on that? What potential does she see in that for tourism in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair for his question. Having received briefings from Tourism Ireland, he knows that it

is looking at four main markets, particularly for Northern Ireland, the biggest of which is visitors from Great Britain. Our target over ni2012 — our huge year of opportunity — is to grow the number of GB visitors by 10%, which would hopefully mean an additional 100,000 visitors with a total impact of £66 million over the next four years. Part of working towards that is, undoubtedly, the marketing campaign, as the Member mentioned. I am happy that he is happy. I think that the global destination advertising campaign, in conjunction with the very successful Northern Ireland Tourist Board advertising campaign being shown across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, will impact on the number of tourists deciding to come to Northern Ireland this year. However, it is not just about this year; it is about next year and the years rolling on from there. It is about making a huge impact in 2012 and then reaping the benefits in future years. Although 2012 is huge for Northern Ireland, we are also looking to the sustainability of tourism in the following years. That is an important point.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will she detail the discussions on the logistics, promotion and advertisement of the Irish Open golf tournament that are necessary to make it a very successful event?

Mrs Foster: It will not surprise the Member that it is a huge event for the Royal Portrush Golf Club and the whole of Northern Ireland. We have been very impressed with the number of enquiries made on the back of the announcement that the Irish Open was coming to Northern Ireland for the first time in 60 years. I commend the partnership that is developing between the Royal Portrush Golf Club, the local council at Coleraine, DETI, the Tourist Board, Tourism Ireland, the Department for Regional Development and Translink. All those elements need to come together to make sure that the Irish Open is a huge success. Last year, around 84,000 people visited Killarney for the Irish Open over a period of four or five days. We are hopeful that we will have 100,000 visitors to the north coast. Of course, it will not just be to the benefit of Portrush; it will be right along the north coast and, I would say, across Northern Ireland. Visitors will come for the period of the Irish Open, but they will want to spend longer in Northern Ireland and, therefore, visit all the other sites that are available to them. Plans are going well in relation to the Irish Open, and we look forward to a very exciting time and to an opportunity to place ourselves in front of the world again at the end of June.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware of some of the barriers to tourists entering from parts of Asia? I am aware that the Irish Government have introduced a visa waiver scheme, which allows visitors from 16 countries to enter Ireland with no extra visa cost, but it is not the same vice versa. Will the Minister liaise with Minister Varadkar and, if necessary, the Secretary of State to ensure that tourists who come from a third of the global tourism market — Asia — can access the North?

Mrs Foster: That is an issue that we have discussed in some detail, not just with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland's Government but with the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, Hugo Swire. In the past couple of weeks, I have discussed with him the fact that there is a visa waiver scheme for people who come from the Far East and Middle East into the Republic of Ireland. If they have a UK visa, they do not need an Irish waiver. However, if they have an Irish

visa, they still need to have a UK visa, and that is where the difficulty lies.

I raised the issue with Hugo Swire, and I understand that it is about safety and security and about mechanisms between the Republic of Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. It is something that we are actively looking at to see if we can address that issue. I am sure that the Member will agree that it is particularly pertinent now that we have flights coming in from Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We would like to attract some of those visitors up to Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is on the schedule to see if we can deal with the issue. However, it is a difficult issue that we will continue to work on with the Minister of State.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for her work in helping with the Irish Open and increasing tourism in the different areas. However, I found it somewhat surprising to read in the statement that the Minister is championing the greening of a number of iconic landmarks worldwide on St Patrick's Day. Can the Minister detail the actions that she might take to ensure that St Patrick's Day celebrations here in Northern Ireland are, in fact, less green and more inclusive for all the people of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: The Member will know that I would welcome a more inclusive St Patrick's Day that we can identify with here as a unionist community in Northern Ireland, but she must also recognise that 70 million people across the world celebrate St Patrick's Day. Therefore, we must try to get the benefit of that by attracting them not only into the Republic of Ireland but into Northern Ireland. That is the reference to the greening of those landmarks. The wheel in London was greened last year to try to attract people into Northern Ireland.

One of the campaigns for Tourism Ireland in the GB market is to have that differentiation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It is hugely important that our nearest neighbours recognise that this is our big year of opportunity. They should come along and enjoy all the cultures that we have in Northern Ireland, and we look forward to welcoming them when they come.

Mr Lunn: I also welcome the Minister's statement. It is very positive, and the prospects for the next couple of years look extremely good. In her answer to Mr Maginness, the Minister mentioned future years. That brings in the question of anniversaries and centenaries, which also have tourist potential. Can we take it that there will be the same level of co-operation between Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board in the various jurisdictions to maximise the potential of the various centenaries?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. I know that the Alliance Party has a motion down on the centenaries that we are looking forward to over the next 10 years. I hope to be able to respond to that motion in the Chamber and to detail all the actions that we are taking in relation to all those centenaries. Some of the centenaries are, of course, coming up very quickly. Therefore, I will welcome the opportunity to come to the House to speak about them in the very near future.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her statement. What impact will the opening of the Titanic signature buildings and the Giant's Causeway visitors' centre have on attracting visitors to Northern Ireland? I welcome the support of

Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board for the Circuit of Ireland rally, which this year becomes part of the IRC championship, the first stage of which is based at the Titanic Quarter in Belfast.

Mrs Foster: I wondered how the Member was going to get the Circuit of Ireland rally in, but I am pleased that he was able to do so. We welcome the fact that the rally is taking in the Titanic Quarter as part of its circuit this year and that, yet again, we will be able to shine a light on what is happening in that area. It also helps us to link the Titanic with another big sporting event. That is what this year is all about. It is about linking all the different events together so that when people come to Northern Ireland they have not just one thing to see, do and visit but a range of events.

We have eight tier 1 events in place, but a raft of other events — some new, some existing — will take place across Northern Ireland for the whole of the year. We very much look forward to the increase in visitors who will come and to the increase in visitor spend that will, undoubtedly, accompany that. More importantly, it gives us a chance to change global perceptions about Northern Ireland, to deal with those issues and with perceptions of safety and security and to say that Northern Ireland is confidently moving on.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the indication in the Minister's statement that, for the first time since 2007, we have returned to a growth in visitor numbers. Hopefully, we are starting to turn the corner with that.

I want to return to the visa waiver scheme, which my colleague raised. When was the Minister first made aware of that issue? Does she have any indication of a figure for the potential economic impact that the lack of co-operation on a visa waiver scheme is having on the economy in the North?

Mrs Foster: I have been aware of the issue for some time. It has become more of an issue now that the Etihad flight is coming into Dublin, and there has been a renewed sense of needing to deal with it. I am not underestimating the difficulties with the issue. However, it is incumbent on me, as tourism Minister, to draw as many tourists to Northern Ireland as we can. That is why I am having discussions with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Republic of Ireland and the Minister of State here in Northern Ireland. It is an issue, and I would like to see it sorted out, but it is a difficult one.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister and the Department for all that they do for tourism. However, she will be aware that when Mr Gibbons briefed the ETI Committee on 12 January this year he was unaware of the significance of 14 June and the Olympic Club in San Francisco. What does Tourism Ireland specifically plan to do to maximise the unprecedented focus that there will be on Northern Ireland and its golfers as they try to win the US Open for the third year running? Has she rejected the proposal that I put via the First Minister last June?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his continuing interest in golf tourism, and I look forward to the day that he spreads out into other tourism initiatives. However, I continue to see his comments as helpful. After his recent intervention, I wrote to the chief executives of Invest Northern Ireland, Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and

asked each of them to make sure they knew exactly what they were doing in each of the markets. That will mean that his comments about Tourism Ireland not doing something at Pebble Beach or, in any event, the US Open — I do not think it is in Pebble Beach this year — are addressed. The slack can be taken up by Invest Northern Ireland, which has a presence there and will be promoting Northern Ireland as the home of champions. There is an imperative on us to grasp the opportunity that has been presented to us by our three champions, and I have made Tourism Ireland, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Invest Northern Ireland very much aware of the fact that we need to grasp it with both hands.

12.15 pm

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Minister for her statement. Realising that St Patrick represents the epitome of the unity and diversity concept, does she agree that, although much has been done on the St Patrick signature project, more investment is required to develop the assets and realise their full tourism potential in the North and that there is an all-island dimension to that form of tourism heritage, as some of the key sites are located in the South of Ireland? Will she ask Tourism Ireland to give greater priority to marketing our Patrician heritage?

Mrs Foster: I am somewhat surprised that the Member is giving up a bit of Patrick and allowing him to be claimed by another part. I thought that south Down had the only claim on St Patrick. However, she will know that we looked at all those issues during the very good Adjournment debate that she brought on the tourism potential of south Down. I said to her then and say to her again that the key to developing St Patrick and, indeed, all the signature projects and the nine destination areas is partnership and working with the local councils. Under RPA, new powers on tourism development will go to local councils. It is about working with the tourism destination areas and the signature project areas. She will also know that NITB and Tourism Ireland will continue to market St Patrick in a meaningful way. It is one of our special stories, and we will continue to use it in our global marketing campaigns.

Mr Allister: In noting the headline events that were commented on at the Council meeting in respect of this year and next, I observe no mention of the two largest cultural gatherings that there will be in both years: those on the twelfth and thirteenth of July. In that context, one also notes the total absence of celebration of the covenant day in the showcase production of 'Your Time, Our Place'. What steps has the Minister taken to rectify that omission, if omission it was?

Mrs Foster: Of course, I expected that question. Given that it is a matter for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and not Tourism Ireland, the Member is straying into new ground. Perhaps he wishes me to take matters that are the subject of NITB into a North/South Ministerial Council. Frankly, I will not do that. However, I will continue to work with the Orange Order, the Royal Black Institution and the Apprentice Boys. Some Members may be embarrassed that they will not be at all those events during their summer holidays. However, I have no such embarrassment, and I will be at every one of them, as I am always, including the County Donegal demonstration in Rosstown. Two years ago, I had the

pleasure of hosting a reception that Tourism Ireland held at Rosstown.

As I understand it, Mr Hume at the Orange Order has indicated to my officials that information on the 2012 tourism flagships will be with my officials next Monday. We look forward to profiling all that the Orange Order has to offer. We will continue to work with Orangefest, the Royal Black Institution and Scarva. I was invited to Scarva last year as a special guest, along with the chief executive of Tourism Ireland and the chairman of the Tourist Board. I am sure that the Member has his Royal Black Institution calendar for this year. In it, he will see that I am pictured at the Scarva demonstration. Perhaps he will let us know whether he was at Scarva last year, as I was and will continue to be on every occasion that I can.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as sin.

I thank the Minister for her extensive report. Mr Dunne referred to the Titanic project earlier, which is there to attract visitors from overseas to learn about that ill-fated ship. Given the relevance to these matters of Cobh, which was part of its journey as well, can the Minister advise us whether there has been any collaborative effort with the rest of the island and with the Government in the rest of the island to promote this joint project in a more collaborative way?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, there are many places, as the Member will know, that will claim ownership of the Titanic story. I have to say that the Titanic story belongs in Belfast. I went around the signature building two weeks ago. It is at a very advanced stage now, and the Member will be pleased to know that some of the photographic imagery there was taken from Queenstown, as it then was, showing the ship leaving for the very last time. In fact, that is the last photograph of the Titanic, leaving Queenstown and going off into the Atlantic. There has been some collaboration, of course, in relation to the other areas that the Titanic went to before it sank. However, Belfast is the key area for the Titanic. That is a message that we need to get out globally. It is amazing how many people do not actually realise that the Titanic was built in Belfast. It is our job and it is incumbent on every Member to make sure that everybody knows that the Titanic was all right when it left Belfast.

Mr Lyttle: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I want to raise a concern with the House. Members have been furnished today with a written statement from the First and deputy First Ministers to announce the publication of the Programme for Government end-of-year delivery report. Will the Principal Deputy Speaker raise my concern with the First and deputy First Ministers as to why an issue of such importance was not met with an oral statement to the House?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Speaker. Under Standing Order 18A(2), it is up to the Minister to decide whether a statement should be oral or written.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm, when the first item of business will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.22 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Sprucefield Bypass

1. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the development of the strategic road improvement M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass. (AQO 1299/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):

Roads Service advises that the M1/A1 Sprucefield bypass scheme is in the Roads Service forward planning schedule, which contains projects in the early stages of development. Roads Service officials further advise that the first stage of the development process was completed in March 2011, when the corridor assessment report was finalised. That indicates two potential corridors that should be taken through more detailed assessment to ascertain the preferred route for the scheme. The pace of further progression of the Sprucefield bypass proposal will depend on funding made available to my Department in the current Budget period and through the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, which is published in draft form for consultation.

The Member may be interested to know that an initial study is nearing completion to examine managed motorway solutions to the current motorway network. Such solutions would include further traffic management controls, possible ramp metering and, more importantly, the implementation of hard-shoulder running during periods of peak traffic to increase capacity. Such measures would provide further benefits for motorists using the M1 between Sprucefield and Blacks Road.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. I am sure that he is all too familiar with the congestion around the Hillsborough roundabout/Sprucefield roundabout area. A bypass would benefit not just Lisburn but all of Northern Ireland, given the regional significance of the Sprucefield area. The Minister will be aware that road users divert off the dual carriageway, go through Hillsborough village, and back onto the dual carriageway to speed up the process. Is there any development to try to manage that problem faced by locals?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. As an almost daily user of the A1 and the intersection interchange at Hillsborough/Sprucefield, I appreciate the frustrations of road travellers. The Member asked about the problems in and around the A1 at Hillsborough and the Hillsborough roundabout and the attempt by some to short-circuit their journeys. I have had representations from his colleague, the honourable lady, and she raised those issues with me among others.

Officials have plans to partially signalise that roundabout, and I recently met elected representatives as the first step of a consultation exercise. The proposal is for signals that will operate during the morning peak traffic period on some of the approach roads to the roundabout. Their effect will be to give greater priority to A1 northbound traffic, thereby reducing tailbacks on the approach to the roundabout and making the alternative route through the village less attractive. To be effective, however, they must necessarily introduce a delay to traffic exiting the village onto the roundabout. The present consultation exercise is designed to determine the level of public support for the scheme, which will, undoubtedly, influence how we proceed.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the sense of it being important to link the cities of Lisburn and Belfast, will the Minister give an update on the rapid transit system, please?

Mr Kennedy: I was not quite expecting that to be linked to the A1 Hillsborough road, but as the Member will know, I am a strong advocate of a rapid transit system for Belfast. I have been encouraged by the responses from Lisburn and Castlereagh councils as well as Belfast City Council. I very much hope that we can continue to make progress on introducing a rapid transit scheme that will extend fully and include all areas of Belfast. I know that there would be general support for that. Much, of course, depends on whether there is finance for such a system.

Railways: North-west

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ceist uimhir a dó.

Mr Kennedy: What does that mean?

2. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the upgrading of the railway line to the north-west. (AQO 1300/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his helpful interpretation skills.

As a result of my statement to the Assembly on 10 October 2011, Translink has moved quickly to take forward phase 1 of the project to improve the railway track and associated infrastructure between Coleraine and Londonderry. That phase enables retention of the line and will eventually remove the temporary speed restrictions that exist currently.

The project board, which includes representation from my Department, meets monthly. The tendering process, which started with publication in the Official Journal of the European Union, is almost complete. Translink hopes to appoint a contractor in March, which should enable work on site to start as planned at the end of July 2012. The line will be closed from then until the completion of phase 1, which is planned for April 2013. As I outlined in my statement to the Assembly in October 2011, the second phase of the project will be completed in 2015, with phase 3 planned to finish by 2021.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David McClarty. I am sorry; Mr Durkan, you are entitled to your supplementary question.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his answer. As the north-west is central

to tourism, given the upcoming events during the next couple of years, does the Minister anticipate an increase in passenger numbers and, perhaps, additions or amendments to the existing timetable?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I always find that colleagues are the most difficult to persuade when you want to speak.

Translink is planning a new timetable, which will be implemented when all the new trains are in service. Obviously, that timetable has to be agreed with the Department in advance. Therefore, there will be a consultation period. Obviously, as part of that new timetable, Translink, taking account of the increased numbers anticipated because of those various events, will endeavour to deploy the new trains. Certainly, we hope to carry that forward.

Mr McClarty: The Minister will be aware that because the upgrading of the track will not be completed until 2013, there will be a lot more pressure on public transport in the area. As Mr Durkan rightly said, the area has a number of huge events coming up, none more so than the Irish Open. Is the Minister in contact with Translink about providing alternative means of public transport, bearing in mind the greater numbers who will use it?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question. I confirm that Translink is, obviously, aware of the situation, as, indeed, are my departmental officials. Every effort will be made to accommodate the travelling public as they seek to visit Londonderry or the north-west and general area for various events, such as the Irish Open, the UK City of Culture and, of course, the Fleadh Ceoil.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is it proposed that passing loops or sidings be included in the upgrade? At one time, it was rumoured that they would be installed at Ballykelly. Will they be installed there or anywhere else along the route?

Mr Kennedy: The essential maintenance work is to ensure that the line is ready for the UK City of Culture events in 2013. There are three different phases of that work. The second phase will deal more substantially with passing loops. The priority is to re-establish an effective service between Coleraine and Londonderry as quickly as possible, and we are on track to do that.

Mr Campbell: The Minister will be aware of the view among some in the north-west that the railway line is up for closure rather than expansion. Indeed, I have raised that with him before. In order to nail that campaign and the paranoia that sometimes exists, will the Minister commit to the long-term development and expansion of the line to include hourly services and, hopefully, a passing loop in the longer term?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member, who is a former Minister for Regional Development, for his supplementary question. I am strongly committed to the railway system and believe that rail provides an opportunity for moving the travelling public. As Minister, I have been very supportive of that line, and that is indicated in the decisions that I have taken and the efforts that I have made to ensure that it is not closed and that it continues to improve. With those improvements will come the expectation of greater use, which will further consolidate the position of rail in the north-west and in other places in Northern Ireland.

A5: Public Inquiry

3. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister for Regional Development when the findings of the public inquiry on proposals for the A5 will be published. (AQO 1301/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Department expects to receive the independent inspector's report in the next few weeks, after which full consideration will be given to its comments and recommendations. I anticipate that the independent inspector's report and the departmental statement will be published in spring 2012. I remind the Member that the public inquiry and the resulting independent inspector's report are independent processes. As such, neither my Department nor I, as Minister, have any control over the timing of the inspector's report.

I welcome today's announcement, which will enable me to spend half a billion pounds on roads infrastructure all over Northern Ireland. I know that it will be widely welcomed, not least by the construction industry, which has encountered significant problems.

The revised Budget that has been agreed will enable me to bring forward two significant elements of the A5 dual carriageway project, between Londonderry and Strabane and between Omagh and Ballygawley, together with the A8 Belfast to Larne project and the long-awaited scheme to dual the A2 Shore Road at Greenisland. Subject to the outcome of the public inquiries that were held last summer, I anticipate construction work commencing on the A8 this spring, with the A5 works starting in early autumn. I will initiate a procurement competition for the A2 Shore Road project, which could see work commencing in early 2013. This is a balanced programme of investment that will provide a significant boost to the local economy.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he acknowledge that the Omagh to Ballygawley road project will significantly link the west, and particularly Omagh, to the centres of business in the east of the Province and the main ports and airports? Does he also acknowledge that it will improve road safety on that carriageway?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I entirely endorse his assessment and analysis of that section of the A5 project between Omagh and Ballygawley. It will significantly open up business, travel and tourism opportunities to the west and the north-west and, importantly, between Omagh and Belfast and the east of the Province. It is a significant announcement that will give a measure of hope and support to those who work in construction in particular and to those who live in the area.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his strong commitment to the A5. In some ways the Minister has answered my question. However, provided that no major issues arise from the public inquiry report, will the Minister confirm that work on the A5 will start in September of this year?

2.15 pm

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I need to be suitably cautious — sometimes it is my middle name — and say that the inspector's report is important. Therefore, I will not pre-empt or predict it in any way. Once received, it will be carefully assessed, and then

we will carry the work forward. However, there is the very hopeful expectation that, because the schemes are shovel-ready, work will start later this year.

Mr Byrne: I also welcome the Minister's announcement and, like the MP for the area, welcome his support for the project. Does he agree that the dedicated roads project team has done excellent work and that everything is in place to move ahead?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I also want to pay a warm tribute to my departmental officials, who have lived with road project schemes all over Northern Ireland. It is their job to do so, but they have carried out that work in a very professional way. They have given me sound advice in identifying the appropriate priorities, and I very much hope that the entire announcement of £500 million for road infrastructure projects all over Northern Ireland will not only link east to west but upgrade busy road networks such as the A2 and A8, and, equally, important road networks on stretches of the A5.

Lord Morrow: Earlier, the Minister intimated that we would have the report of the public inquiry before Christmas. It is disappointing to discover that there is no definitive date.

Is the Minister prepared to issue a swift statement to clarify the position on the particular section of the A5 from Ballygawley to Aghnacloy, now that it has been decided that it will not go ahead? Landowners who feel that their land might be blighted will not be reassured until there is a clear and definitive statement from the Minister.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I stress that the inspector's report is entirely independent of me and my Department. That is why I am not able to provide an answer in the level of detail wished for by Lord Morrow. On the understanding that the report is truly independent, that is the position. I will not be drawn on other commitments today. I am concentrating on the very positive announcement that I will spend £500 million on road infrastructure projects all over Northern Ireland. I am particularly pleased that the Omagh section of the A5 will, effectively, link Omagh to Belfast and the east.

Footpaths

4. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the difference in the agreements between Roads Service and some councils on the gritting of footpaths, and the indemnity aspect of these agreements. (AQO 1302/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The agreements between Roads Service and local councils on the removal of ice and snow from town centre footways during severe winter weather were progressed as a result of talks initiated by me, my officials and representatives of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and carried forward by council officials and local Roads Service officials.

Those agreements have been specifically tailored to suit local circumstances, and they range from formal agreements, which set out in detail how the new arrangements are to be implemented, to more flexible arrangements set out in an exchange of letters between

Roads Service and individual councils. I hope that those agreements will encourage all local councils to consider how best to address the removal of ice and snow from town centre footways and to engage with Roads Service. However, all the agreements in place are based on the same fundamental principles, each containing the basic requirement of an agreed schedule of footways to be treated by the council, the amount of salt to be provided by Roads Service and salt delivery arrangements. Although the more formal agreements explain the issue of indemnity in more detail, it is likely that the same indemnity benefits will apply to those based on an exchange of letters. The Member will recall the advice from the Attorney General for Northern Ireland contained in the winter service information leaflet distributed to households.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister is well aware that RPA was supposed to deal with a lot of these issues. The people out there do not get caught up in who, what or when — they just want to see it done. Will the Minister, maybe at a later date, provide more detail on the agreements that councils have made, whether those are formal agreements or a nod and a wink? Will he outline today the reason for the non-agreement of some councils? We, as elected representatives, have a duty to question local councils if they are not getting involved in ensuring that our constituents get the best service when, and if, they need it.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary, although I am bound to say that my Department does not operate on the basis of a nod or a wink. The Member will accept that we need to have some structure in place. I am loath to name and shame, if that is what the Member is inviting me to do. I do not see it on that basis. I see welcome co-operation between local councils and local government and my Department and the other agencies. That is the basis on which I entered into discussions with NILGA and the representatives from local government; I think that that is most helpful and beneficial.

Mr Copeland: Does the Minister recognise the thinking of councils that have not yet become involved in this process? What steps is he taking, or planning to take, through his Department to ensure that those councils become as convinced as others?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to continue to spread the gospel of good news to councils and other agencies as we seek to provide adequate winter services. As has been stated, it is important from the point of view of the public, not only ratepayers but taxpayers, that this work is in place and can happen. People are not so interested in what or who makes it happen, but they need to know that it will happen and that the service will be available. I will continue to engage positively with everyone in local government.

Ms Ritchie: I recognise the Minister's willingness to enforce the principle of co-operation. Will he elaborate on his assessment of how well the scheme worked over the winter for councils that have signed the formal agreements? Will he tell us what other arrangements he has in place to work with councils that have not yet signed formal agreements? It is in the best interests of the wider public that we have clear footpaths during icy conditions.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. This winter was perhaps not the best to test the agreement. Nevertheless, I am very satisfied that arrangements were in place based on the same fundamental principles, namely an agreed schedule of the footways to be treated by the council, the amount of salt that Roads Service will supply and the salt delivery arrangements.

The Member will be aware that significant salt supplies were brought in. I am happy to say that we can preserve those and that they will not be wasted. The Member will also know that there were considerable numbers of grit piles placed and salt bins provided. Every effort was made to give confidence to people all over Northern Ireland, both urban and rural dwellers, that they had an opportunity to avail themselves of salt. We had, and still have, those agreements in place with local councils. I am not being overconfident in any way. I am still prepared, as you sometimes get icy blasts into early March. I am very keen that we have full control to respond to emergency conditions.

Ms Lo: I am very pleased about the progress that has been made so far on these agreements. However, as the Minister pointed out, they are specifically for town centres. Can the Minister tell us whether, when gritting, Roads Service would consider targeting certain areas where a lot of vulnerable people could fall and badly hurt themselves? Those include places near schools, sheltered housing and GPs' surgeries.

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. There are well-established criteria for the gritting schedule for roads that are fairly and evenly applied, and I am not, therefore, minded to alter or change that. We will obviously keep this under review, but I am satisfied that adequate service is provided, given the resources that we have. We have to remember that this is a resource issue as well. However, I am confident that, at the moment, Roads Service is able to cope with the demand placed on it.

Roads: A8 and A6

5. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Regional Development, in light of the announcement on the A5 scheme, to outline the position on the A8 and A6 schemes. (AQO 1303/11-15)

Mr Girvan: Minister, you might have already answered this question, but go ahead.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. He appears to have displayed certain prophetic qualities — I am glad that I did not say “pathetic”. [Laughter.]

Again, I am happy to welcome the earlier announcement about the finance that has been made available by the Finance Minister and agreed by the Executive, as it will allow me to bring forward a range of measures that will greatly benefit the construction industry and the wider economy in Northern Ireland.

Following a series of meetings with Executive colleagues and work by departmental officials, I have reviewed spending priorities across my Department, and I am pleased to say that we have brought forward a balanced programme of improvements to the strategic road network. I think that that will make a significant difference and will throw a lifeline to the construction industry in particular. It has the potential to

create at least 2,500 new jobs. It will improve opportunities, particularly for young people and the unemployed. It will also provide job security for many and create opportunities for consultants, suppliers, contractors, infrastructure specialists and many others. I very much welcome it, and I know that the whole House will want to join me in saying that this is, indeed, a red-letter day for regional development and for roads in Northern Ireland.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that this morning's announcement might have taken the steam out of this somewhat. However, I just want to expand on my question about the A8 and what has been proposed. Is the whole A8 scheme, as presented, included in this morning's announcement about the moneys? Will the A2 scheme be the complete scheme from Carrickfergus to the M5?

Mr Kennedy: For the benefit of brevity, I think that the answer to both questions is yes. However, I will not sit down at this stage. I will simply say that consideration is, of course, still being given to the public inquiry on the A8 and that that work will continue. I think that the A2 and A8 schemes, as well as the Port of Larne scheme and all that, will give a significant boost to road users.

These are long-awaited and long-campaigned-for schemes. I pay tribute to members of my party, and in particular to the Member for East Antrim, Roy Beggs, for his ongoing and never-ceasing representations on both the A2 and A8. That view is shared by political colleagues from all sides of the House. It is good news, and I think that it will be seen and welcomed as good news.

2.30 pm

Social Development

Social Housing: Private Rented Sector

1. **Mr P Maskey** asked the Minister for Social Development if he will require houses in the private rented sector to meet the decent homes standards before they can be used in the social sector. (AQO 1314/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The application of the decent homes standard is not a requirement for the private rented sector. The decent homes standard is not a statutory standard. The statutory fitness standard, which applies across all tenures, is set out in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, as amended by the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1992. The fitness standard is being reviewed, and I intend to use the forthcoming housing strategy, which I hope to launch in the spring, to discuss that issue and develop it more fully.

Mr P Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle agus a Aire. Thank you, Deputy Speaker and Minister. I hear what the Minister says. Accountability mechanisms must be put in place for private landlords. I am sure that every Member's constituency office is, from time to time, inundated with correspondence on those issues, as people try to get work carried out and make sure that the standard of work is up to that of the Housing Executive

and housing associations. The Minister and the Department should take forward any initiative they can —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please?

Mr P Maskey: — to give a bit of ease to those people who are lobbying Members to get work done.

Mr McCausland: In the housing strategy, we intend to look at the whole remit of housing issues. One of those issues will be the private rented sector. It is important that that sector is seen by people as a good option, as good as any other, and not in some way as second rate. Therefore, it is important that we have recognition of the rights and responsibilities of both landlords and tenants. That is very much our thinking, and it is already part of our thinking in preparing the strategy.

Mr Douglas: Has the Minister any plans to use vacant privately owned homes to ease the social housing waiting list?

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive is acting in a number of ways to recover vacant properties and bring them back into use. In order to drive the empty homes strategy, I agreed to the establishment of a working group, which was established in November 2011. Two pilot areas were selected: Fortwilliam Parade in north Belfast and the Newtownards Road in east Belfast. The aim of the pilot is to support homeowners in bringing properties back into use and to evaluate the use of existing legislation and powers such as vesting, loans and grants to assist the process. That work is ongoing and the Housing Executive is due to report on the effectiveness of its interventions early in April.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister undertake to ensure that houses in the social sector meet the decent homes standard before they are used for accommodation?

Mr McCausland: Housing Executive social housing is already of a very high standard. We seek to improve the standard as much as possible. Over the years, there has not been the investment in the sector that there should have been. Therefore, one of our priorities was to address the issue of double glazing and another was to look at increasing and improving the insulation of properties. In our work, we are putting an increased focus on improving the standard of houses in the Housing Executive stock, which is, obviously, a very large element of the housing stock in Northern Ireland.

Mr Agnew: Given that, in the winter of 2011, there were more winter deaths per capita than there were in Finland and that the energy efficiency of our homes is seen as an important factor in that, will the Minister work with the Finance Minister to ensure a high-level energy-efficiency requirement for all newbuilds across the social and private sectors?

Mr McCausland: There is a balance to be struck. Obviously, there is an increased initial cost in having much higher standards of insulation and energy efficiency. I have visited a number of new housing developments where there are very high levels of energy efficiency, and people there are able to point to reductions of up to 40% in heating costs associated with a property. That needs to be set against available budgets, because the more costly a property is per unit, the fewer you can either purchase or build. All those different factors need to be taken into account. Houses may be available to be brought into social use in a particular

place where the level of energy efficiency is not as high, and you have to consider whether you will miss the opportunity. Therefore, there is not a single answer to this; it depends on the circumstances. However, the principle regarding the importance of energy efficiency, which the Member referred to, is very much in our minds. It is a more complex issue than one that you can give a single, simple answer to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 8 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Welfare Reform: People with Disabilities

2. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the impact of the welfare reform proposals on people with disabilities. (AQO 1315/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Welfare Reform Bill is progressing through Westminster, and, at this stage, it is not possible to accurately assess the impact of the wide range of proposals on people with disabilities. My priority is to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable people in society are protected and that the reform proposals take into account the specific circumstances of Northern Ireland. An Executive subcommittee has been set up to consider all the proposals and to help develop an Executive response that will mitigate any negative aspects and achieve long-term benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

I remain conscious that a higher proportion of our population is in receipt of disability living allowance (DLA) and that we have a different profile, particularly in relation to mental health. The assessment criteria already reflect the views of people with disabilities and the groups that represent them, and we are consulting on the descriptors and entitlement thresholds and will carefully consider all responses received. There is a need for others to be careful that figures that they are quoting on the number of people who may face a reduction in their benefits are informed and do not cause undue stress to vulnerable people. There is a danger of being alarmist.

My officials and I are in regular and ongoing communication with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), particularly on the capacity for flexibilities in the proposals to reflect the particular needs and circumstances of the people of Northern Ireland. Furthermore, to assess the impacts across the section 75 groupings, my Department issued an equality impact assessment for consultation, and we are considering the responses received. I intend to publish a response to that consultation, together with a revised and updated equality impact assessment, soon.

Finally, the introduction of universal credit will increase benefit expenditure in Northern Ireland as a result of entitlement changes and increased benefit take-up. My officials are carrying out a detailed —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your two minutes are up.

Mr McCausland: — analysis to confirm the financial impacts for customers, and robust information will be available in the late spring or early summer.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his very extensive and informative answer. In light of the research that he is doing and the information, such as it is, that is to hand, is it possible to set up some sort of contingency plan so that

any negative impact of welfare reform on people with distinct needs, particularly learning disabilities, could be limited?

Mr McCausland: If you are going to have a plan to deal with various contingencies, you need to know what those contingencies are. Therefore, we are undertaking work on what the impact will be. Up to now, the focus has been on engagement with Westminster, including directly with the Ministers in DWP; we have talked to David Freud and Maria Miller on a number of occasions.

We have also engaged with the Secretary of State to use his influence in a number of areas, and our officials are in contact with officials at Westminster almost daily. Now that the legislation is almost through Westminster, and we know the product from GB, we will be able to assess the impact better. Once we know that, we can start the work that is suggested there. However, parity issues must always be kept in mind, and financial parity places limitations on what can be done. However, it is open to us operationally to make it a bit different, and we will do everything that we can in that regard.

Mr Campbell: Will the Minister confirm that the statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions appear to indicate that up to about 20% of claimants could be adversely impacted by the new personal independence payment? Will he join with me in hoping that everyone who can bring any influence to bear at Westminster, particularly if they are elected to Westminster, goes there and tries to assist those who are hard-pressed and require assistance from those of us who are elected to act on their behalf rather than complaining about it and staying away?

Mr McCausland: I endorse what the Member says. We are a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so it is important that Northern Ireland is fully represented at Westminster and that people are there to state and to argue the case. The Member is absolutely right in that regard.

The figures published by DWP are an estimate of the projected personal independence payment caseload in 2015-16. That does not necessarily mean that there will be a corresponding reduction in Northern Ireland. The profile of DLA customers in Northern Ireland is different from that in Great Britain. Customers tend to be younger here, and a higher proportion has mental health conditions. The new assessment criteria will look at mental, intellectual and cognitive functions as well as physical functions, and further work is being undertaken to see if a similar analysis can provide reliable and robust figures on the impact in Northern Ireland. If so, those will be made available at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I encourage Members to focus on the questions and discourage them from shouting across the Floor.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister acknowledged the outworkings of the Bill when it comes here and has given the matter some consideration. Given the Committee for Social Development's discussions with his Department over the past months, we already more or less know what the legislation will be when it arrives here shortly. Given the consensus across all the parties that there will be a considerable negative impact on people, particularly those with physical and mental disabilities, will the Minister outline

any mitigating aspects that may come from the Department and the Executive subcommittee?

Mr McCausland: The Executive subcommittee has so far met on two occasions, and two further meetings are planned for the near future. That is an important part of the process of overseeing and addressing the implementation of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. As the Chair of the Committee will know, we have also engaged with stakeholders at events, and we received representations from a wide range of people. It is no good for people to come to us and say that there are problems; we want to hear answers. We want to hear ideas on what can be done because those people know the circumstances of the sector that they represent or work in. If there are issues, please bring them to our attention and suggest what could be done. We are solution-focused. It is too early to bring forward a list of possible mitigating measures, but as the Member will know, there is an ongoing conversation with Westminster, and over the next number of weeks, we will identify, through the subcommittee, what can be done. That is on the agenda for the subcommittee's next two meetings.

Town Centre Regeneration

4. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the delivery of town centre regeneration projects. (AQO 1317/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department continues to pursue a very active programme of town centre regeneration across Northern Ireland. The programme of producing town centre master plans is well advanced, with 18 completed to date and another five due to complete during this year. In each town for which a master plan has been completed, an implementation group is established to ensure that the priority projects are pushed forward.

2.45 pm

A substantial programme of public realm improvement schemes and revitalisation projects is planned for the period of the comprehensive spending review. My Department is working on 50 schemes in towns across Northern Ireland that we hope to implement between now and March 2015, subject to funding availability and all the necessary approvals. My Department is working to promote regeneration schemes on 12 derelict or underused sites in towns across Northern Ireland. Although the work is not helped by the current condition of the property market, we are looking at what might be done to accelerate the schemes.

In April 2011 the urban development grant scheme became fully available to towns outside Belfast and Londonderry. There has been a high level of interest in the scheme and, to date, over 90 applications or expressions of interest have been received. I anticipate a supplementary question that has some connection with either Lagan Valley or Lisburn.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Leave that to Mr Givan.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for his response and commend him and his Department for the work that they are doing to take forward town centre regeneration, which is critical if we are to get our economy moving again. As regards my constituency, the Minister will be aware that

Lisburn is taking forward a master plan. Can he provide us with an update on that and tell us whether there are any other plans for Lagan Valley over the next three years?

Mr McCausland: My faith was rewarded.

I have approved funding in the region of £3 million for a major public realm scheme in Market Square and Bow Street in Lisburn, and public consultation on its design will start in March; that is, next month. I expect work to begin on the ground in early November and be substantially completed by Easter next year. In addition to the work that is being done in Lisburn, elsewhere in the constituency my Department plans to implement a revitalisation project in Dromore, County Down.

We intend to issue a development brief for a site at Smithfield Square in Lisburn in March this year. The brief will seek proposals for a retail-led, mixed-use development with associated parking. Over the next three years, our plan is to work in partnership with Lisburn City Council to progress a major development scheme covering an area referred to as the Laganbank Quarter. It is a long-term project that could result in a major new office and residential development on the banks of the Lagan.

Mr Byrne: I welcome what the Minister has said about trying to regenerate many of our provincial towns. In particular, does he hope to visit Strabane soon, where he might help to send out a positive signal on the redevelopment of the town? Will he update us on the current status of the footbridge that we are still awaiting being built in Strabane?

Mr McCausland: On the first question on Strabane, I am happy to visit any part of Northern Ireland that I am invited to, so I await an invitation to meet the Member, other Members and other representatives in Strabane.

On the specific issue of the bridge to which he refers, I have not seen anything about that for some time. I understand that there were some difficulties with taking that project forward. They were not departmental difficulties but difficulties for other project stakeholders. If the Member wishes to have more detailed information, I am happy to supply it. I think that the council has an important role to play, and there may be some issues there.

Mr Dickson: Minister, the work in Carrickfergus has just commenced, but what is your Department doing to support retail trade consequent on the development work that you are doing on pavements and the public realm? It is vital for all our communities that, following on from the public realm work, we create a revitalised town centre.

Mr McCausland: The whole purpose of the public realm work is to do that very thing. We have clear evidence from schemes that have already been completed that, when you complete the public realm work, you first encourage local traders to invest in their premises, so it becomes more of a collaborative approach among the public sector, the local authority and the traders.

When you get that revitalised and improved town centre with the new public realm work and the design work completed, the general result is an increase in footfall. As I said, the evidence is there. The example is often quoted of the very substantial increase in footfall in Newcastle. The message that it works is coming across from schemes elsewhere in

the Province, and we are investing so heavily in it to support our centres.

Housing: Single Occupant Applications

5. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister for Social Development how the issue of single occupant applications for housing is being addressed, particularly in light of the upcoming housing benefit changes. (AQO 1318/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I believe that the Housing Executive and, to a lesser degree perhaps, my Department have overlooked the single occupant group for a number of years. I expect single accommodation dwellings to be provided for in next year's social housing development programme. I will not consider the draft programme until it addresses that issue in a significant and appropriate way that deals with the needs of single and older people.

The size and style of our newbuild programme needs to change to ensure that smaller, more suitable accommodation is available, particularly for single applicants, such as older people, who may be looking to downsize and who, in doing so, could free up larger homes for families.

Plans are being drawn up to bring forward a comprehensive housing strategy that will help me to ensure that the available money targets those most in need. That includes the provision of social and affordable homes to meet the needs of the differing categories. However, although building more new social homes is important, it is not the only answer. We must look for alternatives to suit the wide range of housing needs that people have.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he content that his plans will meet the housing needs for that sector?

Mr McCausland: The wide range of housing need in Northern Ireland can never be met by building more new social homes alone. We need a range of solutions that includes more new homes but that will also seek to do more with the homes that we already have. We need, therefore, a much wider and more holistic approach to tackling this issue. Therefore, the forthcoming housing strategy, which I mentioned, is particularly important. That is why I am preparing it and why I will seek, through that strategy, to do the very thing that we are talking about.

However, it is often overlooked that the biggest role that the social housing sector plays in meeting housing need is not as much through newbuild allocation as through the reallocation of existing units. There is a very high level of underoccupancy in Northern Ireland. For example, this year, we expect to reallocate approximately 8,000 social homes to people who are in housing need. When that is combined with our newbuild, it will go a long way to providing low-cost, quality housing to those who need it most.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers up to now. Recently, I spoke to a number of housing associations, and they told me that, to date, they have not been advised about the direction they should be going to fill the gap in lets for single occupants. Will the Minister tell us whether the introduction of the single-room allowance has the potential to leave 25,000 people homeless over this mandate?

Mr McCausland: The first issue that the Member raised is a reflection of the fact that, during the previous mandate, there was no focus on accommodation for singles. It is important, therefore, that we recognise that, in the matter of months that I have been in the Department, we have started to address the issue, which has been around for a very long time but was simply ignored. For example, we have looked at good practice, not only in Northern Ireland but elsewhere, as to how it might be done in different areas. Therefore, we are keen to look at best practice elsewhere, including within the United Kingdom, to see what can be done to address the needs of singles, who, as I said, make up over half our waiting list.

The housing strategy is coming forward in the spring. Actually, it is the first time that we have had such a strategy in a very long time. In fact, I am not aware of a previous strategy. That is a disappointment, because, no matter what area of work you want to do in government, if you do not have a strategy, you are never going to get anywhere. You need to have a strategic view. That is why this comprehensive and holistic piece of work is so important. How will the proposed changes to housing benefit impact on single householders who are renting privately?

How will it impact on people in the social sector? We are still working through the figures to find out the precise impact. For all these things, there are various figures being quoted. We are still trying to get to the bottom of them to find out the exact situation. It will impact on a substantial number of people, but it is premature to put exact figures on these things.

Mr Copeland: I too thank the Minister for his answers thus far. He may recall that when the matter was brought to this House as a prayer of annulment, he confirmed that not approving the statutory rule would breach parity. He further confirmed that he would examine whatever steps he could take to mitigate the effects of the changes to housing benefit for single people, such as the age of qualification for the single-room rate being extended from 25 years to 35 years. Will the Minister give some indication as to how far along the path of investigation of the steps he could take to mitigate the effects of the changes he has got?

Mr McCausland: I am sure the Member is aware that it is only a matter of weeks since that discussion took place. The issue is extremely complex, as the Member will be aware. All I can say at this stage is that it is still a work in progress. We do not have a resolution to it yet.

These are things that effectively are being directed towards us from Westminster. We are doing our best to mitigate the circumstances, but we are still working on the exact measures. That work is being taken forward with the involvement of the Department and the Housing Executive.

Benefit Tribunals

6. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development what support his Department provides to people representing claimants at benefit tribunals, given that the number of appellants has significantly increased and a more detailed preparation of each case is required. (AQO 1319/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not directly provide support to people representing benefit customers at benefit tribunals. Benefit customers may be accompanied by anyone, including family or friends, to a tribunal, but many choose to be supported by a representative from the voluntary advice sector.

My Department supports the voluntary advice sector by providing funding of approximately £1.9 million a year to front line voluntary advice services through the community support programme, some of which supports people at benefit tribunals. The programme is delivered through our 26 local councils, which contribute additional resources for front line advice services.

The people who work in front line voluntary advice services are trained, supported and provided with up-to-date information to assist in providing a high standard of advice services to all their customers. In the 2011, Advice NI and Citizens Advice staff provided representation at over 3,500 benefit tribunals. Law Centre NI provides a legal consultancy support role in relation to tribunal representation.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the inevitability of the changes that are coming in welfare reform, it is inevitable that there will be an increase in appeals. Will the Minister highlight what provision is being made to prepare the way for that?

Mr McCausland: The Department, through the Social Security Agency, is working very closely with the Department for Work and Pensions at Westminster and Courts and Tribunals Service colleagues to assess the potential impact of welfare reform changes on appeal numbers, including any resource implications. As the legislation is coming to an end of its passage at Westminster, we are at the point where we are able to get a better sense of its impact. When we have made that assessment, we will be able to make some appropriate provision.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. As a result of increased tribunals due to the Atos assessment and people being refused employment support allowance, does he have any plans to monitor the outcomes of those assessments as time goes on?

Mr McCausland: I had an opportunity to visit one of the assessment offices in Londonderry recently and spoke to folk there who are carrying out the assessments. I was very impressed by their professionalism and the way in which they went about their work. They have brought in considerable experience, having carried out work of this nature elsewhere.

The training provided to doctors and nurses working in the service indicates that there might be a greater degree of consistency in their recommendations or in the information that they gather.

I sense an implied criticism in the Member's question —

Mr F McCann: Did they know that you were coming?

Mr McCausland: They had a cup of tea waiting for me, so I suppose that they did. Having said that, I can honestly say that I was very impressed by their professionalism, and I think that it would be wrong of Members to imply that there

is something deficient in the service that they provide. It will be carefully monitored. I am sure that we all have different experiences, but I can honestly say that I am impressed by what I have seen so far.

3.00 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

HCL BPO Services: Job Losses

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Conor Murphy has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action her Department will take to offset the impact of the HCL BPO job losses, announced on 13 February, on the community in Armagh.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): As Enterprise Minister, I am acutely aware of the impact of yesterday's announcement on the local Armagh economy. I am keen that we move swiftly to provide the necessary help and support to employees at HCL to minimise the impact on the individuals affected.

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

I recently met members of HCL's senior management team, and I am somewhat reassured by HCL's commitment to try to redeploy 40% of those affected, which will help to mitigate the impact of yesterday's announcement. In addition, I am aware that my officials in Invest Northern Ireland have already proactively engaged with existing and prospective investors to encourage them to consider the Armagh site, its associated infrastructure and skilled workforce as an excellent investment opportunity in the short term.

I can confirm that, to address the most immediate needs of employees, my officials in Invest Northern Ireland have already engaged with colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and will leverage the support of all local partners to provide whatever support is necessary to limit the impact of any redundancies. That will include running redundancy clinics and offering training options and advisory support for any potential new business starts. In addition, Invest NI is working with Armagh City and District Council, through the South East Economic Development (SEED) group, to develop and deliver a range of initiatives aimed at stimulating further business development in the region.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for attending today to answer my emergency question. I am sure that she shares my huge disappointment at HCL's announcement of job losses, which came on the back of announcements from Unicorn Plastics and Noel Zwecker International Transport of almost 100 job losses. It is, indeed, a bad time for Armagh city and district area.

I am reassured by what the Minister said about alternative customers examining that site. Will she give us every assurance that Invest NI, which falls under her Department, will work very proactively, and encourage HCL to work proactively, with any prospective tenants that may come to that site? As the Minister said, the skills base and infrastructure are there, and it would be a very hopeful signal for the people of that area if there were some

potential of prospective clients coming to that site and redeploying the workforce in some new area.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. It gives me another opportunity to reflect that the announcement is a terrible blow to the people who currently work for HCL in Armagh, particularly when combined with the other two recent announcements that he, rightly, referenced. It is incumbent on me, elected representatives — I have the pleasure of meeting quite a few of them today to discuss the issue — and the local council to try to find solutions for those people in the very near future.

Invest NI is working proactively with existing and potential interests and investors to try to encourage them to look at the Armagh site, which has a good infrastructure and a skilled workforce.

We should highlight the fact that the job losses in no way reflect on the skills of that workforce. HCL was at pains to point out to me that its entire workforce in Northern Ireland has provided it with a very good base, and it is because of the excellence of the workforce that HCL has decided to keep a meaningful presence here. We will work proactively with HCL to try to find new avenues to help to grow that business again.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I thank the Minister for her previous answer. This is a deeply disappointing and demoralising turn of events, particularly for the people and the city of Armagh. Did the Minister or Invest Northern Ireland have any notice of the Armagh city plant being run down? If HCL gave notice, what sort of notice was received? Did the Department consider any measures that might have helped HCL to continue work at its plant in Armagh?

Mrs Foster: We have been working proactively with HCL. Last year, an issue arose between members of staff and HCL, and we have been engaged on that matter as well as the current issue. As I said in my substantive answer, I had the opportunity to meet some members of the company's senior management towards the end of last week. They told me about their plans for Northern Ireland and ensured that I received the message that our workforce in Northern Ireland is excellent.

It is important to point out that HCL has long-term plans for Northern Ireland, and we must acknowledge the fact that the decision was taken because of commercial pressures. However, HCL sees a long-term future in Northern Ireland because of its engagement with my Department, Invest Northern Ireland and the Government. It has brought millions of pounds into the economy through wages, in Armagh and in Belfast, and has also helped us to engage with other Indian firms that have then decided to invest in Northern Ireland. I look forward to growing not only a future relationship with HCL but its business in Northern Ireland.

I assure the Member that we looked at every option to try to keep the Armagh site open for HCL. We have to accept its decision about the Armagh site and minimise the pain for those employees. We must also look at attracting new investment to Armagh to try to offset HCL's exit. We will be doing that over the coming weeks.

Mr Irwin: This is a big blow to my constituency, especially to Armagh city and the surrounding areas. Yesterday's

announcement of the loss of 350 jobs comes on top of the announcement from the Noel Zwecker transport company one week ago of the loss of around 100 jobs. Those jobs will be difficult to replace, and my thoughts are with the people who have lost their jobs —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member come to his question, please?

Mr Irwin: Will the Minister confirm what steps, if any, have been taken towards working with HCL to help with the sale of the Armagh site?

Mrs Foster: HCL will work with us to facilitate existing and new investors who would like to look around the Armagh site. I welcome HCL's undertaking to work with us on that. Our challenge is to find new investment for Armagh city.

The Member referred to 350 jobs, but that figure is across HCL in Belfast and Armagh. I understand that the job losses in Armagh number 170, which is a huge figure for a provincial town such as Armagh. I do not minimise that in any way, and our job is to minimise the impact for employees and their families, which is not a small task. We must also try to find new investment for the city.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful for the opportunity to be called as a constituency Member. I am also grateful to the Minister for her earlier answers and for the opportunity to meet her earlier this afternoon to discuss this very difficult situation. Given that it has been such a difficult period for Armagh, how quickly does the Minister envisage advice clinics being put in place to deal with the staff who have been affected by the announcements? I encourage her and Invest NI to continue their discussions with HCL.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that encouragement. I will continue discussions with HCL and with important potential new investors. We are working very hard to let them know of the advantages — the infrastructure and the readily available skills base — of investing in Armagh city.

As I understand it, the DEL clinics are going down to HCL and will be based on the premises. On the other redundancies that have been announced this week, I understand that DEL is in close contact with the companies affected and will be able to provide them with advice and assistance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask that Members take their ease for a few moments.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Second Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA 4/11-15] be agreed.

Accelerated passage of the Bill through the Assembly is needed to achieve 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 resources in the Bill in 2011-12 and ensure the continuation of public services into 2012-13.

Today's debate follows on from yesterday's. It has been custom and practice to have a debate in this House on the Supply resolution followed by a debate on the Budget Bill. Without wanting to appear to correct what the Speaker said yesterday, it may be useful to remind the House that the Supply resolution debate and the Budget Bill debate are about the same financial years; namely, 2011-12 and part of 2012-13.

The Supply resolution debate gives the House the opportunity to debate and vote on the detail of the Estimates, while today's Budget Bill debate is about the form and content of the enabling legislation that gives legal authority to the spring Supplementary Estimates. This is not an opportunity to discuss future Budgets, nor is it an opportunity to discuss anything that may be funded in future. However, I suspect that if we stick to that, a significant number of Members' speeches will need to be torn up. That might not be a bad thing, mind you. *[Laughter.]* However, I will leave it to your discretion, Mr Deputy Speaker, as to how much latitude you allow Members to take from the current financial year and the Vote on Account for the first few months of 2012-13.

I notice that a significant number of Members are laughing nervously. I suspect that they have speeches that should go to the shredder but will not, and we will hear them anyway.

Mr Hamilton: They came from the recycling.

Mr Wilson: The Member for Strangford says that they came from the recycling. They are probably recycled from last year's Budget debate.

As the House will be aware, preparation of the detailed Estimates and the related Budget Bill under consideration today is a difficult undertaking, given the timetable involved. The Bill and the Estimates must reflect the latest financial monitoring position announced in the Assembly on 17 January, yet the Bill requires Royal Assent prior to the end of the financial year.

3.15 pm

It is no easy task 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 turn now to the purpose of the legislation that is before us 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 2011-12 and the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account for 2012-13. The purpose of the Bill is to give legislative effect to the 2011-12 spring Supplementary Estimates and to the 2012-13 Vote on Account, which were laid before the Assembly on 6 February. Copies of the Budget Bill and the explanatory and financial memorandum were available to Members today.

I do not intend to take up the valuable debating time, which I am looking forward to immensely, with unnecessary repetition of the detail I gave to Members yesterday. However, in accordance with the nature of the Second Stage debate envisaged under Standing Order 32, and for the benefit of Members, I will summarise briefly the main features of the Bill.

The purpose of the Bill is to authorise the issue of £15,244,040,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund in 2011-12. That is an additional £447,632,000 since the Main Estimates were presented last year. That 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 also authorises the use of resources totalling £16,220,944,000 by Departments and certain other bodies. That is some £228,044,000 more than was approved in the Main Estimates last June. Those amounts are detailed in part 2 of each spring Supplementary Estimate for 2011-12. In addition, the Bill revises for 2011-12 the limit on the amount of accruing resources that may be directed by my Department to be used for the purposes in column one of schedule 2. That limit includes operating and non-operating accruing resources — in other words, current and capital receipts — and amounts to £2,221,321,000.

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 Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) minute, which will be laid before the Assembly in March, following the Royal Assent of the Bill. Therefore, the Bill not only authorises the use of resources but it authorises accruing resources, bringing resources for use by Departments and other public bodies to over £8.4 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 to the Bill. I hope that is clear to everyone.

The amounts now requested for 2011-12 supersede the Vote on Account in the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which was passed this time last year, and the Main Estimate provision in Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which was passed in the Assembly on June 2011.

The Bill also authorises a Vote on Account for 2012-13 of cash of £6,687,469,000 and resources of £7,451,346,000

to allow the flow of cash and resources to continue to provide public services in the early months of 2012-13 until the Main Estimates and the related Budget Bill are approved in June this year. Again, the cash and the resources are to be appropriated and used for the services and purposes set out in column 1 of schedules 3 and 4 respectively.

Finally, clause 5 authorises the temporary borrowing by the Department of Finance and Personnel at a ceiling of £3,493,734,000 for 2012-13. That is approximately half the sum authorised in clause 4(1) for issue out of the Consolidated Fund for 2012-13 and is a normal safeguard for any temporary deficiency arising in the fund. I must stress that clause 5 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power. It enables 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. However, I will be happy to deal with any points of principle or details that Members wish to raise.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. The Budget Bill provides statutory authority for expenditure as set out in the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) 2011-12. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows Departments to incur expenditure and use resources in the early part of 2012-13 until the Main Estimates are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

Standing Order 42(2) states that accelerated passage may be granted for a Budget Bill provided that the Committee for Finance and Personnel is satisfied that it has been appropriately consulted on the public expenditure proposals in the Bill. At its meetings on 1 February and 8 February, departmental officials briefed the Committee and took questions on the Budget Bill being debated today. Those evidence sessions represented the culmination of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of public expenditure issues throughout 2011-12 of DFP as a Department and at a strategic and cross-departmental level. Following those evidence sessions, the Committee was content to grant accelerated passage to the Bill. Therefore, the Deputy Chairperson wrote to the Speaker on my behalf informing him of the Committee's decision.

During yesterday's debate on the SSEs, I said that DFP officials had expressed surprise at the level of reduced requirements declared during the first year of the Executive's four-year Budget for a variety of reasons. The Committee heard that that was a major factor in the Minister's decision to undertake a review of the Budget allocations for the final two years of the 2011-15 Budget. The officials advised that they will be giving detailed consideration to the reasons for any reduced requirements declared and bids for additional resources made within the year, together with the provisional out-turn data. Following that, the Minister will set out his initial conclusions on the implications for the 2013-14 and 2014-15 allocations to his Executive colleagues in the summer.

The Committee welcomes this proactive approach. The Minister and his officials have confirmed that my Committee will be kept informed about the progress of the review, and that is also very welcome. However, the Committee

feels that it is important that there is also consultation with the wider Assembly and between Departments and their Committees on the issue. Therefore, I have written to the Minister and his Executive colleagues to request that they agree a course of action that will include appropriate consultation with the Assembly and Committees on the review. That is important, given that accelerated passage will be sought for the associated Budget Bills, which will implement any reallocations in 2013-14 and 2014-15. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I wish to inform the House of the Committee's position on the 2011-12 spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account element of the Budget Bill 2012-13.

The educational development of our children and young people is one of the most significant investments that we can make in our society. Education provides the basis for the personal development of intellect skills, competencies, personal attributes and values and it equips our young people for the future. It is vital, therefore, that any financial arrangements put in place in no way deter or detract from that purpose and goal.

The Committee for Education has some concerns in relation to the time afforded to the Committee for the detailed scrutiny of the Supplementary Estimates, as they were laid only one week prior to the debate. I understand that the spring Supplementary Estimates reflect a consolidation of the previous year's outcomes and feel that it would be beneficial for Committees to take stock at this point before looking ahead to the forthcoming financial year. I hope that that particular issue will be addressed, as the Chair of the Finance Committee has made reference to, through the review of the financial process.

All Members in the House come to this particular time of the year, as has been outlined by the Minister, with some degree of concern, confusion or delight. We take it as an opportunity to go from Dan to Beersheba as far as the issues are relevant to our particular Committee or constituency.

Mr A Maginness: Is that in your constituency?

Mr Storey: Yes, in my constituency.

However, it is important that we have an understanding of the process; a clear understanding. I am glad that we have the Minister of Finance, whose credentials in this area are beyond question.

Mr Humphrey: But not geography.

Mr Storey: Not very good on the pronunciation of certain place names in Northern Ireland — however.

That is why we need to ensure that we, as Members of the House, through the Finance Committee and our individual Committees that have a responsibility, place on our Committees on a regular basis the issue of finance, the issue of scrutiny and the issue of asking questions.

In October 2011, the Committee had just been briefed by the Department and was informed of a £21.7 million bid. The Committee was particularly concerned at the lack of communication that the Department had with the Committee and individual schools; for example, principals and boards of

governors were written to in November 2011 advising them of the need to calculate their budgets and submit them to the Department on the basis of a three-year plan. A great deal of time and effort was involved. I declare an interest, as a member of the board of governors of two schools, Ballymoney High School and Ballymoney Model Integrated Primary School. The stark reality that faced those schools was that they had to prepare on the basis of the letter from the Department in November, which gained its genesis from the Budget process — the Budget agreed in this House. Undoubtedly, that process caused major concern to many schools across Northern Ireland. I will come back to that point in a moment.

Another issue was that it then transpired that an extra £40 million had been made available to the Department of Education in mid-November and a further £120 million in January. However, it was not until the beginning of February that schools were informed of the impact that that additional funding would have on their individual budgets. That, understandably, yet again created uncertainty, lack of clarity and concern.

I accept that there is an issue in relation to the review of the financial process, but this is a clear example of how it works in practice in one Department. I can speak only on behalf of the Department that my Committee has a responsibility to scrutinise, to question and to query. The point that I am trying to make, and the relationship that this has to what we are debating on the Budget, is this. We believe that schools are all-important and there for the right reasons — to educate our young people — and that they should, therefore, be given all the relevant information at the right time. Does anyone in this House really believe that the process being put in place is useful or yielding the right results?

I leave that question for Members to consider.

3.30 pm

The Committee welcomed the additional funding announced by the Finance Minister. I commend him because it was as a result of his intervention in the end-year finance (EYF) crisis, at that famous meeting, which I think was in Armagh, that that issue was addressed. I commend the First Minister and the Finance Minister for their work in relation to the crisis that developed as a result of the November letter, which led to huge concerns about financial planning.

In the January monitoring round, the Finance Minister raised serious concerns about that process of forecasting. He said:

"I am obviously disappointed that DE has surrendered such a large amount of resource, and I have asked my officials to liaise with their colleagues in that Department on improving their forecasting next year." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 70, p44, col 1].

It is a concern that we still do not really know what the long-term, sustainable future of that element of our financial processes will be. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to have in place a properly structured and understood process that ensures that delivery of those issues is for the best for schools.

I will now make general comments as a Member. I want to raise a concern about financial planning that needs to be underscored in the House. I said that I would return to

the letter that was issued on 25 November, which clearly showed a reduction of -5%, -6% and -11%. That was the reality in November. As a result of that letter going out, I constructed a correspondence that subsequently went to the First Minister setting out that particular financial planning, given in the Budget and set out in all the information given by the Department of Education, and the implications that that budget would have for our schools.

Let me give you one example, namely fixed costs with regard to buildings and maintenance, which had already been reduced to a minimum in previous years. I remind Members that utility bills have risen by 39% and gas by almost 20%. There have also been significant increases in, for example, examination fees. The biggest difficulty that schools faced was in average teacher costs. Even through the pay freeze, salary costs continue to rise, there is a natural drift of about 2%. Therefore, a 4-5% reduction in budget would require a significantly larger cut in teaching staff, probably in the region of 10% to 15%. Those are some of the issues that impact, and the reality for us, if you take the announcement yesterday by CCMS, is that they will have a detrimental impact on the ability to deliver good-quality education in our schools.

I will conclude with one other example. In the Budget process, the Department of Education made it abundantly clear that it will be removing, in 2013, the money for the entitlement framework. The Department told us that that process was about enhancing and widening the experience and availability of courses for young people. In principle, we can generally agree with that, albeit the Department has decided to phase in that process. Where it was once 24 to 27 subjects, it is now 18 to 21. In light of that budgetary decision to remove by 2013 the allocation for the entitlement framework, the challenge for all schools is to find the resource and make the money available out of the reduced budgets that they have been given. That is another pressure, concern and cost for which they must provide. Therefore, I appreciate the concern that exists.

Given the Finance Minister's previous role as the Chairperson of the Committee for Education and his insight in that area, I appreciate all that he has done and the expertise and knowledge that he has brought to discussions on the issue. However, I make this plea to Members: we cannot continue on the current trajectory with the education budget and expect to have the same outcome. Number pressures exist. Let us be clear about the redundancy package that the Minister has announced. It is not about letting the most expensive staff members go so that cheaper versions can be substituted for them. No, it means job losses. I have written to the Minister. He has confirmed in the House that the process is not about letting some staff go in order to reallocate posts and allow more staff to come in. It is about letting an element of schools' most valuable resource go. I will repeat what I have already said in the House: a Patten-style redundancy process in education will end in the same way as it did in the police service. Thousands of years of experience disappeared. Remember what happened in the police process. Some years later, the service had to recruit staff, particularly for certain elements of police investigation.

I say to the House that if it values children — we all say that we do — let us look seriously at how the Budget will impact on children's future education provision.

Mr Cree: I am pleased to speak to the Budget Bill. At this point in the year, changes have been made to Departments' budgets. The legislation that gave authority to spend cash and use resources is out of date. Indeed, the Minister referred to that. In fact, there are only some weeks left in the current financial year. Revised legislation in the Budget Bill needs to be put in place before the end of the financial year. Yesterday, we approved the spring Supplementary Estimates and the Vote on Account. The Budget Bill logically follows that and completes the first year of the Budget, which was approved for the period from 2011 to 2015.

The Ulster Unionist Party could not support the package that made up the Budget 2011-15 for many reasons. I want to remind the House of those reasons. My party was unhappy with the decision to commit over 50% of DRD's budget on a road from Donegal to Dublin when many other works were required and were long overdue. The Budget also anticipated raising some £80 million over four years from housing associations' reserves. It had the potential to push many towards insolvency. My party opposed the conflict resolution centre at the Maze. It was originally intended to be a major project. However, most of the other initiatives have been scrapped. Savings that relate to arm's-length bodies were intended to realise £10 million. What has been achieved? My party believes that the number of those bodies should be reduced drastically.

More recently, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced an inquiry into institutional abuse in Northern Ireland. We were told that it could take up to two years before the legislation for that could be contemplated but that that would not delay the investigation or the work of the inquiry. Where is the budget for that important work?

It was decided to cap student tuition fees at a rate that was consistent with inflation. That has led to a shortfall of £41.5 million in the Department for Employment and Learning. That has had, and will continue to have, a negative effect on areas such as apprenticeships and, potentially, the provision of education maintenance allowance, which needs to be resolved.

Invest Northern Ireland has been returning moneys that it cannot use because of the lack of investment by our businesses. The Minister advised us yesterday that those funds have been reallocated to other areas that helped to create or safeguard jobs in areas such as roads, etc. However, the problem remains that Invest Northern Ireland needs to find other ways of stimulating business in the short term. That agency must be seen to be innovative and to take the lead role in regenerating our economy.

Later in the debate, my colleagues will highlight other concerns about the various departmental budgets. We do not intend to be negative, but it is important that we are all aware of the issues in the Budget and about what it will mean for what remains of this year. In June, we will consider the Budget for 2012-13. As the Minister said, that will be another story. Thank you.

Mr A Maginness (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I concur with the remarks that the Chair of the Committee for Finance and Personnel made about the surprising level of reduced requirements across a number of Departments. Certainly, officials from the Department of Finance and Personnel

indicated their surprise at that level. It is interesting, and it raises a number of issues that I am sure the Department will explore in the review. As the Chair of the Committee for Finance and Personnel indicated, it will also have implications for future years. I hope that there will be an Assembly consultation on that involving Committees and the wider Assembly. I also hope that that will bear fruit in future allocations.

That leads me to the surrender by Invest Northern Ireland of almost £40 million, which I believe is an important issue for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. It raises a number of questions. I am a great supporter of Invest Northern Ireland, and I want to see it doing the job that it has set out to do and that it has been tasked to do by the Assembly, the Department and the people of Northern Ireland. That task is to create jobs here and to attract investment, in particular foreign direct investment, to Northern Ireland. The freedom and the flexibility that is given to Invest Northern Ireland emanates from Professor Richard Barnett's report of two years ago, which I believe gave Invest Northern Ireland a very good basis for going forward. Of course, an important element of the report was an attempt to breach the productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the UK. That gap has existed for many years, and the means of filling it has been given to Invest Northern Ireland. One of the most important aspects of the Barnett report was that it tasked Invest Northern Ireland with attracting high-value, higher-paid jobs to Northern Ireland to fill the productivity gap.

3.45 pm

Therefore, it was with a great sense of disappointment that the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment received the news that roughly £17 million was being surrendered in the October monitoring round, followed by £21 million in the January monitoring round. That came as a surprise and a severe disappointment to the Committee. We did not beat up Invest Northern Ireland or say that it was not doing its job properly. We sought to find out why it was happening.

Invest Northern Ireland's reply was basically that, in the middle of very difficult economic and financial circumstances, many firms wanted to invest here, bring jobs here or develop further in partnership with the organisation but could not match-fund what Invest Northern Ireland was prepared to give them. That raises a number of questions about those firms and the financial institutions on which they depend to get money to make investments. There is a question, not just for government, the Department and Invest Northern Ireland but for the financial institutions, particularly the banks.

Mr Humphrey: I have heard the Member make those points in the House previously and in the media. Many of us accept that the banks have managed to get us into the mess across the globe, and I appreciate the point that he makes. However, does he appreciate that, in business, and in the private sector in particular, companies' financial positions can change very quickly? Commitments can be made by companies to invest here and to match-fund the money that will be given to them by the Northern Ireland Executive, and decisions that are taken in boardrooms in distant parts of the globe can affect the investment that comes here.

Nevertheless, that does not mean — for I am sure that the Member will continue to make the point — that we should

not continue to fight for those jobs to come here and give the people of Northern Ireland, including the graduates coming out of our universities, meaningful, well-paid, high-powered employment.

Mr A Maginness: In essence, the Member is concurring with me. The task that Invest Northern Ireland has, which is to bring those higher-value jobs to Northern Ireland, will continue, and the organisation will dedicate its actions to trying to achieve that. However, it is disappointing that we have had that surrender of funds and that Invest Northern Ireland has not succeeded in attracting that investment.

I listened carefully to the Minister of Finance and Personnel yesterday, and he said that although Invest Northern Ireland surrendered them, those funds were put to good use. He said that they were given, for example, to DRD for road building, and so forth, which in itself helps to create jobs. I accept that argument. It is a fair one, but it does not fulfil the aim of the Barnett report. Central to that report, and which Richard Barnett stated very carefully, was the need to fill the productivity gap. We have to get back to that.

I understand the Minister's need to defend the position and to show that moneys are not being wasted and are being recycled — although he might not like that term — to create further opportunities for employment, and I welcome that. However, I have to make the point that it does not hit the target that Barnett laid down.

Invest Northern Ireland is our primary investment and job creation agency. I emphasise that it is pivotal to the attraction of foreign direct investment and the creation of high-value jobs in line with Barnett. The short-term employment measures that have been introduced, such as the £19 million to attract 5,000 jobs, are necessary. However, they are also indicative of our plight, unfortunately, because you are not talking about high-value jobs. You are talking about jobs to fill a gap in the employment market but not the same gap that we are talking about in relation to Barnett. Although those jobs are obviously welcome, they are reflective of the weakness of our economy rather than its growing strength.

I worry about the fact that our economy is still very sluggish and that we are effectively still in recession and do not seem to be moving out of it. I worry further about the fact that we have a continuing crisis in Britain and that Britain does not seem to be moving out of recession. There is a danger of slipping back into a further recession and a danger that the financial crisis in the euro zone, for example, could deepen and, again, affect Britain.

Mr Storey: I am listening to what the Member is saying. It begs the question: does the Member believe that the structures that we have put us in a better position to deal with the global downturn, especially if we have concerns about the plans that have been made in other Parliaments? Through measures that we have taken, we have been able to offset some of the challenges and difficulties. If we had no devolution and were under direct rule, our ability to do something different would be absolutely minimal. Devolution is one of the reasons why we have been able to do things that have been beneficial and not counterproductive to the economic situation in Northern Ireland.

Mr A Maginness: I am not quite sure that I entirely agree with you, because the position is marginal. The problem

goes back to the question of fiscal flexibility in Northern Ireland, which the Minister was quite dismissive of. We effectively have to accept the Westminster funding. We have no option. Westminster determines it, and we have to accept it. We are suffering and will suffer further in coming years under the CSR reductions of £4 billion, which is a very substantial amount. What I am saying is: is there that much difference between Westminster ruling us directly in respect of finance, budgeting, and so forth —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we are debating the Budget Bill rather than straying into wider economic or European discussions. There has been a tendency to go beyond the legislation in front of us. I ask you to come back to that legislation.

Mr A Maginness: I was simply answering the Member's question, which relates very directly to budgets. My point is that it is very difficult to see the distinction between a Budget that comes directly from Westminster and a Budget that comes from the Assembly but is virtually dictated by Westminster. I get the Member's point. I believe that there is some marginal difference.

Mr Deputy Speaker, you may rule me out of order for making my next point. Indeed, the Minister wants you to rule me out of order. He rejected the point that my good friend Margaret Ritchie made yesterday, which was this: give us more flexibility in respect of fiscal policy and give us the instruments to deal with the situation here. I think that that is a reasonable proposition, but the Minister rejected it and asked which taxes we would raise to do it. The fact is that we are looking for tax-varying powers rather than a straightforward tax rise. The point is this: if we were able to use taxes in a much more creative way here in Northern Ireland, we could do much better, because we could control our own destiny, as it were. I will move on, because I know that the Deputy Speaker is becoming a little bit impatient with me, and I do not want to incur his wrath.

There are other pressures that the Minister has not taken into consideration properly, one of which is welfare cuts. The Minister said yesterday that he felt that welfare reform may, in fact, increase the amount of money that people in Northern Ireland receive. I find that very hard to believe. I think that people here will be disadvantaged disproportionately, which will place another pressure on our people and on our economy. If we get less money in welfare benefits, the local economy will be affected. The corner shop, the supermarket and the local garage will be affected. Everybody will be affected; individuals, families and children.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate that he and his party are very concerned about the Welfare Reform Bill, as we all are, and are obviously voting in a certain way in the national Parliament. However, is it really in order for the Member to stand up to make such pronouncements, given that the Bill has not emerged in its final form from the process in the House of Commons? Is it not better to wait instead of raising people's fears and concerns?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that this is not a debate about welfare reform. This is a debate about the Budget Bill, and I ask Members to keep on that subject, please.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Deputy Speaker, the Member raises a point in relation to welfare reform —

Mr Deputy Speaker: And the Deputy Speaker has given a direction that I hope Members will follow.

Mr A Maginness: I accept your ruling, Mr Deputy Speaker. The fact that only 10% of our people are on welfare benefits in respect of households will obviously have an implication. All that I am saying is that there are additional pressures, and I think that we have to take them into consideration.

Further to that, I am disappointed about the way in which the Executive have dealt with the green new deal, which I think is pertinent to the debate; it is kosher. I do not think that the Executive are properly exploiting the great opportunity that it offers. I mean “exploiting” in the proper sense of the word; taking advantage of the green new deal for the benefit of the whole community in respect of job creation and in respect of something that is dear to the Finance Minister’s heart — trying to deal with climate change. I knew that he would react to that. It is very important for us to reduce carbon emissions.

It is very important that we increase the energy efficiency of our homes, and that creates employment, jobs and economic activity. I do not think that the Executive have given that a fair enough wind to develop a proper, well-financed green new deal. This is money well spent, and it will create jobs in the short term. I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel will take that into consideration when reviewing allocations in the near future. I hope that it will be top of his agenda and that he will consider the green new deal a top priority for government expenditure.

4.00 pm

I also want to talk about the social housing programme. The Programme for Government states that 8,000 houses should be built over the next number of years, but I think that there should be an expansion of that programme. An expansion of 500 or 1,000 houses a year could stimulate the construction industry, which is on its knees. As an Executive and Assembly, we have the direct means to increase investment in social housing. If we were to do that, we could directly address the continuing difficulties in the construction industry. That is important, so I say to the Minister of Finance, the Executive and the Minister for Social Development that that should be reviewed.

My final point on the current year’s Budget is that our not having a Programme for Government until later in the year meant that we put the cart before the horse. We have not had a Programme for Government from which to work and establish targets, outcomes and inputs. As a result, there is a disconnect across Departments and a lack of continuity right across government. It is a patchwork of unaligned spending proposals that are not related to a Programme for Government. I emphasise the need for a Programme for Government properly to co-ordinate Executive spending.

Regrettably, there is no evidence of economic recovery in Northern Ireland at present. The pressures on the Executive and the Minister of Finance and Personnel are considerable, and they will get worse unless there is progress on the recovery of our economy. I am happy to conclude on that point.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill. Following the exchanges that we witnessed in the Chamber yesterday on the resolutions for the SSEs and the Vote on Account, the Bill is not without merit, despite the technical nature in which it conveys information.

As the Minister and other Members have said and will say, the Bill makes allowances for the use of the resources voted on yesterday. It authorises the Department of Finance and Personnel to borrow in accordance with clause 4; ensures access to sums from the Consolidated Fund for Northern Ireland; and sets out the guidelines by which they can be appropriated and used over the next financial year. I voted for the pre-requisite resolutions yesterday, so it would be contradictory of me to speak against the Bill. However, my one criticism, following another constructive debate yesterday on the Executive’s review of the financial process, is that we have had such a short time to analyse, understand and scrutinise the Budget Bill in its legislative format. Having voted on the First Stage of the Bill yesterday evening and received the document in its paper format shortly afterwards, Members were given less than 18 hours to assess the Bill and prepare for today’s debate. I am sure that the House will agree that, regardless of the content, adequate preparation or opportunity for scrutiny of the Bill would be difficult in that timescale, and that underlies why the implementation of the recommendations from the review of the financial process here is essential.

I turn my focus to the implications of the Budget Bill. It is important to note that Northern Ireland represents a unique commodity to Westminster, particularly in relation to how finances are allocated. I am sure that Members will know that those do not always adequately reflect the divergence in need associated with an economy that is striving for rebalance in the aftermath of a violent past and ongoing division. At the risk of sounding ungrateful and while making every effort not to bite the hand that feeds us and facing up to the financial conditions with which we must grapple, the onus is on us as Members to seek to mitigate the impact of any disparity and, equally, to rise to the challenge of negating the impact of cuts to our Budget by seeking new and innovative ways of maximising efficiency, encouraging local enterprise and promoting revenue-generating initiatives.

Northern Ireland boasts an unhealthy over-reliance on the public sector, and continued reductions to public spending are causing considerable problems and distress to many, including those who work in the public sector, those who depend on the spending power of workers who are paid by the public sector, those who depend on public services and those in the private sector who depend on public sector contracts, although we had some good news on that front this morning, with a number of construction projects getting the go ahead.

On top of our over-reliance on the public sector, the greatest distortions on our Budget relate to the costs of managing a divided society, and the Minister will not be surprised to hear from me that I still feel that that is an unjustifiable burden of which the Executive and the Assembly must take heed. Indeed, yesterday, the Finance Minister gave an assurance that tackling the cost of division makes economic and societal sense. However, I am not convinced that other Ministers agree. In response to questions that my party and I submitted recently, asking each Department what it is doing to promote a shared future, some simply

said that they had to meet a statutory commitment on the promotion of good relations and were doing little else. That is not good enough. There is a major call from our public for more shared services and facilities. They know that having separate services wastes money that could be spent on schools, hospitals and so on.

The other issue that I have raised before is that significant savings could be found from altering how funds are apportioned. Specific consideration should be given to early intervention and preventative measures. For example, it costs the state approximately £100,000 to keep a child in care, yet family support programmes such as Home-Start and Sure Start cost less than £2,000 an intervention. Investment in interventions to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training could save an average of £81,000 over the lifetime of a young person. Another example is social care. Age NI has claimed that some health trusts can afford to pay only for the critical cases and that the people who are less serious will have to be hospitalised down the line because we cannot provide social care to them now to keep them in their own homes. That does not make long-term financial sense. We need to change the balance of resources going into programmes that seek to prevent problems from emerging or to intervene early, thus avoiding the need for greater resource spending after problems fully develop.

Although I offer my support to the Bill, owing to common sense and good governance, I have to question how much longer we can continue with a haphazard approach to financial scrutiny and, furthermore, a blissful ignorance and reluctance from some to act on the cost of division to our society.

Mr Moutray: I speak as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment and as one who regards the economy as the single most important issue facing us at present. I pay tribute to the Finance Minister. We have had some excellent Finance Ministers since May 2007, and, given these austere times, the present Minister has perhaps had the greatest challenge, and he has shown that he is more than up to the task. In fairness, the Executive as a whole have displayed maturity and common sense in their approach to our finances and to the deployment of the block grant.

It is only right and proper that the economy remain at the heart of the Programme for Government. We have set some very challenging objectives and targets in our determination to do what we can to emerge from a prolonged period of recession. If we get it right on the economy and ensure efficiency in our public spending, we will be much better equipped to deal with many of the problems facing our society in, for example, key areas such as health and education.

The best foundation for Northern Ireland as it prepares to enter its second century is to reduce its dependence on the public sector and to grow the private sector wherever and however we can. According to the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, the recession is now over but we are in what was described last autumn as a depression. Recovery is painfully slow and very fragile, and it would not take much to knock us back. As part of the United Kingdom, we are called to play our part in national recovery, and, as part of the United Kingdom, we are being forced to make financial sacrifices that are not easy, especially for those who are struggling on lower incomes or are struggling

even more because they have lost their job. Unemployment levels among our young people are of particular concern, and the number of unemployed people is at its highest for 15 years. However, despite the obvious difficulties, I am glad that we are part of the UK economy and not tied in with our struggling Southern neighbours or any of the other precarious eurozone economies.

We have limited economic and fiscal leverage, and we must therefore seize every opportunity. In that regard, perhaps the Finance Minister might update us on progress in relation —

Ms Ritchie: I am sure that, as a follow-on from yesterday's debate, on foot of him saying that we have limited fiscal powers and on foot of what Mr Maginness said earlier, the Member will agree with me that there is a case for the Finance Minister to directly approach the Treasury, if he has not already done so, to ensure that our budget prospects are enhanced by having tax-varying powers.

Mr Moutray: I believe that the Minister will use every lever possible to help the situation and the case for Northern Ireland. We are in a much stronger position than the people in the Republic.

Northern Ireland is known for its business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit. We need to nurture, encourage and develop that spirit to suit the needs and demands of the market in 2012, and I commend the work of Minister Foster and her officials and of Invest Northern Ireland, which is making every effort to attract high-value inward investment from across the world. However, to secure that investment, it is absolutely vital that we develop a suitably trained and skilled workforce and do whatever we can to create jobs for it. It is a tough challenge, but I am confident that it is one that the Executive are up to.

I welcome initiatives such as that announced last December by my colleagues Arlene Foster and Edwin Poots on the connected health theme. That has the potential to create a significant number of jobs in health software and support services and is an example of what we can do and what must be done. As well as attracting inward investment, we must encourage our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are the backbone of our economy, to plan ahead, to invest in research and development — the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been working hard on that — and to raise their game in relation to exports.

Many sectors of our economy have suffered from short-term thinking. That is very much a product of the years of violence, terrorism and direct rule, and we must do all we can to encourage a culture change right across the board. Our tourism industry has so much potential that, unfortunately, remained untapped for many years. I am, however, delighted at the current Minister's commitment to tourism, especially this year, in which we will commemorate the centenary of the Titanic, which will be marked by the opening of the flagship Titanic centre. There will also be a new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway, the signing of the Ulster Covenant celebrations and the Irish Open golf tournament at Royal Portrush. Let us make sure that the vast potential of all that is realised with record visitor numbers and a tourist industry that is ready and equipped to meet the challenge.

Before I close, I, like others, want to take the opportunity to raise one or two matters of relevance to my Upper Bann constituency. I previously mentioned the good work of Invest Northern Ireland, and I know from my own experience that local councils are very keen to work with Invest Northern Ireland. However, at times, there can be frustration at what is seen as delays in obtaining letters of offer. I appeal to Invest Northern Ireland to liaise closely with all elected representatives at Assembly and council level. In that way we can make sure that small local businesses are given every opportunity to develop and grow.

4.15 pm

As a representative of the Lurgan and Portadown areas, I am keen to see retail and business regeneration of the town centres. Retail guru Mary Portas has just published her review; her vision is to breathe economic and community life back into our high streets. That is what we need, and I feel that it is another area for joint action between DSD and DETI, in partnership with local councils. I welcome the lead taken by Minister McCausland in that regard, and I trust that both DETI and DSD will work together to achieve delivery and revitalise our town centres.

Councils like my own in Craigavon have been working on innovative ideas such as meanwhile space to bring new businesses to town centres and to reduce vacancy and dereliction. We must build on such opportunity as quickly as we can before there are any more high street closures. Craigavon has the largest Invest Northern Ireland land bank in Northern Ireland, and I believe that there is potential for that to be unlocked and used to develop the area and provide job opportunities.

Finally, I want to mention Lough Neagh, the largest inland lake in the British Isles, as more could be done to unlock its tourist potential. I would be very keen to see a strategy for the development of the lough, and perhaps the Minister and the Tourist Board might consider elevating any plan to signature status to maximise the leisure and recreational potential of that gem. With that, I draw my remarks to a close.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to today's Budget Bill. With my agriculture hat on — perhaps that should be my wellies — as Ulster Unionist Party agriculture spokesperson I would like to comment on the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) budgetary performance over the last year and its position in the coming months.

I want to raise a few issues in particular, and although I realise that the Finance Minister will probably not be able to cast too much light on them, nevertheless it would be useful for him to hear of difficulties occurring across some of his Departments. To begin with, last November in the House all parties contributed to an Agriculture Committee motion on the long-running issue of continual disallowance fines being returned to Europe, running at that time at over £80 million and no doubt increased since then. The Department's response was that it was all right because it was not its money to spend anyway. Frankly, that attitude was ridiculous, and I am sure that the Finance Minister will agree that, although it might not have all been DARD's money to hand back, it would have been spent on something. In other words, something has to give.

Recently at Committee, despite £9.8 million being budgeted for expenditure in 2011-12 on the LPIS mapping system, we heard that only a small number — in the early hundreds, in fact — of farm maps had been distributed to date. That is totally unsatisfactory and, as was pointed out, gives us no confidence that expensive infraction fines are not set to continue for many years to come. It would be interesting to note how, and if, DARD has spent the £9.8 million set aside in this year's Budget, because it has achieved so little as a result, and whether it can guarantee that the £9 million that it has estimated for next year will be spent more wisely and productively. It begs the question: if this year's budget has not been spent, will further adjustments be made for that? The Minister said that she hopes, by next year, to have a fit-for-purpose mapping system that is 100% ready to go. We have certainly seen little evidence so far that that will be the case.

Another issue that I recently raised in the House is the worrying and sharp rise in detection of TB reactor herds, with an alarming 182 incidences last November. That is as much as a 10% increase over last year, making the November figures the highest monthly detection rate for six years. That is an incredibly worrying and costly trend indeed, and one that was not and could not have been accounted for. With that increase in detection comes a proportionate increase in compensation, which, the Ulster Unionist Party has had confirmed, will run-up to, and perhaps beyond, £23 million per year. Although compensation is being reduced in percentage terms, it still forms a considerable proportion of DARD's budget, and the recent increases raise the question as to whether DARD has the ability to pay out compensation continually while having no commitment in the draft Programme for Government to eradicate TB.

The industry is looking for the Minister to take action to stem this expensive tide so that funds can be better directed to ensure the future of the agrifood industry as a key element of our local economy. DARD needs to make sure that local farmers are not being put at a competitive disadvantage when compared with other UK regions, and I have pressed it to consider a capital grants scheme that would not only prepare the industry for the future but would attract young farmers to take up a career in farming.

To date, DARD has failed to instil any confidence that it is up to meeting its many challenges and is persisting with the costly operation of relocating its headquarters at considerable taxpayer expense while failing to deliver on its challenges and Programme for Government commitments. Many in the industry are questioning whether DARD has explored other less costly options so that we can better direct the available funds to prioritise delivering services that are focused on the future growth of the industry.

It would be preferable for the agrifood industry for a DARD budget to be brought forward to the House that is finally free from expensive infraction payments and costly compensation and that is totally focused on helping those in the industry to expand, to create jobs — for example, in the processing and construction industries — and, as the Minister previously stated, to lead the economy in recovery. At present, that leadership is sadly lacking.

The Executive and, in particular, the Agriculture Committee are facing a number of challenges. People and the agrifood industry as a whole are looking to the Minister to come up

with effective solutions. Those solutions should be in the best interests of the sector and should secure the long-term viability of the considerable financial contribution that the industry makes every day to the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The SDLP has played a full and active part in all the Budget debates, the Committee scrutiny processes and in the Executive subcommittee meetings. The party has even published two papers: 'New Priorities in Difficult Times' and 'Partnership and Economic Recovery'. Those papers contain our constructive ideas, which we offered to have included in the Budget process. So I am happy to continue with my party's positive engagement here today.

We were minded to be oppositional on the Budget Bill, but because the Executive restated their commitment to the A5 and have been more imaginative in their spending, I think that we can afford to be more generous than that. As I said, I am happy to engage positively today.

We all know that the Executive have very few economic levers with which to transform the local economy and set it on a path that will stimulate growth and generate jobs. We are seeking to increase those levers and add a more competitive rate of corporation tax to our economic toolkit. That has taken some time, and it looks as though it will take some more time. However, in the meantime, the Executive's main economic lever is public expenditure, and we need to use that lever to our greatest advantage, even given the deep cuts with which we are dealing. Now more than ever we need to ensure that we are maximising every benefit from public expenditure. As we saw in the spring Supplementary Estimates, large amounts of money were handed back in monitoring rounds during this financial year. So in future we need to ensure that departmental spending is effective and efficient and that money is going where it will have the greatest impact on driving growth in the economy and in creating jobs. From that point of view, I welcome the Minister's review, and I hope that it will move things in the right direction.

I also welcome the Minister's earlier statement — well, it is St Valentine's Day — confirming the investments in roads and hospitals, which is very positive news. Since it is St Valentine's Day, I might as well congratulate my colleague Mr Byrne on his tireless advocacy for the A5. I also invite the Minister to confirm that the Executive are committed to completing the Strabane to Omagh leg of that project at the earliest possible opportunity.

I agree with my colleagues Margaret Ritchie and Alban Maginness that we should not be satisfied merely with the fiscal powers that we have. We should be expanding devolution at every possible opportunity to ensure that it is delivering to the greatest extent possible for the good of the greatest number of people here. The Minister of Finance and Personnel could be taking the lead in that respect by interrogating every opportunity for bringing greater fiscal freedom to Northern Ireland. It is not enough to simply be a local manager for the Treasury; we can do more and we can do better. That is the point of devolution. As Margaret Ritchie said yesterday, greater devolution could include the devolution of tax-raising and tax-varying powers, such as landfill tax, motor tax, air passenger duty and corporation tax.

You will probably remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, that much was made of the new sources of revenue that the ministerial Budget subgroup was tasked with identifying. I remember Cairtriona Ruane — I see she is here — reassuring the education sector that there was no need to worry and that there was £1.6 billion in revenue that had been identified and could be realised. The Minister of Finance and Personnel was a little bit more modest than Ms Ruane. He told us that around £842 million had been included in the draft Budget and later in the Budget. He said that the remainder would be allocated over the budgetary period.

The Minister also told us that of that £842 million, £500 million was coming from asset sales. I have not heard of £500 million in assets being sold. Perhaps the Minister has. If so, perhaps he could tell us about those sales. However, if those sales have not been made and the assets have not been realised, perhaps the Minister will say what effect that will have on the Budget. Yesterday, I pointed out that the assets management unit has realised only £1.3 million of the projected £10 million in the first budgetary period. I asked what chance there is of the £100 million being realised over the four years of the Budget. The Minister did reply, but I was not convinced by his answer.

The Budget review group was also tasked with coming forward with further revenue, and I wonder if it has. Mention was made at the time of extra revenue — around £125 million — being raised through the reserves of the Harbour Commissioners and more, indeed, from the reserves of housing associations. However, as yet, I have not heard anything about those moneys being forthcoming. My understanding is that legislation is required to access the Harbour Commissioners' reserves, but I see little sign of any movement on that front. Perhaps the Minister can update us on that.

The Minister also told us at the beginning of this budgetary period that the Executive had agreed to reclassify £250 million of current expenditure as capital spending over the Budget period, with capital spending reaching £1.5 billion by 2014. Does the Minister still believe that that is achievable? What progress has been made to date? What are the plans for the future capital spend?

We have, as Mr Storey pointed out, a huge backlog in schools maintenance and schools awaiting newbuilds. Can we expect some of the £250 million to be used to address those problems?

4.30 pm

This Budget Bill does not anticipate the welfare cuts that are coming down the line. Professionals in the field have described those cuts as a recipe for deprivation, a "tsunami" of cuts, and the most devastating attack on the working class since the 1930s, as they will affect housing benefit, women and children and sick and disabled people, and will cause winter fuel problems, to name but some of the areas affected. The cuts will take an estimated £450 million out of the Northern Ireland economy, and before the Minister responds on that, I should say that that is the figure that his colleague the Minister for Social Development has come forward with.

The social protection fund is now empty, after only one year and before the effects of these cuts have really begun to bite. The Minister says that he welcomes welfare reform

— I call it welfare cuts. He says that it gets people back into work. However, one would have to ask, especially after hearing the news from my constituency yesterday, where are the jobs? If the Minister is so relaxed about welfare reform, perhaps he could answer some of these questions. Can he guarantee that the people of Northern Ireland will not suffer due to the introduction of the consumer price index as a replacement for the retail price index as the measure to calculate benefits? Is he willing to guarantee that no families in Northern Ireland will suffer as a result of the upcoming changes to working tax credits and that no children in Northern Ireland will suffer as a result of the upcoming changes to child tax benefits? Is he able to guarantee that no one will end up homeless in Northern Ireland as a result of single people under 35 —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that this debate is about the Budget Bill, which is a specific bit of legislation. I have allowed some tolerance, but the debate is about the legislation that is in front of us today.

Mr D Bradley: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was making the point that the Budget Bill does not anticipate the cuts that are coming as a result of welfare reform, so I am trying to link the two. However, I take your point.

My last question from that respect is: can the Minister guarantee that the Northern Ireland economy will not suffer as a result of the introduction of the universal tax credit, which will cause a reduction in relative income provided to Northern Ireland from London?

Mr Byrne: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that the budgetary proposals largely represent a bookkeeping exercise in public finances, as they do not indicate any growth targets or economic development targets for the economy over the next year or two? Lastly, does the Member agree that this region is the most dependent of the entire UK? It is now dependent on public subsidy to the tune of 29.4%.

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree with him, and, no doubt, when he speaks, he will have a chance to elaborate on those points.

As my colleague said, the Budget appears to be very much like an application of the cuts that have been handed down by the coalition Government, with little or no mitigation in the measures provided. I mentioned the additional income streams that were talked about at the beginning of this period, and I am disappointed that they have not been realised.

This Budget is characterised by the need for a real focus on job creation and by the need for DSD and the Executive to deal with the threats to people who are among the poorest in our society, which as I said, are threats that welfare cuts pose. It is also characterised by the slow pace of progress on corporation tax and an unwillingness to explore all the possibilities of devolution. I am also disappointed with the lack of output from the Executive's Budget review group.

I think that the Executive are behaving as though they have no real ideas of their own, unlike their Scottish counterpart. It is true to say that it appears as though the Minister is merely administering Northern Ireland on behalf of the Treasury.

As I said, the SDLP wishes to be as positive as possible about the Budget, but will not simply nod it through. Where

we see shortcomings, we feel that it is our duty, in principle, to outline them. However, we are not blind to some of the positive effects.

Mr McCarthy: I want to concentrate on spending issues in health and social care services. The Alliance Party understands the funding challenges facing the health service and the pressures on social care. Changing demographics, new treatments, more expensive drugs and improvements in technology all contribute to rising costs in our health sector. The Alliance Party is committed to maximising the resources directed to the health sector from within the Northern Ireland Budget. However, given the current financial situation, we have to be realistic.

In parallel, attempts must be made to achieve genuine efficiencies and to make the necessary reforms to address the healthcare needs of the future. We support the health and social care review and its implementation. Of course, it must not only be about managing resources but ensuring better outcomes.

We talk about using our existing resources better, smarter and wiser. We need to look at changing the profile of spending on health and social services in Northern Ireland, which often means benchmarking and comparing ourselves with other countries and regions. There is a commitment in the draft Programme for Government to increase the proportionate spend on public health. The Alliance Party believes that we need a similar commitment to mental health, which has, unfortunately, been the Cinderella of our health service for years.

A number of changes can be made to achieve sensible efficiencies. Many examples of different approaches to delivery could lead to savings in the health sector. Those include reducing the reliance on accident and emergency services, as too many people use A&E as an alternative to visiting their GP, using an out-of-hours doctor or visiting a minor injuries unit because of their lack of awareness; placing a stronger emphasis on prevention, early intervention and the use of the community sector, including the excellent service that our community pharmacies continue to provide; focusing on improving public health through better diet, exercise, reducing smoking, and so on, to ease demand and cost pressures; facilitating the better use of technology, for example, by supporting people in their own homes, monitoring and managing prescriptions, and remote care; seeking a greater emphasis on better home and community services, including a good meals-on-wheels service throughout the country; and the development of an inclusive service on a North/South basis.

The Compton review picked up many of those examples, and if people are to have confidence in its implementation, a number of them must be followed through. There must be better co-operation, because improving public health involves a large number of Departments, such as the Department of Education and the Department for Social Development. It also involves the Department for Regional Development's continuing to invest in public and rural community transport to ensure that everyone has equal access to acute facilities.

The Alliance Party welcomes the increased emphasis on the community sector. The community and voluntary sector can play a vital role. Indeed, it has already played a significant

role, for which we are extremely grateful. I pay tribute to the many volunteers who contribute to making our society a much better place. However, there has to be a clear and serious reinvestment in community-based services. Home-Start, early years provision and the family fund for disabled children, for example, have come under pressure in recent times. I mentioned community meals, which have also come under pressure, yet good nutritional meals every day will keep people out of hospital. Our community pharmacies have also come under pressure, and the reform document emphasises that. Community pharmacies must be properly funded sooner rather than later.

Emphasis must also be placed on the provision of social care. The rapidly increasing and welcome demographic of older people in our society must demand our attention and investment now if we are to be adequately prepared for the future. Social care should be regarded as a preventative tool by providing people with, for example, a little bit of help to allow them to stay in their own homes, thereby saving money further down the line.

For older people, investment in preventative social care is cost-effective and can increase their quality of life. Tackling issues such as social isolation and exclusion and promoting active lifestyles can deliver significant savings by reducing hospital admissions and facilitating early discharge from hospital or institutional care.

I endorse Age NI in saying that, with effective treatment and equal access to services, appropriate levels of funding and prevention strategies, older people can continue to experience good health and a long and enjoyable life. However, that is being undermined by tightening eligibility criteria for domiciliary care, restricting access to care and support and withdrawing low-level services, such as home helps and meals on wheels, which are under pressure at the moment. There have been significant reductions in those services, and in my opinion that should be halted when the need is clearly there.

The recent evaluation in England of the partnerships for older people's projects demonstrated that those projects lead to cost reductions in secondary, primary and social care. For every £1 spent, for example, hospitals save £1.20 in emergency beds, and there is a 47% reduction in overnight hospital stays.

Overall, low-level practical support initiatives, from simple housing adaptations for safety and security purposes to running older people's active lifestyle programmes, can have dramatic outcomes for older people and are very important to them.

In conclusion, social care must also be underpinned by rights, entitlements, fairness, dignity, choice and independence for older people. If those issues can be addressed — I hope that they will be — I will be happy to support the Bill.

Mr Copeland: As the Ulster Unionist Party spokesman for social development and as a member of the Committee that oversees that Department, I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in the debate.

The past 12 months have been difficult for Northern Ireland, and the economic downturn is beginning to have an even deeper effect. It is having a devastating effect on the most

vulnerable families and individuals, who in the past could and would have turned to the state for shelter and guidance but who now find greatly reduced resources for tackling their problems because coffers elsewhere are, essentially, empty.

The Department for Social Development has an axiomatic role to play in protecting our society against the difficulties faced by vulnerable and unfortunate people. The Department is growing more and more important as its responsibilities increase, adding further strains on already stretched resources. It is because of that, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is absolutely vital that the Assembly get the Department's budgeting right.

4.45 pm

Historically, my party has stated its concerns that previous Budgets have not been totally satisfactory or adequate in meeting the needs of the vulnerable. On occasions, we opposed those Budgets because we did not feel that they made adequate provision for those whom the Executive have a duty to protect. The past 12 months have, in some ways, been a testament to that.

The Finance Minister stated that the housing associations could contribute up to £20 million a year in revenue. That does not seem to have happened, which raises a number of questions. Where does it place the Department's recent budgetary position? Can the Minister update the House on the actual revenue generated from the housing association sector?

If we examine the implications of the Budget Bill on welfare reform, we will see that we are discussing the current budgetary position. It will, therefore, not be possible to ignore welfare reform. Without doubt, that will become the major issue in coming months. It will pose several problems and many complexities, such as whether the Bill as drafted has the capacity to tackle the extent and complexity of poverty, including the alarming rise in in-work poverty.

The Executive have still not agreed a strategy on childcare, and there is an essential lack of data on the impact that the changes, particularly those around the marginal reduction in rates and the participation tax rates, will have on older people. Currently, there are neither jobs nor employment opportunities available to address the objectives of the welfare reform proposals, and those, we hope, will be taken into account.

Affordable housing is probably the single biggest issue that many of us deal with in our constituency offices. The number of applicants on the waiting lists and those in housing stress has fallen very little from its historically high levels, but there continues to be a very substantial demand for social housing. In the Programme for Government, the Executive stipulated the need for a build rate of 2,000 affordable homes. Again, that does not seem, at this stage, to have proved possible.

It is a simple fact that there are not enough affordable homes in the Province to meet demand. The net stock model indicated that a minimum of 1,900 new social dwellings are required each year to keep pace with the increase in demand, and a further 600 are required to address the backlog that has built up since 2001. That gives an overall annual requirement of 2,500 new social houses. It is a matter of regret that the Minister was unable

on this occasion to convince his Executive colleagues to facilitate a bid for additional funding on a scale capable of addressing the problem, even though that failure may be understandable.

In Northern Ireland, reduced levels of public expenditure, the level of indebtedness, benefit dependency, rising unemployment, a continuing tighter credit environment and subdued housing market will continue to exert significant downward pressure on household purchasing power, investor and consumer confidence and the feel-good factor that we in this place and our population so richly deserve and crave. Those are mighty enemies that the Minister must confront.

As has been said, the Executive allocated a very welcome £20 million to the social protection fund in the previous Budget, and that was subsequently increased to £23 million. My party fully recognises the innovation of thought behind that idea. However, we feel, as do others, that it could be seen by others as questionable that every single penny was spent on one project. That begs the question of who to include and who to exclude.

In conclusion, the Budget Bill is not perfect. No one ever expected or believed that it could be. However, I will support it, as I recognise that we are talking about civil servant and nurses' pay and the provision of health and social care. It is not practical, sensible or desirable for us to oppose the Budget. I urge the Minister of Finance and Personnel to continue, when and where possible, to increase the support for our most vulnerable citizens — whether it be the young couple setting up their first home, the working disadvantaged, the disabled or the old and, on occasion, cold. The Minister for Social Development is making many of the right noises. As yet, the composition cannot be classified as a symphony, but I and, I hope, others are hopeful.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, let us go back a year to this time in 2011. The then Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was full of gloom and doom. Some Members may be old enough to remember the satirical comedy programme, 'Up Pompeii'. One of the star characters was a soothsayer who came in regularly and told Frankie Howerd, "We're doomed, we're doomed; woe, woe and thrice woe". That is exactly what we got from the former Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, who told us a year ago that there would be 4,000 compulsory redundancies, that the health service would be on chapter 11 insolvency, and that there would be massive cuts in services. Nothing could persuade him to say otherwise. We were doomed, and the health service was going to crash into a thousand pieces as a result of what many considered was, in very tight circumstances, a fairly generous settlement for that Department, courtesy of the present Minister of Finance.

Here we are, honourable Members, a year on, and we are not on chapter 11. We have not had 4,000 compulsory redundancies. Indeed, we have not had a single compulsory redundancy among the 70,000 people who work for the health service. Not a single one. The books have been balanced. That is a remarkable achievement, given the increased demands on so many sectors in the health service. It was down to the last £15 million, but that money has been found, and the budget will come in balanced for this year. That is quite a remarkable achievement by the

Minister, his team and the Finance Department, who were generous when it came to monitoring round extra money and certain extra capital items. That is good news.

I note that the former Minister is not here to apologise for misleading the House. In fact, he is never here, full stop. He is never here when we are discussing important items —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Yes, I will give way. I have all the time in the world.

Mrs D Kelly: That is good. As he is someone who, I understand, hopes to take up the Health Ministry, I would not want to be in his shoes when he has to oversee the shortfall of £600 million in the health budget, which is a fact and a reality. I certainly hope that whenever you take over that portfolio, Mr Wells, you will ensure that services continue to be delivered at the front line. We all know that the health service is suffering from unfilled vacancies and not enough beds in many of our hospitals. We want to look at the total picture and not just look through rose-tinted glasses, even though it is St Valentine's Day.

Mr Wells: So, we have a female version of the former Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, but much younger, I would add. Again, gloom and doom.

I would not for one moment say that it was not an extremely difficult exercise to bring the health budget into line for 2011-12. I sat on the Health Committee throughout that period, and I could see that the Minister and his team were going through every line of the budget to find money that was unspent, money that was being misused, money that could be saved and where efficiencies could be developed without affecting front line care. Through the Committee, I saw some examples of how difficult that is. So, do not get me wrong. What I am saying is that when you use your head and you go through the budget carefully, you can find efficiencies.

Remember, the budget was not cut. The health element of the health and social care budget was ring-fenced and protected and given increased resources. As a result of a lot of hard bargaining around the Executive table, health came out of the Budget negotiations the strongest of the Departments. That is not underestimating how difficult it was even to live within that budget because of increased demand. However, all that nonsense about cuts in health was not true. There was just less of an increase than perhaps some former Ministers —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Absolutely; no problem at all.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Deputy Speaker, I came in to hear the pearls of wisdom from the Member for South Down. Normally, he is very eloquent and able to put forward a cogent argument, but I am confused about the point that he is trying to make. Was there doom and gloom but we fixed it and a marvellous job was done by all? "Do not get me wrong; it was difficult," he said. Was it difficult or was it not? That is the key question.

You talk about in-year monitoring coming to the aid of the health service or different funding being available in future because we decided not to build certain roads. I put it to

you, Mr Wells, that the health service is under pressure and needs additional resources.

Mr Wells: I am not saying for one moment that the incoming Minister and his team did not face difficulties. However, this time last year, we maintained that, with a bit of hard work and effort, that budget could be made to balance. Your party said that that was impossible without mass redundancies and cuts in services. We said that it was possible, and we delivered on that aspect of our promise.

Mr Girvan: I wonder whether the Member agrees that if decisions had been made by the previous Minister, the situation might have been a lot easier in the current year.

Mr Wells: Absolutely. It is St Valentine's Day, and I do not want to give bouquets of flowers to DUP Ministers left, right and centre. However, not only did the current Minister balance the budget, he initiated the Compton review, which is a fundamental review of how we deliver health and social care services in Northern Ireland. Similar reviews lay on the previous Minister's desk gathering dust because he did not have the political courage to initiate or deliver them.

Mr B McCrea: I may have been in a different place but I am sure that, this morning, I heard the Minister of Finance and Personnel talking about the collective responsibility of the Executive, how things were agreed together and how they had worked as a team. I think that I heard him say the words, "in the interests of unionist unity". The contribution of Mr Wells does not seem to be in the spirit of that debate. I wonder whether he is somehow stuck in the past or is not on-message —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind all Members that we are debating the Budget Bill, not seeking a cosy relationship with each other. Can we get back to the Budget Bill, please?

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, I am all in favour of greater co-operation in the unionist family. However, I must say that I would have appreciated the previous Minister's attending the debate today and apologising for misleading the House a year ago with his doom-and-gloom message of failure, which was totally wrong. Had he done that, I would have had respect for him, and I would not have taken this opportunity to settle an old score. All last year, I had to face him in the media, when he was —

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that I heard the Member use the word "misleading" in the Assembly. I am sure that that is not quite what he meant to say. Perhaps he would like to clarify that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I encourage good temper and moderation from all Members, particularly when talking about a Member who is not present.

Mr Wells: I certainly take from that ruling that the phrase that I used was not out of order.

Certainly, the honourable Member for South Belfast has been noticeable by his absence from any debate on health service funding since the last election. He made such an issue of that, to the extent that he brought senior officials from the trusts, the Department and, indeed, the Health and Social Care Board into radio studios to back up his argument. He did not have the courage of his convictions to face the media on his own. He would point the finger at

officials and say that they should tell people how bad it is and what options they had. That is not on. Any —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member to come back to the Budget Bill, please. He is on a particular crusade, but please come back to the Budget Bill.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, having got that off my chest, I will now move on to the issue before us this afternoon — it was too good an opportunity.

I am delighted to see that Mr McCallister has come along. He will add greatly to the debate.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Mr Wells has got that off his chest, but we now have reinforcements, so may we go back to that matter, please?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Of course, that was not a point of order — *[Laughter.]* It might make it more difficult if you want to make a point of order in future.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, who said that Budget Bills were boring?

We have to admit that, having achieved all that, the Department faces another great challenge in the incoming year. Despite the protection of the health budget, we continue to have year-on-year growth — some experts say that it is 3.8%, some say that it is 5.2% — in the real-term demands on our health service. An ageing population, more chronic conditions and lifestyle choices all increase demand.

We know all the reasons. Although the Budget is protected, demand tends to increase ahead of the increased resources. Therefore, the Department has to sit down and go through the same process again and that is difficult.

5.00 pm

There are options that could lead to savings without affecting front line services. It is interesting that the Health Committee regularly gets a set of tables showing how the health trusts in Northern Ireland are performing. I have to be very careful here, as does Mr McCallister, because I am about to speak about my health trust. I make it absolutely clear that there is no element of bias in what I am about to say, but the facts speak for themselves.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

In every table, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust seems to be well ahead of the other health trusts in performance and delivery. For example, it is two percentage points ahead of the Western Health and Social Care Trust in using generic drugs. Two percentage points may not seem significant but that could save £30 million if we could get every trust in Northern Ireland not to be world beaters in that field but simply match the best performance of another trust. That is a significant element of health service expenditure.

Mr B McCrea: I am delighted to hear that information. I just wonder, given that his colleague is the Minister of Health — and, of course, the Member's position on the Health Committee — what steps he has taken to ensure that his Minister of Health does do the efficiencies that he thinks are available. What has he done on that issue?

Mr Wells: The honourable Member for Lagan Valley will be glad to know that that information became apparent, as his colleague will tell him, only two weeks ago. Therefore, we have a target, and the target for the incoming year is that if we can get the other trusts to match the Southern Health and Social Care Trust on many other aspects of health service expenditure, we will save money.

Clearly, the delivery of waiting lists in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust is better than in the other four for the number of people who have to wait for 12 hours or more. Nobody in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has to wait for more than 12 hours for their A&E appointment. The fact that it can deliver a more effective service and be top of the league in all financial targets indicates to me that there is scope in Northern Ireland to improve delivery without affecting front line care.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly; I was waiting for this.

Mr McCallister: Does Mr Wells agree that Edwin Poots should resign now and let his very able successor into the post? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: The line I use is that I have no desire for a chauffeur-driven Skoda at this point.

Mr McCallister: Yes; but were you to be asked?

Mr Wells: I will make absolutely no comment whatsoever on that issue. I have total confidence in the present Minister of Health and Social Services, although I regard it as my role to give him any assistance, advice or support I can, and I will continue to do so. He has a difficult task. It is one that he has already shown himself to be doing very well in his first year in office and he will do excellently in his second year in office.

I am simply suggesting that there are options that can save money. I will give another example involving the Western Health and Social Care Trust. Dr Brendan O'Hare, in Castlederg, introduced a novel approach to dispensing in his area. He discovered that after five weeks, if you extrapolate what he saved by introducing that new form of prescribing drugs, it would save £350,000 in the Castlederg area in a single year. That was extrapolated to cover Northern Ireland and between £41 million and £62 million could be saved, without affecting any front line care.

Those are the sort of decisions that we need to continue to look at to save money in a challenging situation. That can be delivered. Those are low-hanging fruit as far as health service finance is concerned. The challenge is for all of us to meet that.

I also say to the Minister that further favourable consideration at monitoring round stage would be extremely helpful, because the way things worked under the old dispensation was that the Department did not get any monitoring round money but had first call on £20 million in the June monitoring round. That was extremely useful. That was able to be used to release money into situations that were extremely tight. Now, of course, the Department bids for monitoring round money in the normal way and I am sure the Minister would be very favourably disposed to further requests for monitoring round money in the future.

Mrs D Kelly: I support the Member's call for favouritism to be shown to the health service. I wonder whether he is surprised to learn that the Treasury's statistical analysis shows that health expenditure per head in Northern Ireland fell compared with health expenditure in the rest of the UK. Therefore, in 2009-2010, the figure for Northern Ireland was £1,891; for Scotland, it was £2,066; for Wales, it was £1,956, and for England, it was £1,896. As I said, those figures pertain to 2010 and show that we still have a long way to go to play catch-up. It has always been the position of all parties in the North that there was vast underinvestment in the health service throughout the years of direct rule. Investment has improved somewhat under devolution. However, there is still a long way to go.

Mr Wells: I assume that the Member means Northern Ireland. We will leave Donegal out of it for the moment. I say to the Member that, historically, more money was spent on health per head of the population in Northern Ireland until very recently. We should, therefore, have been accumulating medical treatments and capital projects. It is worth pointing out, however, that there is still a long way to go to match or beat the most efficient health trusts in the rest of the United Kingdom. For example, there are 21% more nurses per bed in Northern Ireland than in efficiently run health trusts in the rest of the UK. Therefore, there are options for saving money that will have to be looked at as well.

Having said that, remember that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety initiated an absolutely fundamental review of exactly what it will do in the future. Of course, the outcome of that review was the Compton report, which will be outworked over the next five years and will result in a major change in how things are done. There will be some disruption. The Compton report's 99-odd recommendations cannot be initiated without causing difficulties in the health service, because of the level of change and, at times, the requirement for further resources to deliver that change. I know that the Minister would again — perhaps during monitoring rounds — consider releasing more cash into the system to allow for that delivery. In the long term, if the Compton report is fully implemented, the health service will become more efficient in its delivery of front line services and in how it spends money.

One issue on which everyone in the Chamber agrees is that we cannot continue simply to throw money at the health service. Demand for resources in the health service is insatiable. We have to sit down and plan carefully how to deliver a first-rate health service in the most efficient way possible, not simply go back constantly to the Department of Finance and Personnel with a begging bowl to demand more cash.

Therefore, it is a time of transition and change for the health service. It is important that the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety work together to ensure that, in five years' time, money is being spent much more efficiently.

Mr B McCrea: I checked with Mrs Kelly that the Member argued earlier about the need for money. Surely it is an issue for the Assembly that Northern Ireland appears to get less money per capita than other parts of the United Kingdom. I believe that the Member said that that was not always the case. Can it be, therefore, that the Barnett consequentials that derive from health were not passed on

in their entirety to health and that, rather than making up ground, which we all want to do and are united on, we have been losing ground? Surely what the Member wants to see is expenditure per capita increase to the same levels as those of the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Wells: I do not see it like that. The Assembly's aim is to produce the most efficient health service, which delivers front line care in the most effective manner. I do not believe that we should look at it simply in terms of throwing money at the subject. We actually got more money during direct rule because of Barnett. I accept that, recently, because of the budgetary settlement, the Minister has granted more cash to the health element of the budget and there has been a freeze on resources for social care. That is why slightly less money is being spent. What is important is not what is being spent per head but outcomes — people's life expectancy and health.

Three weeks ago, I went to a seminar in Newtownabbey with the Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Mickey Brady. It was a seminar on Cuba, and fascinating it was, too.

Mr McCallister: Was it in Cuba? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wells: No. Unfortunately, we went only to Newtownabbey, not to Cuba.

Ms Ritchie: Mr Speaker, will the Member give way?

A Member: He has.

Ms Ritchie: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you, Mr Wells. Is Mr Wells, a Member for South Down, suggesting or confirming that he has new-found friends that, hitherto, he would not necessarily have associated with?

Mr Wells: If the Member had waited —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have listened carefully to the debate. *[Interruption.]*

Order. I really have to say that people from the outside who are looking in will be wondering whether we are really discussing the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Hamilton: Never mind those outside.

Mr Speaker: Order. That is the case even with interventions. We really need to get back to the subject matter that is before the House this afternoon.

Mr Wells: If the Member had waited and had not got so excited, she would have learned that I have not signed up to Castro or the Cuban communist system.

The interesting statistics that came out of that seminar were that, in the United Kingdom, we spend an average of almost \$4,000 per head on healthcare and the average life expectancy is 76, whereas in Cuba, they spend \$760 dollars per head on healthcare and the life expectancy is slightly higher. The emphasis in the Cuban system on primary care and on lifestyle choices through the public health agenda is very interesting. I would never want to adopt their system of government, but the experience in Cuba shows that it is not necessary to throw money at a health service to deliver a first-rate level of care. Therefore, I welcome the Compton review's increased emphasis on the public health agenda.

So much of what we see in A&E and intensive care units is the result of lifestyle choices rather than the contraction of any diseases or viruses. So, it was interesting to see what is going on elsewhere.

Although the revenue side of the health budget has been protected, its capital budget has suffered. Therefore, I welcome the announcement that the Finance Minister and the Health Minister made this morning about the extra £92 million of capital funding for health over the next three years. That is tremendous news. I am pleased that the extensions of the Altnagelvin and Ulster hospitals will be funded and that there will be a fast-tracking of the much needed and much-welcomed new hospital for the Omagh area.

I want to check one technical aspect of that funding with the Minister. The money that was promised for the A5 from the Irish Republic has been whittled down to a much smaller fraction. Has the Minister had further confirmation that the £29 million that is coming from the Irish Government for the new radiology unit in Altnagelvin Hospital is safe? We were given a categorical assurance three months ago that that was going ahead. However, I am slightly worried that I have not heard any further confirmation from the Republic that that money is still definitely on its way, so it would be useful to get that confirmation. I also assume that the money that was announced this morning for the extension at Altnagelvin Hospital will come from a different pot of money to that which was earmarked for the new cancer unit. I am not absolutely clear about which is which.

It is excellent news that those projects are going ahead. As many Members said, the construction industry is going through an absolutely dreadful period. I know that to be the case; everyone in every constituency could not be unaware of that problem. However, I am also aware that some of the tenders that are coming in for major capital projects are at savagely low prices. In one example in my own constituency, the quantity surveyors for a certain project told the body concerned that the building could not be constructed for less than £11 million, yet the final contract price was just over £10 million. All that we can think of is that the contractor bought the contract to keep his staff employed. That is unfortunate, but it shows how desperate the situation has become. However, that presents a wonderful opportunity for the public purse. Gone are the days of rampant price inflation in contracts. We have an excellent opportunity to get the best value for the taxpayer by going out for those contracts now rather than waiting for the market to heat up again, when it will become more difficult.

The contracts are tremendous news not only for health service provision but for getting men — it is mostly men, I suppose — such as brickies, plumbers and electricians back into the building trade and back to work. I know that there was concern when most of the A5 project was shelved because of the Irish Government reneging on their promised money.

However, what was announced this morning will, at least, give some hope to the thousands of builders and construction workers who had very little hope because of the desperate situation in the private sector. I say well done to all who achieved that package, because there is good news in it for the health service.

5.15 pm

In June, we will be opening the new Fermanagh hospital. I advise anyone who has not seen it to do so. It is the most incredible building.

Mr Speaker: Order. We are debating the objectives and principles of the Budget Bill at its Second Stage. Let us get back to the Budget Bill. I warn all Members that they must link their remarks to the Bill.

Mr Wells: It is good news that the Budget Bill has allocated money to finish the wonderful new hospital in Enniskillen. It cost £269 million, and sufficient money has been allocated in the Budget Bill to continue to pay off the PFI contract money over the next 25 years. It is a wonderful facility, as paid for by the Budget Bill. Indeed, I would say that it is A&E meets 'Star Trek'; it is absolutely extraordinary. It is the most futuristic building that I have ever seen, and it will provide first-rate care for the people of that part of Northern Ireland. That shows us what can be done at the moment and that some wonderful work is being done.

There is no doubt that we face a challenging year. Health goes forward with so many challenges, and, therefore, I welcome the commitment in the Budget to ensure that the good work that has started will continue. I do not want to paint a rosy picture of sweetness and light and say that all is well in the Department, because that would be wrong. I am saying that there is a very effective team in charge who are doing the best possible job that they can, given the terribly difficult economic situation that we are in. I am confident that, with the hard work that was done in the previous year, they will work to achieve a balanced budget for 2012-13. That is quite remarkable, given the fact that, two or three years ago, people were saying that that was not possible.

It is interesting that, when I stop making merry, no one listens to me. It is only when I am cracking jokes that they do so.

Mr B McCrea: We are all ears.

Mr Wells: Yes, exactly. There have been some quite humorous interventions, but I hope that the message is clear. There are great challenges ahead, but I believe that it can be done.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. You will be glad to hear that my remarks will be very brief.

Mr A Maskey: Stick to the Budget.

Ms J McCann: I will try to keep to the Budget. Given the economic climate that we are in, it is important that any investment or distribution of funds from the Executive is delivered in a targeted, sustainable and strategic way. I also welcome this morning's announcement, which is good news for job creation.

When we look at any Budget or Executive spend, we must promote equality outcomes. It is very important to ensure that there is an even playing field for everyone. Equality of opportunity has to be embedded in anything that we do. We cannot afford to exclude anyone from services or from having life chances if we want to deliver the just society that we always talk about in the Chamber.

Some of the concepts of early intervention and preventative spending have already been touched on today. Those are key in ensuring that we work towards that new society. We have to look at doing things differently. I will give Members some statistics. It is very clear that what has always been done and continues to be done is not working, because there are still clear structural inequalities in our society. Resources are not getting to the people that we need to reach.

Statistics for my constituency of West Belfast show that the life expectancy of women and men who live there is the lowest of anywhere in the North of Ireland. More people die in West Belfast from cancer, lung diseases and heart diseases than anywhere else in the North of Ireland. There are more people on antidepressant drugs —

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: Go on.

Mr Wells: The Chief Medical Officer's report, which was published just before Christmas, had an interesting front cover. It showed a bus stop in the centre of Belfast and indicated that, if you got on a bus that went to the top of the Malone Road, you would live an extra eight years. However, that is not because of any difference in the environment; it is because of the lifestyle choices that many people make. I think that they were talking about the lower Markets area in that case. Some of the statistics that the Member has pointed out are due to lifestyle choices, such as alcohol dependency, drugs and, most importantly tobacco and cigarettes. We lose 2,300 people a year as a direct result of tobacco consumption, and west Belfast accounts for a higher proportion of those people than anywhere else in Northern Ireland. Does the Member accept that the public health agenda, as well as the care agenda, is very important for her constituency?

Ms J McCann: The difficulty is that there is a different quality of life for people in west Belfast. I will give some statistics. There is more poverty and unemployment in west Belfast. So, it is not just about life choices; in some instances, it is about the way that people have to live. I would not say that it is based totally on life choices. West Belfast is the area with the third lowest number of people who leave school with two A levels and the second lowest number of people who leave school with five GCSEs. It gets the fourth lowest amount of financial assistance and investment from Invest NI. To round off the statistics, 76% of people in west Belfast live in the most deprived super output areas. I do not think that it is all about life choices.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Ms J McCann: I will finish this point and then give way at the end. Is that OK?

Early intervention and preventative spending are key to ensuring that we work towards a new society. We need measures targeted specifically towards tackling inequality and need. Those measures need to be time bound and have realistic targets. Sometimes we look at doing things without setting a time frame. We need to look at that when we tackle poverty, disadvantage and need through the Budget and any Executive spend.

There are also practical proposals that we can put into operation and measures that we can take. Sustaining

employment and creating new avenues of employment are very important. When the Executive are setting budgets, they need to look at organisations such as Invest NI, because some of them need to be refocused on creating jobs. They need to focus not just on foreign direct investment (FDI) but on local small and medium-sized businesses that are already here. We also need to ensure that people are skilled up so that, when FDI comes, they can take advantage of the available jobs, particularly in IT. Sometimes, people here are not trained up to the level at which they can access those jobs; and that is another very important issue.

Public procurement is also very important in respect of the Budget and Executive spend. We have talked about public procurement, and it is in the Programme for Government. Although it is a key tool in ensuring value for money, we can also use it as a lever to achieve the social and economic outcomes needed to change our society. Like other Members, I have talked in the Chamber many times about developing the social economy sector. It is very valuable not only to create employment opportunities for local people but to regenerate the communities in which those people live. That is a very important aspect too. People need to have faith. They must have a sense of pride in where they live and in their environment. It is very important that those communities are regenerated.

I do not intend to speak for much longer. I very much welcome the announcement earlier today, but I appeal to the Minister and his Executive colleagues — and it is not just the Minister of Finance's responsibility — to use very wisely the Budget and funds we will have over the next number of years. People already living in poverty, disadvantage and need are those we need to target.

If we do not do so, the gap will become wider and those people will never have a chance, nor will children from low-income families and those coming out of school with low educational attainment. That needs to change, and, in my view, we can only change it by getting in earlier and spending money on early intervention to support families and services. We need wrap-around services for such families. We need to look at early intervention. For me, that is the key to change. I ask the Minister to take that on board when looking at any future spend.

Sorry, Dolores.

Ms Ritchie: Mindful of your ruling, Mr Speaker, I will try to keep to the subject of the Budget Bill when making my points. In discussing the general principles of the Budget Bill, all of us have to acknowledge the prevailing financial crisis and economic situation that exists. We have to characterise the community and the economy in Northern Ireland and address the impact that the Budget Bill, in dispersing resources, may have on the wider economy and wider health and educational provision in order to mitigate any potential downfall or detrimental impact on wider communities and people in Northern Ireland generally.

There is absolutely no doubt that communities are facing a deep financial crisis and that the level of poverty has deepened. So I pose this question: has the Minister, in conjunction with the Executive, explored all possible avenues to lever in finance for capital and revenue purposes in order to support the Bill and to ensure that more resources are available out of the consolidated fund for

revenue and capital projects, which enhance the way of life for all our people in Northern Ireland?

There is no doubt that, at the moment, Northern Ireland can be characterised by the people who are awaiting the onslaught of the welfare reform proposals. I hope that the Budget Bill will introduce mitigation measures, such as a hardship fund, to deal with the issue. I understand, by way of an update, that Lord Strathclyde suggested in another place that there may be some Government concessions on welfare reform to avoid further defeats in that place. I hope that such concessions will help our Finance Minister to ensure that proper mitigation measures are put in place in the Budget Bill in order to ensure that our people here are not placed in further poverty.

We have a situation here where property prices are much lower than elsewhere; our construction industry has been undermined; the banks are not providing credit; the levels of youth unemployment are increasing; and the cost of motor insurance is rising, as is the cost of motor vehicle fuel and utility bills for the telephone sector and, particularly, for the home heating sector, and, therefore, the purchasing ability of people on the high street and in the retail sector has lessened considerably.

I ask the Minister what solutions have been brought to the table by way of the Budget Bill to try to bring a measure of amelioration and alleviation. My colleague Mr Bradley, the Member for Newry and Armagh, asked a question that I asked yesterday of the Finance Minister, who seemed to pooh-pooh what I was saying. I asked him about what levels of extra devolution he wants to see introduced in Northern Ireland, rather than simply putting party political preference ahead of the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. I will ask it again: what levels of devolution and tax-varying powers, in terms of landfill tax, corporation tax and air passenger duty on domestic flights, could be introduced to bring in extra capital that could be invested in projects and help our Budget Bill to be more meaningful to the people of Northern Ireland?

In that respect, could I also mention —

5.30 pm

Mr Hamilton: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: No. I am not prepared to give way at the moment but I will in a little while.

I want to say to the House, by way of the Budget Bill and as a means of helping the financial crisis on this island, that the Department of Finance in Dublin wrote to the Department of Finance and Personnel on 15 April 2010 asking if it would be possible to have discussions about the potential for budgetary savings and improved outcomes through North/South co-operation. I understand that, as of a few weeks ago, the Department of Finance in Dublin had yet to receive a response to that letter. That would have covered significant areas in procurement, education, a tax and welfare fund, health, skills, transport, planning and infrastructure. All those issues, had they been adequately addressed, would no doubt have provided a measure of relief to our budgetary situation. Maybe the Finance Minister has some answers in that respect. I hope that he does and that he has provided answers to Dublin that will give a

measure of amelioration by outlining what we could do on a North/South basis to help all the people of this island.

I would also like to hear an update from the Minister on the joint ministerial working group on rebalancing the economy and the estimates of what funds have come across to the Budget as a result of Barnett consequentials. I think of the coastal communities fund and announcements in relation to housing. The Minister said earlier today, in response to another question of mine, that he was not aware, at this stage, of potential readjustments that might have to be made to the Budget as a result of the UK Budget to be delivered by the Chancellor on 21 March. Perhaps as a result of interim discussions that the Minister and his officials might have had with Treasury Ministers and officials, the Minister might be able to provide us with some indications, and perhaps come comfort, that things are not as bad as they might be.

Mr Speaker, I will not stray into certain specifics, mindful of your ruling. However, as a constituency representative, I will say that I want consideration to be given to ensuring the continuation of a sound social, economic and health infrastructure in my constituency, including tourism. Tourism is an area that is labour-intensive. It provides benefit to people and ensures that they can be brought back into employment. It also ensures the best use of Budget funds through capital projects and revenue consequences. It enhances the products that we have and ensures that people feel a sense of wealth and health.

With respect to Treasury matters, I ask the Minister whether there is any update on the possibility of a reduction of VAT on products. Can he give us an update in respect of the aggregates credit levy scheme? I know that he has raised that issue, both as Minister of Finance and in another place, as I have done. There is no doubt that if amelioration can be provided there, via the European Commission, it could help the Finance Minister and other Ministers to develop budget and capital projects right across the piece.

I thank the Minister for being here and look forward to his response. However, though the SDLP does not want a Division on the issue, it is nonetheless disappointing that the Minister is not prepared, as he stated last week, to look at new forms of devolution or tax-varying powers that would help the Budget, help to rebuild our economy and give us opportunities to develop all our assets and new possibilities for wealth and job creation.

I look forward to the Minister's response and hope that there have been major changes of mind and direction. Judging by the Minister's reaction to my colleague, Mr Bradley, I am more hopeful than anything else, but, after all, it is St Valentine's Day, and he may want to bestow love and friendship on the opposition.

Mr Nesbitt: I will begin almost as positively as Mr Wells and welcome this morning's announcement of the major infrastructure investments, particularly for the Ulster Hospital. That is a timely and necessary input to the refurbishment and development of a hospital that is key to so many people in Northern Ireland. My remarks will be short. I am afraid that I was not in the Chamber earlier when Mr Wilson made his opening remarks. I tried to monitor them from my room upstairs, and I missed a few of his words because they were drowned out by the shredder that

was taking care of the speech that I had intended to deliver on the motion.

I speak as someone who was not involved in the original debates on the budgetary process in the previous mandate but was an interested observer at that time. I was interested that the Minister seemed so keen to push for a comprehensive spending review that covered four years rather than the previous three. I was surprised, given that I understand that one of his favourite economic maxims is *ceteris paribus* — all things being equal. All things did not remain equal for very long after the Budget was passed. The Minister for Employment and Learning made his announcement about tuition fees, and the Ulster Unionist Party's own Regional Development Minister found money for the Coleraine-to-Londonderry railway improvements. Invest Northern Ireland handed back £40 million, and there was the strange case of the short-term employment scheme morphing into the jobs fund and, indeed, the millions from the green new deal that seemed to be trapped somewhere in the machinery of government.

To the extent that *ceteris paribus* is a maxim for common sense and a pragmatic approach, I was rather surprised that we went for a four-year CSR. Of course, the question is of the extent to which the budgetary processes that we employ are fit for purpose. For example, we look at end-year flexibility and ask why we still pick an arbitrary date and demand that all money is spent by that time. I am sure that the 60,000-plus people who are on the unemployment register wonder why that makes good sense for government. The challenge is to see whether we can do things not only differently from Westminster but better than Westminster. I talk to business leaders around the country who believe that the value, if there is one, in devolved government at Stormont is that it allows for quicker access to Ministers who have a good grasp of the local issues and are in a position to make instant decisions. As you know, Mr Speaker, the Ulster Unionist Party questioned the sequence of events that led to a Budget coming into being before a Programme for Government. Our view is that we should have an election, followed by a Programme for Government, followed by a Budget, followed by the establishment of the Executive members who will make that come to pass.

I was pleased to hear Mr Moutray refer to economic ambitions for the second century of Northern Ireland. That, perhaps, echoes something that I said a few months ago at our party conference when I said that we should have an ambition to lower our dependence on the block grant from Westminster. We know that Greece will default and that it is just a question of how and when, yet the subvention to Northern Ireland is worth one third of our gross domestic product. That puts us, relatively speaking, in a much worse position than the Greeks.

It is time for a step change, and as the draft economic policy identifies, the step change should come from an emphasis on exports. Currently, the value of our exports, excluding to the Republic of Ireland, is £3.2 billion, and £1 billion of that is from air transport. Therefore, on the principle of *ceteris paribus*, will the Minister accept that the budget lines must recognise the agglomeration effect of high-end jobs being based around our airports, much as they were previously based around our ports?

I noticed earlier that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment was hoping that I would move away from a focus on golf tourism and embrace another tourist sector. I am more than willing to do that once we get the golf issue right. I understand that the average daily spend by a tourist in Northern Ireland is only £37, which is a rather miserable and feeble amount of money. However, if we were to attract golfers who were prepared to play at, for example, Royal County Down Golf Club and stay in the nearby Slieve Donard Hotel, they would automatically put a nought on that and spend at least £370 a day. I heard earlier today from the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce that the average spend of a Chinese tourist visiting Harrods in London is £2,520. So perhaps we could raise our ambitions a little bit in what we do for our economy through the Budget.

A Member referred earlier to Lough Neagh, and I wonder whether you will rule all local issues out of order or whether I could stretch my luck and say to the Minister that I very much want the introduction of a budget line to establish a renewables corridor from Belfast harbour, through Newtownards and down the peninsula to Portaferry. It should begin with the £50 million logistics facility being built at the harbour to facilitate DONG Energy, which will develop offshore renewables in the Irish Sea, continue down through the environmental unit at the South Eastern Regional College, past Portavogie where the fishing fleet can see a renewed lease of life servicing the logistics and finish at SeaGen off Portaferry in Strangford lough. In other words, we can create a UK centre of excellence down that renewables corridor. I thank you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker, and I will finish there.

Mrs D Kelly: I want to touch on a few matters that I hope are pertinent to the Budget and to the Programme for Government. Given that the Executive have proposed that the economy remains the number one priority in the Programme for Government, I hope that the Finance Minister and other Executive Ministers will consider the value of childcare and the continued absence of a childcare strategy. I do not see any budget line for that, and at this stage, no Department has claimed responsibility for its delivery.

Given that welfare reforms — or cuts as others have called them — are being scrutinised at Westminster, I hope that the Minister will agree that the failure to agree and implement a childcare strategy means that parents will be subject to the harsher conditionality without the structural support that is in place in GB. On average, childcare is scarcer in Northern Ireland, and the Labour Government's extended schools policy with wrap-around childcare was not rolled out here. The measures in the latest proposed social security changes, such as the reduction in the childcare element of working tax credit from 80% to 70% of costs, will impact heavily on families that are already struggling to pay for childcare.

Childcare touches across the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department of Education, and in the past, critics have scrutinised the Assembly and the Executive. People who looked at the issue closely criticised the fact of our continuing to work in silos, which is evident from the lack of agreement on a childcare strategy. If the economy is the number one priority, childcare provision has to go hand in hand with a well-resourced economic strategy.

Many Members referred to the issue of poverty, and the increasing number of people living in poverty has, hopefully, concentrated the minds of many Executive Ministers.

Ms McCann spoke about the people of west Belfast in particular. The long and debilitating impact of poverty on individuals, families and communities was evident from her contribution, and any map of Northern Ireland showing wealth distribution provides further evidence.

My understanding is that the Department of Finance and Personnel is responsible for NISRA and that there was an undertaking that the Minister and his Department would look at how those figures are compiled. If poverty remains an issue that the Executive wish to tackle in their Budget and Programme for Government in order to help people living in rural areas, particularly where there is no spatial concentration of population, hopefully, the Minister might prioritise that in his Department in the upcoming year.

5.45 pm

The Minister's Department, the Agriculture Minister and DETI in particular, have a key responsibility for the distribution of EU funds. All Ministers want to ensure that every penny — or every cent, in this case — that can be obtained to better the lives of people in the North will stay here. To that end, I urge the Minister to speed up the processes and to make whatever investment is needed in the staff who assess and evaluate EU programmes. Perhaps the Minister might also better inform us about the small loans scheme, which the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment announced some months ago. Will that be extended to the rural sector, particularly the small and medium-sized enterprises? I have asked that question on a couple of occasions at the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and have not yet found the answer.

I also wonder whether, under OFMDFM, the social protection fund will be extended beyond its planned lifetime. That was an excellent and timely proposal by my party, which other parties bought into and supported, and we welcome that support. Hopefully, OFMDFM will extend the fund beyond 31 March 2012.

I cannot leave the debate without mentioning the high cost of continued division, its effect on Budget spend and our failure to agree as a society and community on moving forward. We still duplicate services. All Departments should be building good relations into their plans for taking forward their budgets and the Programme for Government.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. This is an excellent opportunity for the Member to provide clarification to the House. If the Member's statement came from a policy position, will she define for us what the SDLP's view is today of shared education, given the announcement yesterday by CCMS? On the basis of what we saw yesterday, that sector clearly has a long way to go in embracing a shared educational structure.

Mrs D Kelly: My constituency will suffer from CCMS's announcement yesterday. Many people are very upset about the closure of Drumcree College. It would have been useful if CCMS and, indeed, the Department of Education, had looked at the viability of combining shared access and shared services provision in different locations. That is what I said over the weekend after it became apparent that CCMS would announce the closure.

In my constituency, I will not lose sight of the needs of the people of Banbridge, where a number of young people in particular suffer high unemployment. The Minister referred to that yesterday and to some measures that may well be taken forward. Currently, over one third of benefit claimants and over 27% of the long-term unemployed in Banbridge are young people. I hope that the Finance Minister, in discussions with his Executive colleagues, will prioritise investing in the future, and in our young people in particular.

Lord Morrow: What about the point that he raised?

Mrs D Kelly: I answered it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr McCallister: I already hear shouts of encouragement and support from Mr Wells. I am grateful, because he thinks that the Budget Bill is such good news for health. Considering the difficulties that health has had and will continue to experience, I suppose that it may be easier to do the health project now, given that the Finance Minister is slightly more obliging to his party colleagues when giving out some of the money.

Traditionally, health has been very difficult to fund. As Mr Wells said, the need in health rises yearly at a dramatic rate. Health inflation, all the associated costs and the demographic changes that we face are putting enormous pressure on the healthcare system. Obviously, Mr Wells would not support our move to get rid of Mr Poots immediately and take the job himself. However, at some point, he will have to realise that all his remarks are in the Hansard report, and when he is sitting here as Health Minister, we will remind him that he talked about how generous the funding arrangements have been for health over the years, particularly when he is struggling to keep hospitals open and has to announce that Daisy Hill Hospital, the Causeway Hospital or other hospitals around the country have to close.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. We are straying into the area of the closure or non-closure of hospitals. *[Interruption.]*

Order. Let us go back to the Budget Bill, please. Once again, I remind Members that they should, as far as is possible, link whatever they say to the Budget Bill.

Mr McCallister: Indeed. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for that direction. Changes that happen as a result of the Budget Bill could, of course, lead directly to the closure of Daisy Hill Hospital and the Causeway Hospital and associated threats that we face.

When he is Health Minister, Mr Wells may not be as confident about implementing the effects of this Budget Bill.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member has been well trained by his predecessor, Mr McGimpsey. However, in Mr McGimpsey's absence, we might have a proxy apology for his outrageous comments this time last year. Will Mr McCallister apologise on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and Mr McGimpsey for the latter's totally unfounded prediction of 4,000 compulsory redundancies —

Mr Speaker: Order. Even interventions need to relate to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I warn Members —

Mr I McCrea: Say sorry.

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr McCallister: The Member will know that there will be no apology from the Ulster Unionist Party because it has nothing to apologise for. We have fought hard to get appropriate money spent on health. We have fought hard to make health a priority for the Executive and the Assembly. That is why we are passionate about seeing it mentioned in the Budget Bill. We will continue that fight. We welcome the extra money for capital investment that is outlined in the Budget Bill. However, if we had not put up that fight, where would the health and social care system be now? It would be in a mess. They used to say that Michael McGimpsey was exaggerating when he referred to the £200 million a year shortfall. It turned out to be £177 million. That gap had to be closed. The next few years are going to be very tight for health and social care.

Mr Wells talked about redundancies. During his contribution, he said that we have 21% too many nurses. Obviously, I can see where he is going to get his redundancies in the health service —

Mr Wells: I am not going to let the Member get away with that, particularly as it is going to appear word for word in the 'Mourne Observer' next week. What I said was that I was not advocating the loss of one nursing job. I said that when you compare hospitals in Northern Ireland with the most efficient hospitals in the rest of the United Kingdom, you see that we have 21% more nurses per patient. Therefore, by retaining the same staff, we can use them more effectively to provide more services and reduce waiting lists.

Mr McCallister: Twenty-one per cent too many. It is too late — it is already away to the 'Mourne Observer'.

There are many things that we would debate about health, and we will continue to fight for it. The DUP has had to acknowledge that health is being protected, yet when we were standing in the 2010 general election, we fought on a campaign of protecting health, and it was thanks to the Conservative Government that you got it protected. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCallister: In the Budget Bill, Mr Speaker, they would not have protected health. They did not hand on the full amount of money that was sent from Westminster, so they would not have protected it; that is the decision that they would have made. We would have made very different decisions to fight and defend health and social care because it is the cornerstone of our society.

Other Members mentioned possible changes to the way that we do business, and changes to the Budget process were raised in last night's debate. My colleague Mr Nesbitt talked about the Programme for Government and the Budget structure and said that we have been out of kilter on that. That is regrettable, and we must ask how we will manage that. The Programme for Government is out of kilter with the Budget; hence, the Budget is changing all the time. Many changes have been made to it over the past year already, and there are another three years to run in this Budget process. It is regrettable that those two are not coming together at once.

Jennifer McCann and Ms Kelly talked about services that would be affected, and, indeed, early intervention is key to much of what we do. The Minister and the Executive are struggling, without the Programme for Government, to get all those things to come together. Their difficulty is that we are not getting in early. We say one thing but then reduce spending on services such as Home-Start, which can make a huge difference in communities. Intervening early can make an enormous difference to the educational attainment of children and probably have an impact on our criminal justice system and the level of NEETs. It has an effect across the spectrum: on mental and physical health and the differences in life expectancy and health inequalities across society. Mr Wells cited the huge difference in life expectancy that the short bus journey from central Belfast to the Malone area makes. We have to do something in this Budget Bill and the Programme for Government to make an impact on those issues.

Mr Wells: The honourable Member allegedly sits on the Health Committee and has done for many years. Therefore, he will know that the Compton report, initiated by the Minister, Mr Poots, makes that a priority and states that Home-Start and early intervention are vital. As the Compton report is unveiled, courtesy of extra money provided by the Minister — I think that it is £71 million to deliver that — there will be much more emphasis on early interventions in the areas that he has outlined. Therefore, the Member cannot say that there is no emphasis on it. It will be rolled out as part of the Compton review.

Mr McCallister: Mr Wells should know that the Health Department is just one Department. When we talk about early intervention, we need much more. We need the Department of Education, the Department of Justice, the Department for Social Development and OFMDFM involved to drive this. We need a collective approach to the problems that many in this House are speaking about and to address inequalities.

Mr Wells is long enough in the Health Committee to know that everything to do with health is not just for the Health Department: perhaps only 20% of health outcomes are directly related to the Health Department. We need a huge investment from the Department of Education so that we can get in early to improve the educational attainment of children and to identify children with special needs or learning difficulties and put in support for them. That is the sort of collective approach that we need across the Budget Bill. We need to see all of government putting their shoulder to the wheel truly to make a difference to the lives of our citizens. That is what we mean when we talk about early intervention. Criminal justice has a huge role to play, as, regrettably, we see young people getting involved in antisocial behaviour and falling into the criminal justice system. That has a huge societal cost that we have to address. We need early intervention, and we are simply not seeing enough of it.

6.00 pm

I welcome some aspects of the Compton review and the fact that the Budget will allow them to be implemented. Some of what we are talking about, including the Headstart programme suggested in the review, is to be welcomed. I would welcome provision being made in the Budget for that. That would be good, but we need to get a collective

approach. If you decouple the Programme for Government from the Budget, you will not have that collective approach. The point that we in the Ulster Unionist Party have consistently made in debate after debate is that you need that direction.

Every Department needs to put its shoulder to the wheel to get movement on some of these issues or we will just continue to fail a large section of our population miserably. They will be left behind and will have no great career prospects. They will be economically inactive across the board or they will languish in the criminal justice system.

Our needs in mental health are also enormous. The Compton review can make a difference, but we are still spending too little on mental health. The Member knows as well as I do that our spend on mental health is falling as a percentage, because we heard that at a recent Health Committee meeting. That is something that we have to address in this Budget Bill. We have to make changes to suit that, or we will be in real difficulties.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member also raise the concerns of many of the parents of young people with a learning disability who, on reaching the age of 18, have to go into residential care homes with much older people? That is totally inappropriate. It is against the recommendations of the Bain report, and, hopefully, the Compton review will address that.

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, we are moving away from the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I remind Members again; let us get back to the Budget Bill. At one time, I thought we were discussing the Compton report. Let us get back to the Budget Bill. Once again, Members need to be continually reminded. If Members continue to do what they are doing, I will ask them to take their seat and I will move on to the next Member on the list to speak.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mrs Kelly is right in that provision has to be made in the Budget Bill to address the very important issues that she has raised.

Everyone knows about the very tight budgetary settlement that we have with which to face the economic difficulties that many other countries around the world are also facing. We are almost one year on from the introduction of the much-heralded social investment fund, yet nothing has been done with it. In fact, I am led to believe that some areas around the fund may not even have been completely defined yet. Information on how we are going to use the £80 million that was allocated to that is lacking in the Budget Bill. What is it there for? Why are we not using it in some of the Sure Start, Home-Start or Headstart programmes to intervene early and do something with that money? Instead, we are trying to reinvent the wheel and coming up with something that does not drive us towards being a shared society, but just sectarianises us. I do not think that that is a helpful approach, and I would like to see the use of those resources addressed in the Budget Bill.

The Minister cannot keep telling us how difficult the settlement is and how difficult the Budget is when we have money waiting in, for example, the social investment fund that is not being used for the benefit of all our citizens.

Mr Allister: I think every Finance Minister likes to be thought of as a magician. Yesterday, after the First Stage of the

Budget Bill, the Deputy Speaker solemnly announced that the Bill would then be printed. When I made my way from here to my pigeonhole on the second floor, there it was, just waiting for me, magically printed, and here we are, just a few hours later, expected to debate it.

When I picked up the Bill and began to look at it, the first thing that struck me when I read figures like £15 billion and £16 billion is how glad I am that we are part of the United Kingdom. Where would we get £15 billion or £16 billion to run our hospitals and our schools, to pay for roads and to waste the money that we waste if we were not within the United Kingdom? When I think of some in this House who have a vision of taking us to another place — a bankrupt place — I really ponder where the £15 billion or £16 billion would ever be conjured up from. It would take a very green, magical magician to conjure up that sort of money.

Of course, the reality is that we can only have the level of spend that will be endorsed in this Budget because we are fortunate enough to be part of the United Kingdom. If others had their way, they would take us to a Greek-style crisis, such as we are seeing elsewhere in Europe. Therefore, we should reflect that when we talk about the Budget Bill, we are talking about something that goes to the core of the exercise of our citizenship, and given the extent of the deficit between what we raise and what we spend, the constitutional reality of Northern Ireland is something to be cherished and valued. It does not just mean that we have a rich heritage and are part of a great nation. It means that the Government have money in their pocket to spend. If we were not part of that arrangement, we would not be talking about £15 billion or £16 billion. We would be talking about scraping by on whatever could be raised locally and with a lot less provision in our community — all of our community.

The people who speak the most about wanting to change the constitutional attachment of Northern Ireland should think of their constituencies and ask what their constituency of West Belfast or West Tyrone could raise in comparison with what it spends. When they answer that question, it will be time enough to talk about constitutional change, because the reality is that they could never raise a fraction of what we spend and get in the United Kingdom.

The Budget Bill sets parameters in a very general sense for what each Department can spend, and one of my complaints yesterday, which I will repeat, is that there is only a one-line figure in the Budget Bill, and you do not know the breakdown. Therefore, there is no certainty as to where money is coming from and where it is going. However, it struck me that, within the limitations of the Budget Bill — although it gives some figures — the announcement today already, for this and future Budgets, takes us outside the parameters of what is provided for. In the A5 announcement, the Minister told us that in year 3, I think, he will be £185 million short, and, at this moment, he does not know where he is going to get it from. Yesterday, I heard that same Minister chiding the SDLP about where it will raise the extra money to do the things that it wants to do.

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, I am trying to lead the House and bring it back to the Budget. I remind the Member that comments made in the House should be very much linked to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I am reminding the whole House and trying to get Members back to the Budget again.

Mr Allister: Yes, Mr Speaker; I am speaking to schedule 1 to the Bill. It sets out the amount of money allocated to the Department for Regional Development — £907 million. I am making the point that, as the A5 project rolls forward, we are going to be short. We were told this morning that that project was a job-creation project, but, less than a year ago, the same Minister told the House that it was not a job-rich project. Last March, the Minister had one of the many exchanges he seems to have with Ms Ritchie. On 1 March last year, during the Final Stage of the Budget Bill, the Minister said something that must have been relevant and admissible then. I suggest that it is equally relevant and admissible at the Second Stage of the Budget Bill this year. He said:

“in the last debate on the Bill, her party was vociferous in its support for one of the biggest capital spending projects in the Budget, namely the A5. Believe me, that project is not job rich, because most of the money will go on buying land, and the rest will go on a capital intensive project.” — [Official Report, Bound Volume 62, p380, col2].

The point that I am making is that in terms of wise spend and in spending money to try to match and track the deficit in jobs, it is right and necessary that we maximise that spend to maximise job return. I am making the point that, today, the Minister has promoted a project, which he knows is not job rich, despite what he said today. How does that fit under the Budget, with the Programme for Government and with the intention to make job creation our top priority?

Of course, there is much more about the A5 project that, perhaps, will be surprising. I asked a question this morning, and I still await an answer. Due process involves an inquiry. In previous answers, the Minister said that he cannot make decisions until he has an inquiry outcome. Due process requires a business case. Has a business case for these two aspects of the A5 project been given to DFP? Has it been approved? When was it approved?

I make those points because if we are talking in all seriousness about a Budget that is setting parameters, limits and the direction of travel, we are espousing the principles of proceeding by due process. However, when it suits, it seems that due process is an expendable commodity; it is not something that we really have to hold to if political opportunism makes a better offer. That, I think, is one of the problems in respect of setting budgetary arrangements, which are then breached in terms of the arrangements that they are meant to set.

Mr Wells: I think the honourable Member is very experienced. He was in the House 30 years ago and he will know that all capital projects are subject to such issues as planning permission, public inquiries, etc, but that the money, obviously, has to be allocated. Will he admit that the extra £92 million is for health service projects at Dundonald, Altnagelvin, etc, that are very labour-intensive and will bring much-needed employment to the building trade in those areas. It is a mixed, balanced package, which will, undoubtedly, be welcomed by the vast majority of people in places such as Kilkeel, where hundreds of unemployed men are desperate for that type of work.

6.15 pm

Mr Allister: I did not say that the hospital projects were not job-intensive. I have been dealing with the issue of the £330 million spend on the A5 and agreeing with the Minister in his previous contention that it is not a job-rich project. Mr Wells said that there are procedures to be gone through. That is exactly my point. However, you must have the money there to deal with it. We got much further than that today; we got way beyond consideration of business plans. At Question Time, the roads Minister gave us a start date for work that, it would seem, has not even had a business plan and which has not even had a report from the independent inspector yet. Indeed, the Finance Minister told us this morning that contracts had already been awarded for the A5. If that is right, for what and for how much?

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again I am slightly worried that we are going into the detail of the A5. I remind the whole House and the Member who has the Floor to get back to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Allister: I will seek to take your guidance, Mr Speaker. Others have exalted the A5 project. I am simply seeking to raise what I think are legitimate issues with the budgetary context. If it is to be built, it is coming out of money that will be in Budget x. Therefore, we need to address it.

I looked to see how DETI is fairing in the Budget, and I discovered that Invest NI has, perhaps for many years, had something of a misfocus with regard to its preoccupation with the glamour of foreign direct investment and ignored too much the reality that so many of our people depend on jobs provided by local entrepreneurs — small businesses that might grow into medium-sized businesses.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. If he had been paying attention to what was happening in his constituency, he would know that as the result of the intervention of Invest Northern Ireland, a local engineering company in Ballymoney has employed more people and secured more contracts. If —

Mr Speaker: Let us have all remarks through the Chair.

Mr Storey: Mr Speaker, if the Member paid attention to local issues, he would discover that that company in Ballymoney is glad that Invest NI exists.

Mr Allister: I am perfectly aware of the situation. Moreover, in my own small way, I have brought some jobs to Ballymoney by recently opening a new advice centre. I am sure that the Member is welcoming of that as well. If he wants to talk about Invest NI and North Antrim, I will be very glad to do so. The sad reality, confirmed by answers to questions, is that, in five years of devolution, two foreign investors have been brought to North Antrim by Invest NI. Since 2007 — the first four years of devolution and Invest NI — when the Member was in this House, not a single foreign investor had been brought to visit North Antrim. I am more than sure of my facts about North Antrim: we have had abysmal neglect by Invest NI in attracting foreign direct investment.

Yes, Invest NI has been very good at spending money on hospitality: £2 million in the past five years, and I am sure that there is money in here for that as well. It has been very good at directing bonuses to its chief executive but not

so good at looking after the on-the-ground requirements of North Antrim.

As the Member engages me on issues pertaining to that, he drives me on to deal with the issue of education. Education is, of course, provided for in this Budget. We do not know a great deal of the detail of the spend, but we anticipate that some will go to ESA in due course; something that the honourable Member Mr Storey, not so long ago, told us had gone and was not coming back. Well, we know that it is coming back, courtesy of the deal that he and Sinn Féin have done. He used to brand ESA — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: —as bureaucratic and an invention to satisfy the control freakery of the Sinn Féin Department. Now, in due course, he will rise to support and vote for a Bill to bring back that which he said would never come back, but then the honourable Member is a past master at abandoning that for which he previously stood.

I certainly do not endorse ESA, nor do I welcome the fact that, within the Budget, it shall be —

Mr Storey: I ask the Member to check the comment of a member, or former member, of his party Terry Williams — I am not sure which, because the members of his party keep coming and going. What was it that he said at the Member's party conference in some room, somewhere? I ask him to check what Terry Williams said about ESA —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not get into a debate about party conferences. Please let us not go down that road, even in interventions. Let us try at least to keep to the subject. Once again, I remind the whole House and the Member to try to get back to the Budget.

Mr Allister: I will take your advice, because we could end up at GAA matches or anything, Mr Speaker, if we were to go down that road. Maybe some will, and the honourable Member may be next to follow in that regard.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am speaking to the Member directly and trying to guide him. I warn the Member that we should come back to the Budget. At this time, the Member is more concerned about the detail of various issues in the Budget, when he really should be talking about its principles and objectives. I remind the Member to stick to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Mr Allister: Yes, Mr Speaker.

I regard certain things as being absent from the Budget, and I regret that. We are approaching what will be a remarkable event in the lives of most of us: Her Majesty will celebrate 60 years on the throne, which is a truly incredible achievement. Yet neither in the Programme for Government nor the Budget does one penny appear to have been allocated to celebrate that momentous occasion. Not one penny, it would seem, has been allocated to give our schoolchildren a memento of that occasion. Not one penny, the Culture Minister has already confirmed, of additional funding will help communities to celebrate that momentous occasion. That is, from my perspective, not only hugely regrettable, but a slight, which I, for one, resent. We should be prepared to put that right. It is quite amazing that, in this year of all years, when we have the diamond jubilee,

there is not a penny to give our children a memento or to help communities to celebrate, but there is money — “loadsamoney” — for hospitality, spin doctors and all that. In that small but important measure, we have very much got our priorities wrong.

The Ulster covenant will be celebrated this year. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Ulster covenant, there was a public holiday in Northern Ireland. This year, the covenant has its 100th anniversary, and if the House gets it way, it will be barely mentioned because there is nothing in the Budget to afford funding to celebrate that momentous occasion, which was the big building block in the creation of this state.

I make those points to draw attention to the defects in the Bill. I am sure that there is much more that I could say. I regret the fact that, under the Budget, money will be rolled out for the Maze project, which will be blighted by building on the site of the prison to incorporate the divisive prison buildings. We need a conflict resolution centre. Why do we want to build it where it will be blighted and divisive? Let us build it where there is no baggage to bring that bite to it. However, under the Budget, that is exactly what we will see.

I make those few points, and there will be other opportunities to make further points. However, I want to apologise to the Minister: I am usually assiduous in waiting to hear ministerial replies. On this occasion, I have a commitment, which means that I will probably not be here for his reply. That is no disrespect to him, but I am sure that he will be his gentle self and be as gentle with me as I am with him.

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Member gave way. I am glad that the honourable Member's wife has a stronger pull on his commitment than I do. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: I wish that were the case. Alas, it is a commitment in my constituency that sadly has a stronger pull, and that has nothing to do with my wife.

Mr Agnew: I will try to be brief, and, hopefully, Jim can stay to hear some of the Minister of Finance's response. As leader of the Green Party in Northern Ireland, I will give my views on the Budget Bill. I also speak as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

As the Committee Chair mentioned, the Committee was surprised at the reduced requirements of Invest NI. Unfortunately, a pattern already exists, with money being given back on two occasions. Invest NI explained to the Committee that that is due to projects to which it had committed being unable to find match funding. That is understandable because of the economic downturn, the reduction in businesses' ability to invest and the inaccessibility of credit.

In that regard, I welcome the proposed Invest NI £50 million loan fund. Before that announcement was made, I had raised the issue of setting up a similar type of public bank. Although I do not presume that the Minister of Finance said, “Steven Agnew suggested this; what a great idea” — I did not think so, Minister — I am glad that the Minister is of a like mind because it is a valuable initiative to help businesses to access credit.

I have asked whether a loan from the Invest NI loan fund could be used alongside other Invest NI supports. It appears

that that would not be the case where a combination of the two supports would result in more than 50% of a project's funding being met. Therefore, although I have some concern about how effective the loan fund will be, I appreciate that there are rules on state aid that we cannot infringe.

6.30 pm

What the giving back of Invest NI money shows is that, UK-wide, despite the coalition Government's promises that the private sector will step up to the plate to create jobs that have been lost in the public sector, their strategy to cut the public sector and, thereby, suck money out of the economy, is failing. Indeed, the Government's predictions of growth have shown continually, on each occasion, to be overestimated. They have had to revise their estimates on a number of occasions.

Essentially, we are seeing evidence that we need to take a Keynesian-based approach and invest in public sector works at a time when Invest NI is coming to the Committee and saying that the private sector is unable to step up to the plate because of the economic downturn and the inaccessibility of credit. The Assembly and the Executive need to invest in public spending in order to boost the economy. In fact, a scheme of public works is needed that will create jobs, reduce the burden of household energy bills and contribute to the fight against climate change. Of course, I am referring to the green new deal. A mere £12 million has been allocated in the Budget to a project that, as the Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment said, should be a priority for the Executive. A mere £12 million has been allocated over three years, yet, in a single year, £23 million was spent on the social protection fund. That fund gives a one-off payment, which I am sure is very welcome, to households that struggle to pay their energy bills. However, had that money been used to retro-fit homes, instead of being a one-off payment, it would be a payment to households that keeps giving through energy-efficiency measures and becomes ever more valuable as energy prices continue to rise.

As well as the insufficient resources that have been allocated to the green new deal, the spending of those limited resources is being held up by a series of bureaucratic roadblocks. As dole queues grow ever longer, home energy bills continue to rise and climate change continues unabated, the Executive have failed to act to progress the green new deal. The economist Mike Smyth was speaking to the Committee for Finance and Personnel when he said:

“Research shows that the most effective way of creating and maintaining employment at present is retro-fitting houses.”

I hope that the Minister of Finance and Personnel and the Minister for Social Development, who have lead responsibility in that area, will take that on board.

In recent weeks, we have heard much talk about the devolution of tax-varying powers. I welcome the fact that the Finance Minister has admitted that, in the current Budget period, the Assembly cannot afford the proposed cut to corporation tax, as my party has stated all along. The further cuts to public expenditure that would be required as a result of the corporation tax cut would, inevitably, lead to job

losses and further devastation of public services, which are already under considerable pressure.

I must challenge the assumption, which underlies the Budget and will underlie the Programme for Government, of the necessity — often unchallenged — to rebalance the Northern Ireland economy. Although it is often pointed out that 60% of our population is employed in the public sector, Sweden employs a similar proportion and it is considered to have world-class public services and a relatively stable economy. It is certainly not suffering in the same way as Greece, where public sector cuts are continually imposed and no recovery is in sight. We should be proud of our NHS and our education system, but we could look at the Swedish model to see how we can improve our public services.

One of the core principles of my party is to take decisions at the lowest effective level. Although we would like to travel the road to greater fiscal autonomy, we should learn to walk before we can run, and the Green Party does not believe that the Northern Ireland economy is in a place where it would make sense to take on greater fiscal autonomy. We should, however, use the fiscal levers that we have in a progressive manner to ensure that those with the broadest shoulders bear the biggest burden. That is why my party and I welcomed the Minister's large retail levy.

Jennifer McCann pointed out that perhaps we are not doing enough as an Assembly and an Executive to support the most vulnerable. In that regard, we need to look again at our domestic rating system. The cap on rates that means that those who live in modest houses subsidise those who live in mansions must be lifted. When families on low incomes are struggling, we cannot justify their subsidising the wealthy. I do not know how we justify that or allow it to happen.

Mr Wells: I am surprised at the honourable Member's comments. Given that he represents North Down, he must know that quite a few of those who occupy those large houses are widows or widowers. At some stage in their lives, they perhaps had significant incomes, but they have lost their life partners and could not possibly have afforded the rates demands that were initially indicated pre-devolution. Those were so onerous that they would have driven those individuals into bankruptcy. How would the Member have dealt with that? That situation was so prevalent that the Finance Minister capped the overall amount that they would have to pay in rates at quite a high level.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is my understanding that the cap is set at £400,000. In business and domestic settings, we look at assets as a form of wealth, as we must do. Although I appreciate the Member's point, in my constituency, many people live in what would have previously been referred to as council estates, in houses that are damp and not energy-efficient — I know that the Member will understand the need to improve the energy efficiency of homes — yet they pay rates to subsidise those who live in houses that are valued at more than £400,000. I do not think that we can have people in estates subsidising those who live in better housing.

Mr Wells: Nonsense.

Mr Agnew: The Member may disagree with me, but as an elected representative, I reserve the right to make my point.

We hear much about efficiency savings, but often, rather than those, we actually see top-slicing and cuts. The Executive will rightly seek, in the Programme for Government — when we see it — to tackle a number of cross-cutting issues. We could make genuine efficiencies in tackling cross-cutting issues through the pooling of budgets between Departments. Although they engage with one another through ministerial subcommittees and consultation, Departments need to move beyond simply talking to one other and towards collaborative working and the pooling of limited resources to ensure that they can go further. While Departments continue to operate in silos, limited resources will be wasted.

Another advantage of pooling budgets would be to help Departments to engage in preventative spending. Earlier, Jim Wells pointed to the importance of the public health agenda in preventing ill health rather than simply treating it. Equally, the many ill effects of poverty need a similar approach. Northern Ireland has the highest level of child poverty in the UK, and the UK was ranked by UNICEF as the last of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in relation to child well-being.

Investment in the early years of a child's life is essential to tackle that problem. As highlighted by Professor James Heckman, the benefits of a £1 spend on children in their earliest years, from nought to six, would require an equivalent spend of £7 in adolescence to produce the same benefits. We need Departments to work together, and I speak specifically of the early years strategy, which, unfortunately, sits in one Department. We need such strategies to be cross-departmental and with a cross-departmental spend to prevent some of the ills that the Budget has to address.

Yesterday and today, we began the legislative process to allow the Budget to take effect, but my party continues to oppose the priorities of the Budget. We need to keep it continually under review to ensure that we spend our limited resources wisely.

Mr B McCrea: Today, we are being asked to consider two elements in the Budget Bill. The first is to approve the expenditure of £16 billion for last year, and secondly, we are being asked to approve on account £7.5 billion for the early months of the coming year. I am struck by those numbers, because the £7.5 billion that we are being asked to approve is getting close to half of the Budget.

Having looked at the issues, there are a number of points to raise, but I will confine my remarks to dealing with employment and learning and associated areas because I chair the Committee for Employment and Learning and I have a particular interest in those matters. Members have asked about where we might spend more money. Throughout the debate, I have heard Members' concerns about the levels of cuts to welfare and to the Budget in general. There used to be talk about £4 billion in cuts.

6.45 pm

We cannot look at the Budget in isolation. We have to understand that the money comes from Westminster. We have to understand that we are part of the United Kingdom; that, in December, the debt of the United Kingdom rose to £1 trillion for the first time in its history; and that it continues to increase. People sometimes worry about how

much £1 trillion is exactly. I do not know whether it is of interest to people here. I hear all these figures of billions and millions, and to put it in context: one million seconds is 12 days, one billion seconds is 32 years, and one trillion seconds is 32,000 years. So, if we repay our debt at £1 per second, it would take us 32,000 years to pay it back. However, we are not paying it back at £1 per second, of course. We are increasing our debt in the United Kingdom. Our debt stands at something like 64% of GDP. We are borrowing £143 billion a year, and this year alone, we had to service that debt at a cost of £48.6 billion. That means that the debt of the United Kingdom may well rise to 100% of GDP by 2015.

People ask, "Can we have some more money, please?" I have to say that that is highly unlikely. We will have to spend what we have got. I hear the argument from the Benches to my right that we might be able to get more money by raising taxes locally. The simple fact is that when 70% of Northern Ireland's economy is based on the public sector, you cannot raise the taxes that you need to fund the services that you want. There is no —

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, the Member is straying outside the real debate, which is the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. I do not know how many times I have repeated myself today: Members, in whatever they say, must try to link their comments to the Second Stage of the Budget Bill. Up until now, I have heard nothing from the Member that tells me that he is linking anything to the Budget Bill. I remind the whole House: let us try to link our comments to the Budget Bill.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, I take direction from you, of course. However, I am a little surprised that I have not been able to convey that, in addition, we are being asked that the Bill will authorise the temporary borrowing of up to £3,493,734,000 in 2012-13. That is a matter of great concern to the House. We can ill afford the borrowing that we are having to take on board. I admit that that borrowing will have to be repaid within the year. That is all part of the general discussion about the principles of the Budget, how much money we have, and where we will find it.

I refer to page 5, line 40 of the Budget Bill, which states that the Department for Employment and Learning was allocated £1,074,431,000 last year. However, from the Estimates that were agreed in the summer, we had to find an additional £55,468,000. It is my contention that that figure will rise, as it underestimates what we are going to have to spend. It includes, among other things, expenditure on youth and adult skills training and services, including employment. Mr Speaker, as you well know, unemployment is rising, particularly youth unemployment. In terms of the general principles, I suggest to the Minister of Finance and Personnel that we need to re-profile our Budget because we cannot increase it for the reasons that I have put forward.

There are Members who will advocate consideration of taking control of corporation tax because that would do us a favour in the longer term. However, in the short term, it would have a negative impact on our ability to provide services to the people who need them most.

In respect of the Bill's broad principles, I would like to look at the expenditure put aside for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I think that I heard in

an earlier speech that some £21 million was recently returned and that around £40 million in total was returned. The figures in front of me suggest that that has been consolidated into a figure of £13 million. The future of Northern Ireland lies not in direct grants but in the skills of our young people. We must tackle youth unemployment. We must give people the skills that they need to compete in an ever more difficult employment regime and world market. That is the issue that I would like people to consider.

Through the Budget, which is itemised in the Bill, precious little is being done for those who are NEET, particularly those with a disability. Only recently, I was talking to people from the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance (CDSA), an umbrella group for organisations that represent people with disabilities, about the fact that they do not have the funds required to do what is necessary.

Mr Speaker, although you thought that I strayed off the mark, I have tried to be very succinct and to the point, because I realise that the hour is late. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr B McCrea: Frankly, I know full well, as no doubt the Minister will remind us, that the Bill is just a tidying-up exercise and a Vote on Account and that the real debate on the Estimates will take place in the summer. Nevertheless, it is worth putting it on the record that given that tourism is an integral part of our economic development policy, we ought to be doing more to make sure that we have a tourism product that we can sell to the rest of the world. I think that it is a problem that some 70% of hotel rooms in Northern Ireland are occupied by people from here, not from abroad, and that there is only one direct international flight from here.

I will conclude by saying that I am a wholehearted believer in early intervention, which is where we should be putting our money. However, we have to realise that, to do that, we have to invest now to save in the longer term. We must see a re-profiling of our expenditure towards things that stop people getting into trouble or getting ill and that make sure that people have the proper life skills to succeed in this competitive world.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to my colleague for giving way. On the point of early intervention, does he agree that we need a proper, collective approach from everyone in the Executive?

Mr B McCrea: I thank my colleague for the intervention. It gives me a point on which to close this submission.

A Member: Submission?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, I understand the trouble that you had in trying to get Members to keep to the subject of the Bill. However, I do not think that you really had a problem with me in that regard. When trying to have a reasoned debate, it is right and proper to put out the issues that have to be dealt with. It is right that points of view be democratically challenged. Therefore, when Members turn round and ridicule others for trying to make a real point, they not only do democracy a disservice but show themselves to be unable to sustain an argument. When it comes to this issue, I will debate it in the Chamber and anywhere else. If

Mr Wells says that we have one in five nurses too many, I will challenge that because it is not right. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr B McCrea: I will conclude on that point but I am absolutely happy to take the debate on.

Mr Poots: I want to let the Member know that, in the next two weeks, Antrim Area Hospital will recruit 40 permanent nurses. It is under my Ministry and my party that you will get more nurses, not fewer.

Mr B McCrea: Mr Speaker, I want to let you know that I had sat down to finish, but the Minister was so keen to get up that I could not stop him.

Mr Wilson: From looking at the crowded Benches, I know that a lot of Members are here either because they do not want to take their wife or husband out tonight or because they want to encourage me to shut up so that they can do so. I am not sure which is the case.

A number of issues were raised. I want to go through them and thank Members for their contributions during the debate on the Bill.

I want to correct two figures that I cited earlier. The Bill contains a significant number of figures, and I want to ensure that the correct figures are reflected in the Hansard report. I stated that resources for use were £8.4 billion; that figure should read £18.4 billion. I am not sure whether that mistake was made by me or whether it was in the notes that I used. I also stated that the cash Vote on Account was £6,687,469,000, whereas it was in fact £6,987,469,000. That is so that the Hansard report contains the correct figures.

Many issues were raised, and I will go through them quickly. Some of them are repeats of what was said yesterday; where they are, I will try to avoid saying a great deal about them.

The Chairman of the Committee for Finance and Personnel raised the issue of the review of Budget allocations for 2013-14 and 2014-15. I want to make it clear once again that I will not conduct a fundamental review of that. It will simply look at where Departments were at the start of this year and where they will be at the final out-turn in May. It will investigate the causes of the differences and look at the pressures that Departments might have. It is important that we note the scope of the review. However, I would welcome input from Committees so that we can collate their responses.

Mr Storey raised the issue of education funding and the schools end-year flexibility scheme. The response to schools and the pressure on the schools budget are an indication of where it is important — despite what some Members' ill-informed comments, which I will address later, might have led us to conclude — that we look at spending throughout the year, identify reduced requirements and new pressures and meet those needs. Look at what happens with the schools budget. Mr Storey mentioned the £40 million. That was found within the Department's own resources. It was something that the Department produced itself. However, the £120 million, which I found in January and which I announced today as part of the money to be spent on the A5 — that is how we will fund the £120 million over the

next three years — is an example of how we have looked proactively at budgets to deal with them.

Mr Storey also said that utility bills have gone up. He will be aware that, in January monitoring, we made £3.7 million available to schools to deal with those utility bills. I am disappointed, and I have expressed this previously, that the Education Minister made a bid for £20.5 million for schools EYF, did not use it all and returned it in January when it is a bit late to reallocate it. However, we will work with officials from the Department of Education to ensure better forecasting in future.

Mr Cree and Mr Maginness raised the issue of Invest NI and the response to the economic downturn. I do not want to add to what I said yesterday, namely, that much of that spend is demand-led. Where firms cannot or will not take opportunities, the right thing for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to do is to return the funding so that it can be allocated to other areas of spend that were of themselves job-creating.

Of course, as is indicated by the amount of money that we have put into the headroom provision for DETI, where pressures are anticipated or where DETI anticipates that it can spend the money, it will be made available because the first priority in the Programme for Government is the growth of the economy. However, there is no point in the Department's simply holding onto that money. Mr Cree said that there should be other, innovative, ways of doing that.

This is probably not the debate to get into it, but Members throw these phrases out, and those kinds of phrases were thrown all around the House today. It is one thing to say that Ministers should be more innovative in looking at how they spend or raise money and another thing to leave it at that. If Members have ideas about how those things could be done innovatively, let them come to their Committees or to Ministers and raise the issues. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) still has the funds to promote 25,000 new jobs during the comprehensive spending review period, which includes 6,300 jobs through the jobs fund and research and development funding of approximately £300 million. DETI still has the resources for those jobs.

7.00 pm

Mr Maginness and his colleagues raised a number of issues, especially around fiscal flexibility. The Member for North Antrim made the powerful point that the resources that are available in this Budget would not be available to Northern Ireland if we were not part of the United Kingdom. He talked about those whose aspiration is to take us into, and to ally ourselves with, a country that is in very grave economic difficulties. What he did not say is that, equally importantly, there are those who, falling short of calling for constitutional change, want to loosen the economic ties that we have with the rest of the United Kingdom through seeking greater fiscal freedom. Equally importantly, those people ought to bear in mind the subvention that we get from the rest of the United Kingdom. How would we fill that gap?

Do not forget that there are people in the Treasury who would love to say that, if Northern Ireland wants greater autonomy, that is great: you take it and fill the deficit yourselves. I have the benefit of being here and also at Westminster, and I know the attitude that many English MPs

have towards Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the amount of subvention that is made available to them. There is nothing that they would like better than for us to seek greater fiscal autonomy because they could then reduce the subvention that they give to us.

Mr Bradley, Mr Maginness and Ms Ritchie raised the issue of fiscal autonomy. I do not know what taxes they wish to have further devolved, apart from corporation tax and air passenger duty, both of which they do not want to raise any extra revenue from anyway. They want to reduce the revenue from those taxes; they want to reduce air passenger duty and corporation tax. There is no extra money coming from that.

The only other two that were mentioned were motor tax and landfill tax. The SDLP needs to get its story straight. I think that it was Mr Bradley who raised the issue of motor tax, and I assumed that, since he wanted extra money to have the flexibility to deal with all of the shortfalls that we are going to have as well as welfare reform and extra housing, he wanted to have motor tax devolved so that we could increase it. The cost of motor tax will have to go up a fair amount if we are going to finance all the things that the SDLP wants financed through the devolution of taxes and putting those taxes up. Ms Ritchie cannot get the story straight, because she told us that one of the problems is that the poor motorist in Northern Ireland pays more for fuel and insurance. Mr Bradley wants us to devolve motor tax so that he can stick it up to pay for welfare reform, housing and Lord knows what else. At least get the story straight if you are going to come in here and make stupid proposals like that. That, of course, is the kind of attitude that we get from the SDLP

Mr Maginness talked about Invest NI and said that the money that was allocated to other jobs did not fill the productivity gap. He is right. However, if there is no demand for funds at the moment, there is no point in our not spending the money on job creation in other areas. As I said to Arlene Foster, if the opportunities arise for that money to be spent, we will be able to obtain it because of the importance that is attached to it in the Programme for Government.

Mr Maginness also raised the problems that local businesses are having with banks. We are, of course, liaising with the Treasury on Project Merlin and on the participation of local banks in the Government's credit-easing initiative. The Treasury has now confirmed that it is consulting UK-based banks to see how they are operating in Northern Ireland and how they can include provision of the additional money to see how it will be spent in Northern Ireland.

Judith Cochrane talked about the timing of the Budget Bill. I appreciate that the information was made available only on 6 February. We have a very short period for consultation, and the Bill then has to come here for the discussions that we have had yesterday and today and for accelerated passage. Her desire was that the review of the financial process would prevent this from happening in the future. The only reason why the information is presented so late in the day is that it has to reflect all the changes that have been made in the Budget over the year in question, and we do not know those changes until we have done the January monitoring. We also have to build in to the estimates the possible demands from Departments for additional funding. That is that headroom figure that we

are talking about, and you can leave that only until right towards the end of the financial year. So, even with a change in the review of the financial process, we cannot hold out any hope that we will speed up or give more time for the process. That is why I always appreciate the Committee for Finance and Personnel's quick work in collating information from Departments. However, Committees do some of the scrutiny during the year when they look at in-year monitoring changes, reduced requirements and Departments' bids.

Judith Cochrane also spoke, as did Stephen Moutray, about the reliance on the public sector. The public sector is important to the well-being of Northern Ireland. It is, of course, important anyway, because it provides many services that could not be provided otherwise, and it is the best vehicle for doing that. We have to bear in mind that, although we have a relatively large public sector in Northern Ireland, it is because our private sector is too small, and the secret is to start building the private sector by whatever means we can through the action of Invest Northern Ireland.

Jo-Anne Dobson raised the issue of the headroom that had been made for DARD for CAP disallowance. We have included a figure of £15 million that DARD believes it may have to pay out this year. That headroom has been made available. If the Department does not use it, it cannot use it for some other purpose, as it is there only for that one. The current situation with the TB and brucellosis compensation is that the taxpayer bears all the cost of animal disease. That cannot continue, because, since that is the case, there is no incentive for farmers to deal with the issue. I welcome the DARD proposals to put a cap on the TB and brucellosis compensation and to reduce the rate of compensation for in-contact animals.

I loved Mr Bradley's early remarks when he said something like, "Normally, we might have opposed the Bill, but, given the Minister's decision this morning on the A5, we have decided to support it." I am glad that the SDLP can be bought for a couple of stretches of road. It is very cheap. I must say, I am very pleased. In fact, now that I know that, we can perhaps use that information in the future. Mr Bradley asked whether we could give a guarantee that the rest of the scheme would be completed. The answer is that that will be dependent on what happens with the commitment from the Government in the Irish Republic. We have always made that clear. If there is no further commitment, the rest of the A5 will go into the mix with all the other road schemes in Northern Ireland. As it turns out, parts of that will be fairly low priority.

He also raised the issue of increasing the levers in the economic toolkit, and he spoke about greater fiscal freedom, as did Mr Maginness. Mr Maginness, of course, said that he did not want tax-raising powers but tax-varying powers. I am glad that he has come in for this part of the debate. All I can say is that, given that the SDLP sees those levers as being ways of financing some of the things that we cannot finance, the only conclusion that I can come to is that, if we had those additional powers, that party would want to raise the taxes from them. However, we know that it does not want to raise the revenue from corporation tax or from air passenger duty — although Ms Ritchie seems to think that you can reduce air passenger duty. I noted her words carefully. She gets mixed up on those things occasionally. She thinks that you can reduce the amount of money that you take in air passenger duty and the amount that you take in corporation

tax and that that will then release more money for capital schemes across Northern Ireland. How that quite works, I am not too sure. I know that people have accused me of being an economic magician, but, I must say, even my magic does not extend to reducing taxes and finishing up with more money. That seems to be the way in which the —

Mr Agnew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Givan: Steven thinks that they grow on trees.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Weir: That is what he means by the green economy.

Mr Wilson: You would have to be very green to believe all that anyway.

I welcome the endorsement that the insightful Mr Moutray gave me. Mind you, given that the First Minister used to hold my post, I think that he has perhaps blotted his copybook with some of the things that he said. Nevertheless, he made a number of important points.

He spoke about the importance of dealing with youth unemployment. First of all, the Minister for Employment and Learning has made it quite clear that he is bringing forward a strategy for that, and he has already put considerable amounts of money into it. He got £12.7 million in the monitoring rounds to deal with the Steps to Work programme, which will help young people etc. We are committed to finding ways of meeting the target. Do not forget that, over the next three years, he has a target, and money is included in the Budget for next year for getting 114,000 people back into a position where they will be able to present themselves and have the skills to move back into full-time employment.

He also spoke about government working with local councils. He made a very important point there, because, of course, local councils can borrow money, which we, as central government, cannot do. That is because when we borrow money, it scores against our departmental expenditure limit, so the amount of money that we have available from Westminster is reduced. Local councils are not tied in that way. Belfast City Council set a good example this week. It is going to use its borrowing powers for capital schemes in the city. That co-operation between central government Departments and local councils is something that we should be looking to build on, especially as the RPA will mean that additional powers go to local councils. So, it is something that we should be building on in the future.

7.15 pm

Kieran McCarthy talked about the funding challenges that face Edwin Poots and the changes that are required. He also talked about taking care of the elderly. One of the things, of course, that the Health Minister said is that, through implementing the recommendations of the Compton review, he will release resources from some very expensive health infrastructure so that they can be poured into looking after people in the community. That will take time. It is a great pity, as Mr Wells pointed out, that those steps were not taken by the former Health Minister. However, at least we now have a Health Minister who is vigorously pursuing that agenda, and I hope that he will be successful in doing so.

Mr Wells made a robust defence of the health budget. He made an important point about the health budget and the

money that will be spent in 2011-12, which we are now, through the Budget Bill, authorising. He said that we were told that that money would not be adequate and would have all the disastrous effects that he described. None of those things has happened, and they have not happened because we have a Health Minister who, instead of complaining about the amount of resources that were available, actually started to work with those resources and has done a magnificent job living within budget. He has not only lived within budget but has increased, in many cases, some of the services that the Department —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No. Normally, I would give way, but I will tell you why I am not, and I will refer to it later. The Member waltzed in here about three hours into the debate and made one of the most ill-informed comments and contributions that one could have made because he did not listen at the start of the debate. He then thinks that he can jump up and down like a yo-yo or a jack-in-the-box with interventions and smart comments. That is not going to happen. I do not mind giving way to Members who actually had the decency to sit through and listen to the debate, but the Member does not. He thinks that he is going to grandstand, but he will not on this occasion.

Michael Copeland raised a number of points. The first was about the need for social housing. Mr Bradley also made a point about the money that we had hoped to raise, and indeed had raised, from housing associations. The social housing programme will provide for 1,400 new starts this year. Mr Bradley seemed to have the wrong end of the stick when he said that we were going to take money off housing associations and that we had not got a penny off them. That was never the intention. We said that we would reduce the grant that was available to housing associations, which then freed up capital money for us. It meant that housing associations either had to dip into their substantial reserves or had to go out and borrow money in the market to build the houses. That has happened, and it has released, I think, £15 million this year from the capital budget, which has been made available to others. The target for social housing will be met this year. Of course, in addition, we have been able to put additional funding into schemes such as co-ownership. That in itself has made affordable housing open to a range of people who would not have been in that position before. The Co-ownership Housing Association will no longer have to use the lottery-type process for applications. It has had and will have sufficient money to deal with applications. In addition, of course, the Minister for Social Development and I met the banks to ensure that they would provide money for the mortgage element of the process.

I am hoping, next week or the following week, to look at how the scheme has worked to date. However, I will give Members an example. One family who were renting privately at £500 a month have now been able to purchase a three-bedroom house. They did not have to put down a deposit, because the banks agreed that, since we are carrying 50% of the burden and, therefore, taking the risk on any fall in the value of the house, no deposit was required. That family's mortgage and rent repayments now amount to £280 a month, as opposed to the £500 a month that they were paying before, thus giving them an additional disposable income of £220. That is how the money that we were able

to allocate during the year is now benefiting people. When it is expressed in terms such as that, we can see that this Executive have taken responsibility and looked at innovative ways of trying to help people look after their own housing needs in a way that is affordable. Sometimes we do not get credit for some of the innovative things that we do and the results from them.

Mr Bradley also raised the issue of the childcare strategy, as did a number of other Members, including Mrs Kelly. There is £12 million available over the comprehensive spending review period for the childcare strategy. OFMDFM is leading on the issue, and I understand that work is ongoing in that Department to develop the strategy.

I think that I have dealt with most of the comments made by Ms Ritchie, who mostly talked about not having enough levers. I do not know what taxes she wants to raise, because she has not quite told us what taxes she wants to raise or, indeed, how much we are going to raise. However, I will make the fairly fundamental point that, even if we did have the devolution of tax powers to Northern Ireland and even if the SDLP did suddenly get the courage to vote for increased charges to the public, this is not new money. Do not forget that every time that there has been a call to vote for these kind of things, whether on the issue of fees, water charges or whatever, the SDLP has always said no, it is not prepared to do it. This is not new money. It is simply a transfer of money from the people whom you are going to tax to public spending. Therefore, you take with one hand and you give with the other.

There is not going to be an overall impact on the economy unless the downward multiplier, the money you take away from people, is less than the upward multiplier, the way in which you spend the money at the end of the day. The difference is not going to be all that great. Even if we could get a sensible proposal as to what tax powers the SDLP wants devolved to Northern Ireland and even if we could get that party to raise its hand for an increase in those taxes, there is no guarantee that that would have any more than a neutral impact on the economy in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCallister raised the issue of health spending in Northern Ireland. He seemed to think that, somehow or other, Edwin Poots is now in a position to deliver on things because he is treated much more generously by an “obliging” Finance Minister than poor Mr McGimpsey was. Again, I have to explain to him that if he looks at the record of in-year monitoring allocations between this year and last year, he will find that, this year, I allocated £25 million to my colleague Mr Poots and, in the previous year, when his own party Member was the Minister, the allocation was £38.1 million. I was more than 50% more generous to his Minister than I have been to my own Minister.

Mr Poots managed his budget not because largesse was, somehow or other, thrown at him by an obliging Finance Minister; Mr Poots managed his budget because he is a proactive Minister who did his job responsibly and properly.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will not give way. The Member had every opportunity —

Mr McCallister: He will not look at page 7 of his own Bill.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Mr Wilson: Let me come to Mr Nesbitt's contribution. He said that he did not hear what I said, as he was not in the Chamber for the start of the debate. He did not hear because my words were drowned out by the noise of him shredding his speech, when he suddenly realised that it was irrelevant. Having heard his speech, I would not have liked to have seen the bits that he shredded, because the part that he brought to the House did not have much relevance either.

First, Mr Nesbitt asked why we had a four-year Budget. The reason is that Westminster allocated us money on that basis. We have to spend it in the years to which it has been allocated. We cannot say that we will take all the money and spend it in the first year; it has to be spent in the year to which it was allocated. That is dictated by the comprehensive spending review period and the allocation made by Westminster.

Mr Nesbitt then said that I had used the term “*ceteris paribus*”, which I did. It is an economic term that means “all things being equal”. He said that all things were not equal, because, hardly were we into the four-year Budget period before we were not spending money on fees and trying to find money for this or for that. I hate to tell him this, but when we talk about *ceteris paribus*, that is not its application, not in any budget. I do not think that even Mr Nesbitt believes that, when we get a four-year Budget, we do not expect a single thing to change over that time. Departments will find efficiencies. We cannot tell them not to find efficiencies and keep on spending, because that would mean that all things were not equal. We find ways of saving money, and we do not tell Departments not to save money because we have allocated it for four years and want to keep it rigid and tidy. If Mr Nesbitt understood the budgeting process, he would understand that there has to be flexibility in the Budget. As I pointed out to Mr Storey, that flexibility and the fact that we make changes as we go along — such as that announced earlier today — shows that we can use that flexibility for our benefit. Mr Nesbitt told us that his preference was for an election, then a Programme for Government and then a Budget.

Mr Hamilton: And then an Executive.

Mr Wilson: Yes, probably.

Today's exercise shows that you cannot leave a vacuum. The very fact that we had a Vote on Account for the first number of months of this particular year demonstrates that we had to make a decision. The money was available, and we could not have waited until after an election to decide how to spend it. What would happen to Departments in the interim? We worked out the Budget as soon as the money had been allocated to us by Westminster. The Budget reflected the Programme for Government as it stood then, and it still reflects the Programme for Government as it is now. Although there may be a desire, probably rightly, to bring the two closer, that was not possible when the money was given to us.

Mr Allister made a very powerful point about subvention from the rest of the United Kingdom. It was a sobering reminder to us all that cutting constitutional or fiscal ties with the rest of the United Kingdom and thinking that we can go it alone would be totally wrong, and we would be much poorer for it.

The benefit of the union is that we are better off as a result of our union with the rest of the United Kingdom. Regardless of Members' political views, they should at least recognise that that is the case.

7.30 pm

Mr Givan: They should be grateful.

Mr Wilson: It is not a case of being grateful; it is simply a case of recognising a fact of life, which is that there is benefit in being part of a bigger nation and a bigger union that can carry the burden of some of the disadvantages that regions have because of their geographical location, their structural problems or their historical problems. People who want to look at some other kind of arrangement need to bear that in mind and factor that into their thinking.

Mr Allister raised the issue of the A5 and where the money is coming from. He did not see it in the Budget Bill. I do not want to be pedantic, but there is no implication in the next year. The money that we are voting through and the decisions that have been made today about the A5 and other capital projects do not have any impact on the Budget for next year. In fact, there is a £900,000 difference, which can easily be found through in-year monitoring.

The problem arises in the third year, and the Member seemed to think that I did not have a clue where the money was coming from. I think that people know by now that I am not reckless in that way, and, indeed, even if I wanted to be reckless, I have a set of officials who would ensure that I am not. However, I made it clear to the Assembly that there will be an issue in the third year of the programme but it is one that I believe is manageable. However, it is going to require decisions to be made.

I will now come to Mr Agnew. He raised all the usual things that you would expect him to raise: retrofitting, his opposition to the devolution of corporation tax, the importance of the public sector and efficiency savings. In fact, he queried some of the efficiency savings. The efficiency savings are real; they are not a result of simply cutting or top-slicing budgets. I will give two examples that have come out in the monitoring round and in a recent PAC report. As far as consultancy is concerned, last year, we spent 38% less on consultants than we did in the previous year. Since I first took over as Finance Minister in 2009, that figure is down by over 66%. That is as a result of a decision by the Executive that every consultancy application that a Department made worth £10,000 or more had to come to a Minister, and the Minister had to be convinced that it was the right thing to do. The Minister could then ask questions about it, and, as a result, we have brought consultancy costs down. That is a real efficiency.

The other efficiency is the 3.8% saving on administration across Departments. That has released millions of pounds that can then go into front line services. So efficiencies were not simply about top-slicing Departments' budgets. They came about as a result of departmental officials and Ministers taking seriously the promise that was made when the Budget was discussed this time last year, which was that, over the Budget period, we would release as much money as we could to deal with front line services that were under pressure as a result of the cuts in the allocation that we received at that particular time.

Mr Agnew: I appreciate the efficiencies that the Minister outlined, but does he recognise that another way that Departments have sought to reduce budgets is through recruitment freezes, which mean that when people have left their job there has been no rehiring? In a number of cases, the jobs have been in front line services.

Mr Wilson: Departments have been asked to look very closely, because, very often, vacancies have been retained and those posts have been kept on the books.

You have got to ask yourself the question: if the vacancy has been there for a year and work has continued without that vacancy being filled, is that post essential? Those are the kinds of questions that you need to ask at that micro level to ensure that you are not spending money unnecessarily. Those are the kinds of things that need to be done, if we are going to make sure that services are delivered to the front line.

The last contributor was Mr McCrea, who gave us a lecture on how much we owe and the cost of it, and he was appalled at the £3 billion of borrowing contained in the Budget Bill. Had he been here at the start of the debate, most of his speech would have had to be scrapped, because he would have known that I made it clear that that borrowing of £3 billion did not provide additional resources to the Executive. It was simply a facility that we had for the better cash management of the system, where money drawn down to the account may not have come down at the same time as the money was being spent by Departments. To ensure that we had that efficient cash management, we had that loan facility. It does not mean additional resources; it does not lead to any long-term commitment to paying off; it does not add to the national debt; it does not add to the borrowing costs nationally. That was explained at the very start.

I thank Members for their part in the debate. I appreciate that it is late, but you still have time to get to whatever restaurant you want to go to and have a pleasant Valentine's evening.

I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is the Budget Bill, the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget Bill [NIA Bill 4/11-15] be agreed.

Adjourned at 7.37 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Programme for Government (2008-11) - Delivery Report to 31 March 2011

*Published at 9.30 am on
Tuesday 14 February, 2012*

**Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and
Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):** On 8 December 2011, the Executive noted and agreed the end-year Delivery Report for the Programme for Government 2008-11.

The Delivery Report provides a robust assessment of progress up to 31 March 2011 against the key goals and commitments as set out in the last Programme for Government and the departmental targets set out under its 23 Public Service Agreements (PSAs). The report also provides an overview of departmental initiatives to address the equality and good relations which form part of the PFG.

This report is an important milestone in measuring delivery against commitments over the past three years. Approximately 67% of the total number of targets have either already been completed or expect to be completed.

It is recognised that many targets have achievement dates beyond 31 March 2011. In such cases the report recognises the need for ongoing monitoring of the targets which have not yet been completed.

A copy of the report has been placed in the Assembly Library and is also available from <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/pfg-2008-2011.htm>

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 3 February 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Youth Work: Funding

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the level of funding allocated by their Department in the 2011/12 financial year to each youth work project and group in (a) East Belfast,; and (b) including groups that based in the city centre; and (ii) the duration of the funding in each case.

(AQW 4981/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): OFMDFM does not directly fund youth work as this is the responsibility of other departments. However, we do provide funding towards good relations and summer intervention work which either target or involve young people and youth workers in East Belfast.

In addition, OFMDFM funds a number of after school clubs in East Belfast. Details of this funding is included in the table below:

After School Club	Funding for 2011/12 (£)
Oasis Caring in Action Ltd	9,000
Short Strand Community Forum	10,865
Bloomfield Community Association	6,262
Ballymac Friendship Centre	11,300

OFMDFM Spending: West Belfast

Mr P Maskey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail their Department's, and its arm's-length bodies', spend in the West Belfast constituency in each of the last three years; and the proposed spend for each year until 2015.

(AQW 5312/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Expenditure by our Department and its Arms Length Bodies in the West Belfast constituency in each of the last three years is set out in the table below. An accurate forecast of proposed expenditure for each year until 2015 cannot be provided at this time.

Expenditure in the West Belfast Constituency by OFMDFM and Arms Length Bodies

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
OFMDFM	£409,676	£643,984	£367,785
Community Relations Council	£775,752	£1,107,070	£1,142,977
NI Memorial Fund	£296,000	£418,000	£639,000
Playboard	Nil	Nil	£56,222
Strategic Investment Board	£140,307	£377,695	£28,905
Total	£1,621,735	£2,546,749	£2,234,889

One Plan: Ebrington Site

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a breakdown of the estimated funding which will be provided, during this mandate, for the One Plan in Londonderry, given the commitment to its implementation in the draft Programme for Government.

(AQO 936/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our department has provided just over £30.5m expenditure allocation in the 2010 Budget for the development of the Ebrington site, which is a key element of the One Plan.

DSD has provided over £16m expenditure allocation as well as an additional £10m to City of Culture.

The Executive agreed the main principles and objectives of the One Plan at its meeting on 24 November and Ministers agreed to nominate a senior official within each department as a central point of contact for One Plan issues.

In addition, the Executive also agreed to provide any necessary support to Ilex in more effectively accessing appropriate EU sources of funds that may be available and in the seeking of additional funding streams particularly from the private sector in order to fully finance the spending set out in the One Plan.

Campaign Advertising: Freeze

Mr Nesbitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an estimate of (i) the savings that will be made by freezing campaign advertising, as agreed on 8 December 2011; and (ii) the expected resulting job losses in (a) the local advertising industry; and (b) the Executive Information Service.

(AQW 5856/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: It is estimated that there will be potential savings of £400,000 from the campaign advertising freeze.

The campaign advertising freeze is short-term and is in place until the end of March 2012. Therefore no assessment has been made of potential job losses in the advertising industry or the Executive Information Service.

NI Executive Website: Archived Statements and Publications

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why the archived statements and publications which appear on the Northern Ireland Executive website are limited to those produced post 2007.

(AQW 6084/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The current Northern Ireland Executive website was launched in late 2010 as the main online publishing platform for news releases for all Executive departments, and Executive statements.

At this stage it was decided only to publish information on the new live site which dated from the return of devolution in May 2007. This reflected current best practice in website management so that the website is current and up-to-date rather than being an online repository for all NICS departments' historical documents, statements and news releases going back over numerous administrations, including those under direct rule.

NI Executive Website: Removal of Historical Documents

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of whether transparent government is being promoted by the removal of historical executive documents from the Northern Ireland Executive website.

(AQW 6085/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We refer you to the answers provided to AQW 6084/11-15 and AQW 6086/11-15.

The NI Executive website features a feedback facility for enquiries and individual requests for ad hoc information. In addition, there are listings on the site whereby readers may request historical documents on specific areas such as RPA and PFG. Contact information for all departments is also readily available via the website.

Such arrangements are reasonable for accessing older information and are in line with the ethos of transparency in government.

NI Executive Website: Archived Statements and Publications

Mr Kinahan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they intend to restore the archived statements and publications produced pre-2007 on the Northern Ireland Executive Information Service website.

(AQW 6086/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We refer you to the answers provided for AQW 6084/11-15 and AQW 6085/11-15. There are no plans to restore the archived statements and publications produced pre-2007 to the Northern Ireland Executive website.

OFMDFM: US and Canadian Strategy

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the US Canadian Strategy.
(AQW 6209/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Northern Ireland Bureau, based in Washington, DC, is responsible for the delivery of the Department's US and Canadian Strategy. The Bureau also has an office in New York City. The Bureau's strategy of engagement in North America is driven by the Programme for Government. The strategy was developed by matching elements of the Programme for Government with initiatives being carried out in several cities and regions across the US and Canada. Given the limited number of staff and financial resources at the Bureau's disposal, activities have been prioritised on those areas which offer the greatest potential for promotion and co-operation.

The overarching objective of the strategy is to work with InvestNI and Tourism Ireland and other stakeholder interests to promote inward investment, tourism and to encourage strategic co-operation in key areas including education and research and development. The relationship with our partner agencies is strong and information and leads are exchanged on a regular basis. In terms of themes, the Bureau has promoted NI's Creative Industries Sector at events in Los Angeles and Washington, DC and its R&D capability and educational excellence in North Carolina and in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In the majority of cases, the activities undertaken have been enhanced by the participation of a member of the Executive or the Speaker of the Assembly.

Canada represents a key market for us and we share a great deal in common in view of the historical, economic and cultural ties that exist between our two countries. We see significant opportunities to further these links in building strong and mutually beneficial relationships to support economic growth and job creation here. The Bureau and InvestNI have established a stronger presence in Canada over the past year with the aim of supporting our businesses looking to trade in Canada; to attract businesses to invest here and in promoting our region as a great place to live, learn, visit, work and do business.

In terms of wider outreach, the Bureau has been active, over the past twelve months, in Washington, DC, New York City, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Silicon Valley, New Orleans, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Boston, the Durham/Raleigh Triangle in North Carolina and in Toronto and Ottawa. Each of the above cities was selected based on research which identified synergies with the Programme for Government.

From our own perspective, we have used our visits to the US to promote the local economy and to engage on a one-to-one basis with President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, members of Congress and potential and existing investors across the USA. We also have tentative plans to include a short visit to Canada after our visit to Washington, DC in March 2012.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Storey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the results of the consultation on the draft Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI) Strategy, with particular reference to education; and (ii) whether, in light of the consultation responses, his Department plans to redraft its key CSI priorities.
(AQW 6229/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Cohesion, Sharing and Integration consultation attracted 288 individual responses and these are available on the OFMDFM website along with the analysis report on the consultation (www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/equality/community-relations/csi-consultation.htm).

Party leaders agreed to the establishment of the cross party working group on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration in June 2011 and representatives from each of the five main parties were nominated. The group held its first meeting on 27 September 2011 and continues to meet on a weekly basis. The working group received a presentation from the consultation analyst at the outset of the process and this helped inform the work plan of the group. The current priority is to establish a political consensus and agree on the strategic direction against the range of issues raised by the consultation. The cross party working group will continue to work with a view to publishing the final strategy and an associated action plan in early 2012.

Many of the issues within the programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration are of a cross-cutting nature and there will be a need to seek departmental views and inputs to ensure that the document is as reflective and comprehensive as possible.

A number of the Department of Education's existing educational policies contribute to building a more united community. In light of the relevance of education to the wider good relations agenda, input on its role and impact will be built into the document before it is finalised. The finalised strategy will also reflect how departments can better align policies and resources in a more strategic way across the range of cross-cutting areas that contribute to meeting good relations objectives.

European Policy and Funding Arrangements

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the Executive's Strategic European policy and funding arrangements.
(AQW 6263/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Executive's Strategic European policy and funding arrangements are set out in its published European Priorities 2011-12. These can be found at:

<http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/index/co-operation/about-the-european-policy-and-co-ordination-co-operation/co-operation-european-priorities-2011-2012.htm>.

Bonfire Committees: Funding

Mr McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the level of funding allocated to Bonfire Committees in each local council, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6301/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM provides annual funding to district councils to administer the District Councils' Good Relations Programme. Each council prepares an annual Good Relations Plan based on the findings of their Community Audit and OFMDFM provides 75% funding for the programme and 75% salary costs for at least one Good Relations Officer in each council area. Not all councils have Bonfire Committees but some of them facilitate schemes and initiatives to address what are often contentious issues associated with summer bonfire events.

The majority of the funding allocated to such schemes is spent on diversionary activities such as Fun Days and family activities by way of promoting a celebratory atmosphere and reducing the potential for division and intimidation. Alternative events to traditional bonfires include beacons fuelled by willow chippings or gas. Many district councils use their own funds to assist with bonfire-related events in their areas. The Housing Executive also has funded some councils and community groups via its Housing Executive Bonfire Funding.

Details of the funding spent on bonfire-related activities by each of the district councils during the last five years is included at Annex A.

Annex B details the District Council areas where the Housing Executive has funded local Councils and Community Groups through its bonfire management programme: Housing Executive Bonfire Funding.

ANNEX A

Funding for bonfire related activity by council area

Council	2007 £	2008 £	2009 £	2010 £	2011 £	5 Year Totals £	Notes
Antrim	45,000	45,000	35,000	35,000	30,000	190,000	Funding via Environmental Health.
Ards	21,503	52,369	54,765	82,784	73,003	284,424	-
Armagh	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	No core funding allocated towards Bonfire Committees.
Ballymena	3,510	13,734	11,470	5,443	7,500	41,657	Council does not have Bonfire Committees, but "have had 3 schemes whereby local groups apply for funding of events associated with bonfires".
Ballymoney	4,400	3,000	4,000	12,000	3,717	27,117	Funding from both Community Safety and Good Relations.
Banbridge	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	-
Belfast	21,000	25,000	27,000	84,000	73,500	230,500	Includes all funding approved via the GR Partnership.
Carrickfergus	Nil	Nil	6,083	5,245	5,803	17,131	Bonfire Forum only established in 2009.
Castlereagh	2,000	2,000	3,400	8,400	11,000	26,800	-
Coleraine	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	-
Cookstown	Nil	2,050	2,600	1,400	Nil	6,050	-
Craigavon	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	No Bonfire Committee.
Derry City Council	50	50	50	50	6,937	7,137	Environmental Services Committee deals with Bonfires. £50pa is allocated to Bonfire Management meetings. The 2011 allocation is for a pilot-based training scheme for groups "engaged in Bonfires or alternatives to bonfires".

Council	2007 £	2008 £	2009 £	2010 £	2011 £	5 Year Totals £	Notes
Down	Nil	Nil	10,500	Nil	Nil	10,500	Funding via the Community safety Partnership. Capital spend on beacons.
Dungannon	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	-
Fermanagh	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000	5,000	Funding via the Community Safety Partnership
Larne	7,302	8,560	6,036	8,236	9,052	39,186	-
Limavady	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	902	902	-
Lisburn	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Does not have a Bonfire Committee.
Magherafelt	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	-
Moyle	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Does not have a Bonfire Committee.
Newry & Mourne	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Does not have a Bonfire Committee.
N/Abbey	Nil	Nil	Nil	36,015	34,536	70,551	Bonfire Protocol established in 2010.
North Down	7,500	7,500	7,000	13,300	2,400	37,700	-
Omagh	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	-
Strabane	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Nil	Has a Bonfire Committee but no resources attached to it.
Totals	113,265	160,263	168,904	292,873	259,350	994,645	

Annex B

The table below details the District Council areas where the Housing Executive has funded local Councils and Community Groups through their bonfire management programme

Housing Executive Bonfire Funding

Council Area	Year	Paid to Council	Paid to Community Group
Antrim	2007-08	£15,500	£0
	2010-11	£500	£0
Ards	2009-10	£500	£0
	2010-11	£1,500	£0
	2011-12	£1,500	£0
Ballymena	2009-10	£500	£0
	2010-11	£500	£0
	2011-12	£500	£0
Ballymoney	2009-10	£500	£500
	2011-12	£500	£500
Belfast	2007-08	£25,000	£0
	2010-11	£0	£1,000
	2011-12	£7,500	£0

Council Area	Year	Paid to Council	Paid to Community Group
Carrickfergus	2009-10	£500	£0
	2010-11	£500	£3,000
	2011-12	£500	£0
Coleraine	2011-12	£0	£650
Craigavon	2009-10	£0	£500
	2011-12	£0	£1,500
Down	2009-10	£500	£0
	2010-11	£500	£0
	2011-12	£500	£0
Magherafelt	2007-08	£0	£1,000
Newtownabbey	2009-10	£0	£500
Strabane	2011-12	£1,500	£0

Hospitality: Spend

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what has been the total spend on hospitality by their Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6358/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The following table sets out the total spend on hospitality by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in each of the last five financial years:

Year	Cost (£)
2006/07	78,523
2007/08	207,000
2008/09	238,000
2009/10	187,000
2010/11	116,237

Children and Young People: 10-year Strategy

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the findings of the mid-term review of the 10-year Strategy for Children and Young People.

(AQW 6367/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We have not reviewed the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People and have no plans to do so.

We are, however, evaluating the success of the 2008-11 Strategy Action Plan with a view to developing a successive Action Plan for the next period along with the governance arrangements required to support its implementation.

Racism Strategy

Mr D McIlveen asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Racism Strategy.

(AQW 6370/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Work has been ongoing to develop a new Strategy to replace "A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010". The Racial Equality Panel has discussed this at meetings during 2011 and will continue to progress this work through early 2012.

We consider that the six shared aims set out in the original Racial Equality Strategy are robust and comprehensive and that the section concerning the "Scale of the challenge" in the Strategy is as relevant now as ever before, although we remain open to suggestions as to how we might strengthen these six shared aims.

We are committed to developing the new Strategy through a partnership process with minority ethnic groups and the wider community, as was the case with the original Strategy.

OFMDFM: 0845 Numbers

Mr Girvan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much revenue has been raised by their Department, in each of the last three financial years, by the usage of 0845 numbers.

(AQW 6435/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In the last three financial years, our Department has not generated any revenue through the use of 0845 numbers.

Severe Weather Work Programme

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the work programme that was developed after the severe weather in December 2010, to enhance wider preparedness and resilience, as detailed in their Department's Business Plan 2011/12.

(AQW 6452/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A good deal of work has been done since January 2011 to capture and build on the learning points from the emergency response to the prolonged sub-zero temperatures of December 2010 and the subsequent rapid thaw which gave rise to severe disruption to water supplies.

The Civil Contingencies Group (CCG(NI)), led by OFMDFM, has significantly progressed a work programme aimed at developing new and enhanced arrangements to improve resilience to any future emergencies that may arise, not only those resulting from severe weather. These new and enhanced arrangements comprise a number of Protocols which include:

- A Co-ordination Protocol for Local Level Emergencies – to facilitate effective co-ordination of the multi-agency assessment of, response to, and recovery from local level emergencies.
- A Protocol for Escalation of the Multi-Agency Emergency Response – to facilitate the rapid, smooth and timely transition of the multi-agency response from the local to the strategic level.
- A Toolkit for Addressing the Needs of Vulnerable People in an Emergency – comprising a multi-agency Protocol for Identification of Vulnerable People; guidance on information sharing and data protection issues for use during the emergency response; and guidance to responders on the use of geo-spatial mapping to aid in the identification of the vulnerable and the targeting of resources to assist them during an emergency.
- A Collaborative Communications Process – for the co-ordination of the provision of timely, accurate and up to date information to the public and the media.

These new arrangements were tested in a large scale multi-agency emergency exercise which took place on 22 November 2011, involving 150 participants from a wide range of organisations including central government departments, district councils, health and social care bodies, and emergency services. The exercise proved very successful and concluded with a strong consensus amongst participants that the new and enhanced arrangements would significantly strengthen the multi-agency emergency response.

CCG(NI) has reviewed the findings from the exercise and agreed final amendments to the new and enhanced Protocols to ensure that they are fit for purpose. OFMDFM will continue to promote these arrangements and encourage all civil contingencies organisations to embed them into emergency plans, test exercising regimes and working practices.

It is clear that as a result of this work programme our collective ability to respond to, and recover from, a future emergency has been improved.

Asset Management Unit

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the Asset Management Unit has produced regular reports for the Executive, on better asset management in the public sector, as detailed in their Department's Business Plan 2011/12.

(AQW 6454/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Asset Management Unit (AMU) reported to the Executive's Budget Review Group (BRG) on 11 October 2011 on progress with meeting the Executive's asset management objectives, including establishing an Asset Management Strategy. The AMU is due to report again on 31 January 2012.

OFMDFM: Civil Servants from the Foyle Constituency who Work in Greater Belfast

Mr McCartney asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the total number of civil servants in their Department who live in the Foyle constituency and travel to work in the Greater Belfast area; and the total cost to their Department for subsidising the travel.

(AQW 6474/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There is one civil servant in our Department who lives in the Foyle constituency and travels to work in the Greater Belfast area. Travel costs are not subsidised by the Department.

Social Investment Fund: Parallel Structures

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the Social Investment Fund, to detail why so much has been invested in creating parallel structures and a layer of bureaucracy to administer funding, when there are already well established, proven mechanisms for identifying need and delivering services, such as the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

(AQW 6541/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: There has been no investment in creating parallel structures or a layer of bureaucracy to administer funding,

Area Plans coming from the Investment Zones will set out how they intend to address need.

In regard to proven mechanisms for the delivery of services, communities will then identify how best they feel services should be delivered.

Child Internet Safety

Mrs Overend asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the strategic development within their Department on child internet safety.

(AQW 6615/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety leads the Safeguarding sub-group of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. Child internet safety is one of the many issues upon which the sub-group has been focusing.

Children and Young People's Strategy

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the review of the structures which support the implementation of the Children and Young People's Strategy, to detail (i) what progress has been made; (ii) the terms of reference; (iii) who is undertaking the review, including names; (iv) the structures which form part of the review process; (v) the input to the review process from other Departments; (vi) how children and young people will be engaged and involved in the review; (vii) how the children and young people's sector will be engaged and involved in the review; and (viii) when the review will be completed and published.

(AQW 6625/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are currently evaluating the success of the 2008-11 Action Plan, with a view to developing a successive Action Plan for the next period.

Alongside this, we will be putting in place robust governance arrangements to ensure that implementation of the Children and Young People's Strategy is appropriately integrated with wider policy priorities and maximises outcomes for children and young people. In taking forward this work, we will take account of the views of stakeholders, including children and young people, in finalising our ideas.

Social Investment Fund: Area-based Approach

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the Social Investment Fund, to detail how an area-based response can cater for, and respond to, the needs of small marginalised groups, such as children with disabilities and their families.

(AQW 6685/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation, on the Social Investment Fund proposals, ended on 23 December 2011. There was a significant response to the consultation, which our officials are currently analysing.

The Social Investment Fund is an area based fund designed to tackle poverty and disadvantage across those areas in greatest identified need.

The Strategic Objectives of the Social Investment Fund are to support communities to:

- Build Pathways to Employment
- Tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation
- Increase community services and
- Address dereliction

It will be the communities within the Investment Zones who will bring forward Area Plans setting out their priority needs through agreed Action Plans.

At this moment in time, no Area Plans have been submitted so we are not in a position to know if marginalised groups, such as children with disabilities and their families will be targeted.

In addition, the Executive has also established a Social Protection Fund. This is designed to address the needs of individuals, to mitigate against the impact of the financial cuts on the most vulnerable in our society. The fund operates as an Executive Fund and it is up to Ministers to make bids as they deem appropriate.

Social Investment Fund: Children and Young People

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the interventions funded through the Social Investment Fund for Children and Young People, whether they would consider utilising the existing expertise, such as the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, to assist in the development of plans and the identification of priorities.

(AQW 6694/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Strategic Objectives of the Social Investment Fund are to support communities to:

- Build Pathways to Employment
- Tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation
- Increase community services and
- Address dereliction

It will be the communities within the Investment Zones who will bring forward Area Plans. It is entirely up to the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership if they wish to engage with the Investment Zones in regard to assisting them in the development of Area Plans and the identification of priorities.

Social Investment Fund: Community Plans

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Social Investment Fund community plans will complement the model of community planning which is being considered as part of local government reform.

(AQW 6695/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Social Investment Fund Area Plans should be a demonstration of community planning in action.

We would not envisage the Social Investment Fund operating in isolation from other key programmes. Clearly, we would hope that Local Government would develop their community planning process in ways that would add value to all key programmes and take account of mechanisms and structures which are already established so as to ensure added value.

Social Investment Fund: Area-based Approach

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how will they ensure that disadvantaged and marginalised groups, that are dispersed geographically, benefit from the Social Investment Fund which takes a solely area-based approach.

(AQW 6696/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation on the Social Investment Fund proposals ended on 23 December 2011. Interest in the proposals was high and we have received over three hundred formal consultation responses, which our officials are currently analysing.

The Social Investment Fund is an area based fund designed to tackle poverty and disadvantage across those areas in greatest identified need.

The Strategic Objectives of the Social Investment Fund are to support communities to:

- Build Pathways to Employment
- Tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation
- Increase community services and
- Address dereliction

It will be the communities within the Investment Zones who will bring forward Area Plans setting out their priority needs through agreed Action Plans.

In addition, the Executive has also established a Social Protection Fund. This is designed to address the needs of individuals to mitigate against the impact of the financial cuts on the most vulnerable in our society. The fund operates as an Executive Fund and it is up to Ministers to make bids as they deem appropriate.

Social Investment Fund: Steering Groups

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether steering groups, appointed under the Social Investment Fund proposals, will include groups listed in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, to ensure that they are representative of vulnerable and marginalised groups.

(AQW 6697/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation, on the Social Investment Fund proposals, ended on 23 December 2011. There was a significant response to the consultation, which our officials are currently analysing.

Whilst several key issues have already emerged, it would be wrong for us to detail these in depth at this time. Issues, such as the operational arrangements for the Fund, will only be finalised after the outcome of the consultation has been fully considered.

Social Investment Fund: Steering Groups

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the process of appointments to steering groups, under the Social Investment Fund, will be subject to independent oversight.

(AQW 6698/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation on the Social Investment Fund proposals ended on 23 December 2011. There has been a significant response to the consultation, which our officials are currently analysing.

Whilst several key issues have already emerged including the process for the formation of the steering groups, it would be wrong for us to detail these in depth at this time. All issues around the operational arrangements for the Fund will only be finalised after the outcome of the consultation has been fully considered.

OFMDFM: Administration Costs

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the reasons for the 18.1 percent increase in their Department's administration costs during this financial year, as identified in the Minister of Finance and Personnel's January 2012 Monitoring Round statement; and (ii) why their Department has overspent when most other Departments have succeeded in cutting their administration costs.

(AQW 6706/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The entire increase of 18.1% relates to technical changes agreed as part of June 2011 Monitoring, incorporating the reclassification of costs and budget transfers from other departments for services provided centrally by OFMDFM.

These are:

- Technical transfers into the Department for NI Direct costs (£0.5m) and Government Advertising Unit costs (£0.4m).
- Reclassification of Attorney General for Northern Ireland (AGNI) costs (£1.45m) from resource to admin as it is not a frontline body

The Department has therefore not overspent in terms of its administration budget.

Childcare Strategy

Mrs Overend asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Childcare Strategy.

(AQW 6819/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM is leading on the development of the Childcare Strategy in support of the draft Programme for Government action to implement a strategy for integrated and affordable childcare. This action requires co-operation and joint working across departments and agencies.

In December 2011, the first meeting of a high level working group, the Childcare Strategy Group (CSG), was convened. Chaired by a senior OFMDFM official, the CSG comprises senior officials from key departments involved in childcare provision. The work of the CSG will take account of the views of stakeholders, as well as other relevant information and research, and will put forward proposals to us on the development of the Childcare Strategy. The intention is to carry out a public consultation later in the year on proposals to promote the availability of high quality, accessible and affordable, integrated childcare provision.

Additional funding of £12 million (£3m per year) has been allocated to support the development of the Childcare Strategy. This funding will not replace existing baseline provision for the delivery of childcare services.

Programme for Government

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how the detailed guidance on Programme for Government (PFG) delivery will monitor, assess and evaluate how Departments work together to produce policies, plans and strategies consistent with the draft PFG; (ii) whether it will include guidance on addressing a failure to work together; (iii) whether the Executive will be consulted on the PFG delivery framework; (iv) when departmental action plans to deliver on the PFG will be initiated; and (v) what plans there are for consultation and public engagement on these action plans.

(AQW 6821/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A key component of the new Programme for Government (PFG) is a delivery framework which ensures that progress against the agreed priorities and commitments is managed with maximum effect. This framework, which was originally included in the draft PFG agreed by the NI Executive, draws on previous experience and best practice and makes provision for regular reporting and monitoring by officials within departments. Departmental Action Plans, which provide specific details for delivery, and identify particular roles and responsibilities including those associated with progression

and intervention measures, will be finalised as soon as possible and no later than the end of March 2012. The Action Plans are designed to take into account policies and stakeholder views that will inform and shape delivery of the Programme for Government commitments and priorities.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they are using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to source economic support for tackling poverty and disadvantage, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6860/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has established a Barosso Task Force Working Group which is addressing four key themes. Each of those themes will have a dedicated working group led by a senior official and a desk officer, an objective for whom is to build contacts in Europe.

OFMDFM is leading the Social Cohesion Thematic working group which is made up of officials from eight government departments who have agreed to collaborate to ensure a wide perspective is maintained.

Our officials will attend the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum (NIERF) set up by Belfast City Council which aims to provide a strategic platform for collaboration on EU policy and funding.

OFMDFM officials have also met with NI-CO to discuss how the Social Cohesion Thematic of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group can be brought to bear in assisting funding proposals from NI. NI-CO has 20 years experience in bidding for European Funding and can assist in sourcing economic support for tackling poverty and disadvantage.

The Social Cohesion Thematic has a dedicated desk officer to be based in Brussels, due to take up post mid-February. An objective of the desk officer is to source funding in Europe.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the key objective to explore best practice for tackling disadvantage in other regions, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6861/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has established a Barosso Task Force Working Group which is addressing four key themes. Each of those themes will have a dedicated working group led by a senior official and a desk officer, an objective for whom is to build contacts in Europe.

OFMDFM is leading the Social Cohesion Thematic working group which is made up of officials from eight government departments who have agreed to collaborate to ensure a wide perspective is maintained.

OFMDFM officials will attend the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum (NIERF) set up by Belfast City Council which aims to provide a strategic platform for collaboration on EU policy and funding. OFMDFM officials will be able to build contacts with organisations who have worked with other regions in tackling disadvantage.

OFMDFM officials have also met with NI-CO to discuss how the Social Cohesion Thematic of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group can be brought to bear in assisting funding proposals from NI. NI-CO has 20 years experience in bidding for European funding and can assist in utilising contacts in other regions to explore best practice for tackling disadvantage.

The Social Cohesion Thematic has a dedicated desk officer to be based in Brussels, due to take up post mid-February. An objective of the desk officer is to build contacts in Europe that will assist NI organisations in exploring best practice for tackling disadvantage.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they are using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to build on and share experiences of conflict resolution, in terms of peace-keeping, peace-building and peace-making, with other regions, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6862/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has established a Barosso Task Force Working Group which is addressing four key themes. Each of those themes will have a dedicated working group led by a senior official and a desk officer, an objective for whom is to build contacts in Europe.

OFMDFM is leading the Social Cohesion Thematic working group which is made up of officials from eight government departments who have agreed to collaborate to ensure a wide perspective is maintained.

Our officials will attend the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum (NIERF) set up by Belfast City Council which aims to provide a strategic platform for collaboration on EU policy and funding.

OFMDFM officials have also met with NI-CO to discuss how the Social Cohesion Thematic of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group can be brought to bear in assisting funding proposals from NI. NI-CO has 20 years experience in bidding for European Funding and sharing the experience of NI in Europe and throughout the world.

OFMDFM is making use of the EU programmes to build on and share experiences of conflict resolution by bringing forward proposals for an international Peace Building and Conflict Resolution Centre to be based at the Maze/Long Kesh which is currently seeking funding under PEACE III.

The Social Cohesion Thematic has a dedicated desk officer to be based in Brussels, due to take up post mid-February. An objective of the desk officer is to build contacts that would allow NI to share its experience throughout Europe.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, how they are using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to engage in communities, including the 'other' perspective, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6863/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has established a Barosso Task Force Working Group which is addressing four key themes. Each of those themes will have a dedicated working group led by a senior official and a desk officer, an objective for whom is to build contacts in Europe.

OFMDFM is leading the Social Cohesion Thematic working group which is made up of officials from eight government departments who have agreed to collaborate to ensure a wide perspective is maintained. The Social Cohesion Thematic group will also review the consultations on Programme for Government and the Social Investment Fund to ascertain and maintain a focus on those objectives that are of most importance to communities.

Our officials will attend the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum (NIERF) set up by Belfast City Council which aims to provide a strategic platform for collaboration on EU policy and funding. The NIERF has members from both the public and voluntary sectors in NI.

OFMDFM officials have also met with NI-CO to discuss how the Social Cohesion Thematic of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group can be brought to bear in assisting funding proposals from NI. NI-CO has 20 years experience in bidding for European Funding and a wide range of contacts that can assist in providing a wide perspective.

Social Investment Fund: Area-based Approach

Ms Ritchie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) when the determination on the Social Investment Fund will be made and announced; and (ii) what criteria will be used to identify areas which will receive funding.

(AQW 6884/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation on the Social Investment Fund proposals ended on 23 December 2011. There has been a significant response to the consultation, which our officials are currently analysing.

Whilst several key issues have already emerged, it would be wrong for us to detail these in depth at this time. Issues, such as the operational arrangements for the Fund, will only be finalised after the outcome of the consultation has been fully considered.

The criteria used to identify areas was set out in the consultation document as those areas of high deprivation, drawn together and resourced on the basis of:

- Neighbourhood Renewal areas
- multiple deprivation output areas
- Community Empowerment Partnership (CEP) areas (where relevant)
- Areas at Risk Programme
- Rural poverty measurements

We hope to be in a position to publish a consultation report in the coming months. In parallel, we will develop and bring final proposals to the Executive, with a view to having the Fund fully operational as soon as possible.

Foreign Direct Investment: Trade Missions

Mr McKay asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are planning to be involved in any trade missions to help secure potential Foreign Direct Investment.

(AQO 1098/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In the coming months, we plan to travel to Washington DC, Canada, India and the United Arab Emirates.

We will continue to promote our economic strategy and our investment strategy at the highest levels of the Obama Administration during our visit for St Patrick's Day.

We will then make our first official visit to Canada. Over 4 million Canadians have Irish or Ulster-Scots heritage and the historical, cultural and economic links between our two countries are strong. Plans are also in hand for us to meet existing and potential investors and to host a tourism event which will capitalize on the exciting tourist focused initiatives that will be happening both this year and next year.

We place a great deal of importance in using our overseas visits to promote the local economy. In fact, the promotion of the economy is the underlying objective for any visit we undertake.

By way of illustration, we would like to refer to the recent investment decision by the Chicago Mercantile Exchange – a world leader in the Financial Services Sector. We did not publish details of our visit to Chicago last September simply because the project was at a crucial stage and we wanted to get it over the line. We met with the company's most senior management team to promote business opportunities here and to assure those senior executives that the project had our personal support.

We also met with Jeff Smisek, the Chief Executive of United Continental Airlines. As a result of that meeting we were able to work with the Treasury to have Air Passenger Duty devolved to the Assembly. That intervention helped secure the Newark to Belfast route, our only trans-Atlantic service.

In both cases we worked quietly behind the scenes to deliver results. Those positive results may take months to come to the public's attention but the important factor is – our intervention makes a difference.

We also plan to lead a Trade and Investment Mission to India and the United Arab Emirates in April 2012, along with the DETI Minister.

This mission is part of Invest NI's 'Opportunity India' campaign and will be the first mission to visit the market in 2012. We will be meeting with existing and potential investors, key business influencers and university contacts and we will be reinforcing the message that the Executive is pro-business and is committed to growing our economy.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the key objective to build on exemplar strategies and delivery mechanisms, such as the Child Poverty Strategy, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6926/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has established a Barroso Task Force Working Group which is addressing four key themes. Each of those themes will have a dedicated working group and a desk officer, an objective for whom is to build contacts in Europe. In relation to child poverty, the Social Cohesion Thematic has recently appointed a dedicated Desk Officer to be based in Brussels who is due to take up post mid-February. These contacts will be utilised to build upon existing strategies and delivery mechanisms in NI bodies.

OFMDFM officials will attend the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum set up by Belfast City Council which aims to provide a strategic platform for collaboration on EU policy and funding. This forum will provide opportunities to build on exemplar strategies and delivery mechanisms of members and partners in other European regions.

OFMDFM officials have also met with NI-CO to discuss how the Social Cohesion Thematic of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group can be brought to bear in assisting funding proposals from NI. NI-CO has 20 years experience in bidding for and administering European funding for NI bodies. Through the development of a relationship with NI-CO, exemplar strategies and delivery mechanisms can be built upon.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made on the key objective to align with the Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative 'The Platform Against Poverty', as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6927/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Department has established a Barroso Task Force Working Group which is addressing four key themes. Each of those themes will have a dedicated working group and a desk officer, an objective for whom is to build contacts in Europe.

In relation to poverty issues, the Social Cohesion Thematic has recently appointed a dedicated desk officer to be based in Brussels, due to take up post mid-February. An objective of the desk officer is to keep abreast of developments in terms of EU policies, events and funding streams relevant to Social Cohesion and ensure this is fed back to the thematic group. This will assist in alignment with the Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative "The Platform Against Poverty".

The Social Cohesion Thematic working group is made up of officials from eight government departments who have agreed to collaborate to implement the aims of "Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12".

Our officials will attend the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum set up by Belfast City Council which aims to provide a strategic platform for collaboration on EU policy and funding. Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative "The Platform Against Poverty" will be one of the bases upon which funding bids will be pursued.

OFMDFM officials have also met with NI-CO to discuss how the Social Cohesion Thematic of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group can be brought to bear in assisting funding proposals from NI. NI-CO has 20 years experience in bidding for and administering European Funding and this experience can be utilised in aligning with the Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative "The Platform Against Poverty".

Programme for Government

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 6366/11-15, to detail (i) how often the reporting will occur; (ii) what the reports will contain; and (iii) when the reports will be published.

(AQW 7005/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Progress against the new Programme for Government (PfG) will be reported and monitored on a quarterly basis throughout the duration of the PfG cycle. The reports will include evidence and information from departments relating to the progression of commitments for which they are identified as being responsible for. The Delivery Reports arising from this work will be published at regular intervals.

Social Investment Fund: Public Consultations

Mr Flanagan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the number of people who attended each public consultation event on the Social Investment Fund; (ii) a breakdown of the cost of each event; (iii) for their assessment of value for money and possible greater engagement with the public if the events had been held in community venues; and (iv) what consideration they have given to using community venues in the future.

(AQW 7060/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The table below outlines the number of people who attended each of the six Social Investment Fund (SIF) consultation events and provides details of the costs associated with each event.

Venue	Attendees	Cost
Belfast	56	£1027.50
Derry/Londonderry	48	£669.00
Antrim	49	£505.00
Craigavon	50	£487.50
Enniskillen -	30	£377.50
Newry	14	£0.00

In selecting venues for the SIF consultation events, our officials had tried to ensure that in all cases they had a central location that was accessible to all, including people with a disability, offered the necessary communication equipment and was large enough to cater for anticipated numbers.

Mindful of value for money, officials had compiled an extensive list of possible venues, including some community facilities. The venues selected were those deemed most suitable based on the requirements we have outlined above. Possible future venues, including community facilities, would also be assessed against these general requirements.

Child Poverty

Ms Ruane asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the recent figures for child poverty and the Executive's commitment under the Child Poverty Act, whether they will ensure that all Departments play a full and active role in addressing this issue.

(AQO 1100/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Child Poverty Act 2010 required the Executive to lay a Child Poverty Strategy before the Assembly. The Act also places a statutory duty on departments here to describe the progress that they are making in contributing to meeting the target to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

To meet this statutory obligation, we co-ordinated the Executive's agreement to the 'Improving Children's Life Chances' Strategy. The Strategy was laid before the Assembly in March 2011. The Strategy sets out the priority action areas proposed by the Executive to address the issue of child poverty.

We continue to work with colleagues in other departments here to finalise a draft action plan which will detail those key departmental initiatives and signature projects to progress the strategic priorities and priority action areas identified in the child poverty strategy.

Crumlin Road Jail

Mr T Clarke asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Crumlin Road Jail project.

(AQO 1101/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A £5.3 million restoration programme has recently been completed at the Gaol. This will facilitate the opening of the Gaol as a visitor attraction and conference centre.

The Department is currently inviting tenders for an Operator to manage this facility.

The restoration work has also facilitated the commercial leasing of A wing at the Gaol. A number of proposals have been received and are currently being assessed. This process is at an advanced stage.

Arm's-length Bodies: Value for Money

Mr Hussey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they ensure that organisations such as Ilex demonstrate value for money.

(AQO 1102/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Arms Length Bodies operate with a degree of independence and flexibility. They must nonetheless operate within clearly defined parameters set by the sponsoring Minister and Department to ensure that proper governance arrangements and value for money are demonstrated in usage of public funds. The Department's Corporate Governance Framework sets out details of its corporate governance arrangements and provides an understanding of arrangements to ensure proper and effective management of the Department's affairs, its relationship with Arms Length Bodies including Ilex and the process involved in ensuring the proper usage of public funds in discharging allocated resources.

Civic Forum

Mr S Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Civic Forum.

(AQO 1103/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Following the restoration of devolved powers in 2007, the then First Minister and deputy First Minister considered the position of the Civic Forum in the re-established devolved arrangements and commissioned a review of the effectiveness and appropriateness of its structure, operation and membership. The review was also to make recommendations on the most appropriate mechanism for engaging with civic society.

The review was launched in 2008 with a public consultation exercise that attracted 60 written responses, which are accessible on the OFMDFM website. In addition, the review involved meetings with former Civic Forum members and stakeholders, and with similar bodies in other jurisdictions.

Analysis of the consultation phase of the review has been completed, and options for the future have been under consideration with a view to making recommendations to us.

Ministerial Sub-Committee for Children and Young People

Mr Spratt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the forward work plan for the Ministerial sub-committee for Children and Young People.

(AQO 1104/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Whilst there is no formal forward work plan, the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People is focusing on five key priorities:

- Safeguarding;
- NEETS;
- Special educational needs;
- Early years; and
- Vulnerable Young People.

Junior Ministers intend to discuss a number of proposals to streamline work across government to deliver further improved outcomes for children and young people at the Ministerial Sub-Committee meetings scheduled for April and June 2012.

As we are at the half-way point of the Ten Year Strategy, there will be a particular focus on the approach and timeframe for the development of the new 10 Year Strategy Action Plan for Children and Young People and the governance structures to support the development and delivery of the Action Plan.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy: All-party Working Group

Mr G Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the All-Party Working Group on Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.

(AQO 1105/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Party leaders agreed to the establishment of the cross party working group on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy in June 2011 and representatives from each of the five main parties were nominated.

The group held its first meeting on 27 September and continues to meet on a weekly basis. The working group received a presentation from the consultation analyst at the outset of the process and this helped inform the work plan of the group. The current priority is to establish a political consensus and agree on the strategic direction against the issues raised by the consultation.

The cross party working group will continue to work over the coming weeks with a view to publishing the final strategy and an associated action plan in early 2012.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Agri-food and Biosciences Institute: Recruitment of Board Members

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many applications were received for the recent recruitment exercise for the General Board Members of the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute; and how many applicants were shortlisted for interview.

(AQW 6534/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): A total of 29 applications were received during the recent recruitment exercise to appoint a Deputy Chairperson and five General Board Members to the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. Of these, 26 were for the position of General Board Member and 14 for the position of Deputy Chairperson (with 11 applications for both).

Seventeen applicants in total were shortlisted for interview. Prior to interview, one applicant withdrew from the process, leaving 16 to be interviewed. Of these, 15 were interviewed for the position of General Board Member and 10 for the position of Deputy Chairperson (with 9 interviewed for both).

Fishing Gear Selectivity Trials

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the fishing gear selectivity trials that her Department has committed to undertake with the fishing industry.

(AQW 6547/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The gear trials project which my Department is funding through the European Fisheries Fund is being carried out in partnership with industry. The Seafish led project team includes representatives from our 2 Producer Organisations, local net makers, AFBI scientists, and DARD policy officials. At its first meeting on 11th January the project team identified 5 different designs for highly selective gears for testing. The trials will take place on twin-rig and single rig vessels over a period of 20 days during February and March. The results of the trials will be reported to the European Commission and its Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF).

A successful outcome will mean that the Nephrops fleet will have the right technical solution for a highly selective gear which will enable them to secure an exemption from the effort regime as laid down in Article 11 of the Cod Recovery Plan.

Fishing Fleet: Restructuring

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when her Department will submit a business case on restructuring the fishing fleet to the Department of Finance and Personnel for approval.

(AQW 6548/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have instructed my Finance Division to have the business case with DFP in the next few days.

Watercourse Maintenance: Bellarena/Magilligan Area

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether there is a distinction in the water course maintenance work that is currently being carried out in the Bellarena/Magilligan area by both the Rivers Agency and the private contractors who are employed by the Rivers Agency.

(AQW 6550/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Whilst my Rivers Agency and the private contractor are both working in the Bellarena/Magilligan area, each is working on separate systems and independently of each other. The private contractor supplements the labour and plant resource available to my Rivers Agency. There is no difference in the standard of maintenance required from my Rivers Agency or the private contractor. The only distinction in the current works being carried out in the Bellarena/Magilligan area is the manner in which the work is programmed. For my Rivers Agency programming is subject to competing priorities and available resources. For the private contractor, once a work package is instructed, it is free to decide what hours it works and what resource it allocates to complete works within the contracted time period.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she has any plans to increase sentencing for crimes of animal cruelty.

(AQW 6600/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Last year my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, brought the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 through the Assembly. The 2011 Act replaces the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 and significantly increases the penalties for animal welfare offences. The maximum penalties in the 1972 Act are 3 months imprisonment and/or a £5000 fine on summary conviction. In the 2011 Act these will increase to a maximum of 6 months imprisonment and/or a maximum fine of £5,000 on summary conviction and to a maximum of 2 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine on conviction by indictment. The new penalties are stiffer than those

introduced in England and Wales in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which has a maximum penalty of 51 weeks imprisonment and/or a £20,000 fine.

I am pleased that the new penalties for all welfare offences become fully operational here on 2 April 2012. I can assure you that I take the welfare of animals very seriously and believe that the tough penalties in the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 will provide a strong deterrent, thus protecting animals from unnecessary suffering. I therefore have no plans to increase the fines and penalties further at this time.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what additional action her Department intends to take to combat animal cruelty.

(AQW 6601/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Last year my predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, brought the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 through the Assembly. The 2011 Act replaces the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 and is a major step forward in terms of protecting the welfare of both farmed and non-farmed animals.

I take the welfare of animals very seriously and I am committed to implementing this new legislation. The majority of the provisions contained in the 2011 Act came into operation on 11 July 2011, introducing a new duty of care for all vertebrate animals and new powers to take action to prevent animals from suffering as opposed to having to wait until suffering occurs. The PSNI also now has stronger powers to deal with animal fighting. The penalties for serious animal welfare offences have been increased and the new penalties for all animal welfare offences become fully operational here on 2 April 2012.

In addition, the Act provides powers to regulate, through subordinate legislation, a wide range of activities involving animals.

The 2011 Act will fully replace the 1972 Act as current subordinate legislation is remade under the 2011 Act. In the coming months I propose to introduce a range of subordinate legislation to protect the welfare of animals including: the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations, Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments) Regulations, the Welfare of Animals (Permitted Procedures by Lay Persons) Regulations and the Docking of Working Dogs' Tails (Certification and Identification) Regulations.

My Department will continue to work to prevent cases of cruelty and neglect concerning farmed animals and from April 2012 Councils here will have a new role in the enforcement of welfare in respect of non-farmed animals. My Department is providing annual funding to help Councils implement their new role, starting with £404k funding this year to meet their requirements as they prepare for implementation. Next year, £780k funding is available, which increases by £20k for each of the remaining 2 years in this budget period.

Assisted Rural Travel Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much funding has been allocated to the Assisted Rural Travel Scheme in each of the last three years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6602/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I refer the Member to the answer I gave to Question 5850.

European Fisheries Fund: Priority Axes 1, 2 and 3

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail any funding that is available for measures eligible under Priority Axis 1, 2 and 3 of the European Fisheries Fund that has not yet been allocated to a specific project.

(AQW 6657/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: €18.1m of European Fisheries Funding is available to DARD over the duration of the Programme period. This must be matched by national funding.

Preliminary allocations were made to Axes and Measures within the draft NI Investment Plan which was the subject to consultation with stakeholders. These initial allocations were subsequently confirmed through the completion of Measure Level Business cases. The Department is now reviewing these allocations in light of applications received to date, changes in demand and fluctuations in the exchange between sterling and the euro. It is likely that changes to allocations will be made in due course, where business justification can be made.

The following table summarises the original funding allocations and available funding by Measure of the EFF Programme.

Measure	Allocation (Draft Investment Plan)	Allocation (Measure Level Business Case)	Funding Allocated to Projects	Available Funding
1.1 Permanent cessation of fishing activities	£10.28m	£4.00m	£0m	£4.00m
1.3 Investments onboard fishing vessels & selectivity		£2.50m	£0.234m	£2.266m

Measure	Allocation (Draft Investment Plan)	Allocation (Measure Level Business Case)	Funding Allocated to Projects	Available Funding
1.4 Small-scale coastal fishing	£1.00m	£0.600m	£0m	£0.600m
2.1 Investments in Aquaculture	£1.60m	£1.60m	£0.293m	£1.307m
2.2 Aqua-environmental Measures	£0.48m	-	-	£0.480m
2.3 Fish processing and marketing	£2.40m	£2.40m	£0.903m	£1.497m
2.3.1 Animal Health measures	£0.080m	-	-	£0.080m
3.1 Collective actions	£2.80m	£2.42m	£2.557m	£0
3.2 Protection of Flora & Fauna	£1.60m	£1.50m	£1.50m	£0
3.3 Ports, landing sites and shelters	£3.52m	£3.50m	£3.027m	£0.473m
3.4 New markets and promotional campaigns	£0.80m	-	-	£0.800m
3.5 Pilot Operations	£1.20m	-	-	£1.200m

European Fisheries Fund: Priority Axes 1, 2 and 3

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to detail all the funding allocations to date under Priority Axis 1, 2 and 3 of the European Fisheries Fund; (ii) to detail, in each case, the article of regulation 1198/2006 EC under which support is granted; and (iii) to indicate, in each case, the actual or anticipated completion date of the measure.

(AQW 6659/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The following table summarises the current funding allocations, and references the Article under which each Measure is supported. While all funding commitments to projects supported under each Measure must be made by 31 December 2013, the Regulation allows for spend against those commitments to continue until December 2015.

It is the Department's aim to have all EFF spending completed on all measures by 31 December 2014 in order to facilitate the timely introduction of the 2014-2020 European and Maritime Fisheries Fund in 2014.

Measure	Current Allocation to Measure	Funding Allocated to Projects	Article of 1198/2006
1.1 Permanent cessation of fishing activities	£4.00m	£0m	23
1.3 Investments onboard fishing vessels & selectivity	£2.50m	£0.234m	25
1.4 Small-scale coastal fishing	£0.60m	£0m	26
2.1 Investments in Aquaculture	£1.60m	£0.293m	29
2.2 Aqua-environmental Measures	* £0.48m	£0	30
2.3.1 Animal Health measures	* £0.08m	£0	32
2.3 Fish processing and marketing	£2.40m	£0.903m	35
3.1 Collective actions	£2.42m	£2.557m	37
3.2 Protection of Flora & Fauna	£1.50m	£1.50m	38
3.3 Ports, landing sites & shelters	£3.50m	£3.027	39
3.4 New markets and promotional campaigns	* £0.80m	£0m	40
3.5 Pilot Operations	* £1.20m	£0m	41
Funding made available for reallocation following preparation of Measure Level Business Cases	£6.76m	£0m	

* Preliminary allocation made to these Measures in the draft NI EFF Investment Plan

Southern Organisation for Action in Rural Areas

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what measures she is using to ensure that all the communities in the SOAR (Southern Organisation for Action in Rural areas) cluster area are availing of her Department's funding opportunities on an equal and fair basis.

(AQW 6687/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very keen to ensure that all communities right across the north avail of my Department's funding opportunities on an equal and fair basis. In the Southern Organisation for Action in Rural Areas (SOAR) Cluster, like all clusters, calls for applications for funding are advertised in local press (13 local Newspapers in SOAR) which cover all communities. Information sessions are held in locations which are easily accessible to all communities and Local Action Groups (LAGS) made up of local people from all walks of life pro actively market the programme and encourage applications. Ensuring equality in terms of representation on and participation in the LAG is of key importance. This is to ensure that equality issues across all Section 75 sectors are fully informing the direction of the programme and how the programme is managed and delivered.

In addition TADA Rural Support Network, funded by my Department, works with a wide spectrum of disadvantaged communities and groups in the SOAR Cluster area and supports them to avail of funding opportunities.

Gorse Fires

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what meetings have taken place between her departmental officials and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, to discuss the prevention of gorse fires in 2012.

(AQW 6727/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has participated in four meetings of the Inter-departmental Steering Group on Wildfires since September 2011 which is chaired by the NI Environment Agency's Director of Natural Heritage This Group discussed stakeholder responsibilities regarding the prevention of gorse fires. The Group will report on its findings to the Minister of the Environment in February 2012. DARD and NIEA were also represented at a workshop in November 2011 entitled "The impact of wildfires on biodiversity in NI".

Farmers: Administrative Burden

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken to reduce the administrative burden on farmers.

(AQW 6752/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Over the last number of years my Department has been taking forward a programme of regulatory investigation and analysis with the key goal being to reduce the amount of administrative burden that the Agri-food industry in the north of Ireland has to comply with.

In 2007 my predecessor Michelle Gildernew, along with her Ministerial colleague at the time from the Department of Environment Arlene Foster, asked an independent panel to review the regulations that apply in the agri-food sector in the north of Ireland with a view to simplifying and reducing the administrative burden placed on farmers and the industry generally.

The NI Agri-Food Better Regulations and Simplification Review was published in April 2009 and the recommendations put forward by the Independent Panel provided my Department with an opportunity to review and evaluate a wide range of policy areas and regulations. Furthermore, my Department agreed to a target to reduce the administrative burden on the agri-food sector by 25% by 2013, with an interim target of 15% by 2011

Since then the department has been actively taking forward an extensive programme of work to give effect to the 63 recommendations put forward by the Independent Panel which have been accepted or accepted in principle. Part of my Departments response was a commitment to develop an action plan to implement, monitor and review the accepted recommendations. The action plan was published on 5 January 2011 following a detailed scrutiny by the ARD Committee.

The Department is constantly striving to improve its approach to policy development, simplify existing legislation and ensure that all new initiatives are of a high quality. The introduction of sheep EID from 1 January 2010 brought with it several simplification measures. For example, Markets, Meat Plants and Export Assembly Centres (EACs) are approved as Central Points of Recordings (CPRs). CPRs read tags on behalf of keepers and give them a list of their tag numbers, which keepers must keep with their flock register. This means that keepers, who move sheep to a CPR, do not have to read tags and record tag numbers on the movement document, which is a significant benefit.

Since April 2011 my Department has delivered 50 training courses on the use of APHIS Online accommodating 725 farmers with a further 33 courses planned before the end of March 2012. This training and increased promotion of APHIS Online has seen cattle birth registrations via this channel rise from 34% in December 2010 to 42% in December 2011. This service allows 24 hour access to records and is in keeping with customers expectations. Computerisation of the application process for Agri-environment schemes has also contributed to reducing the administrative burden for farmers who participate in the new Countryside Management Scheme. Also, my Department received 5,880 online Single Farm Payment applications during the 2011 scheme year which shows that farmers are keen to take advantage of alternative methods of communicating with the Department in ways which reduce the time and cost they are asked to spend on paperwork.

Plans to extend the telephony registration pilot across the north have been put in place and rollout of this service should be completed by the end of February 2012. This will enable all herd keepers in here to register births via telephone, eliminating the need to complete an MC1 form.

In addition the Department has eliminated herd size as a factor when synchronising annual Brucellosis surveillance herd tests with any due TB herd test. Furthermore, from 1 January 2011 the minimum level of Cattle Identification Inspections (CIIs) was reduced allowing my Department to reduce the number of CIIs from 5% to 3% which is approximately 700 inspections based on a total of approximately 23,300 holdings.

These are just some of the actions my department has taken to reduce the administrative burden on farmers. My Department has recently completed the interim re-measurement exercise which has demonstrated a reduction in administrative burden of 4.3%. We are currently validating this figure with industry representatives who originally worked with us to agree the baselines. The progress made to date has been slower than I would have wanted to see. This is due mainly to the nature of the key actions which the Action Plan highlights to be delivered, the vast majority of which are based on EU Regulations. Nevertheless, I am encouraged by the fact that we are making progress and moving in the right direction.

As we continue to move forward my Department wants to work closely with industry to ensure that the regulatory environment in which we operate has the appropriate level of governance without being unduly burdensome whilst at the same time maintaining our high quality standards. I feel it is vital important that we make every effort to reduce red tape where possible for the future prosperity of the industry in the north and I want to see more progress being made on the ground that reduces the administrative burden for those in the Agri-Food industry and which helps them to grow their businesses.

I have asked my officials to go out and talk to agri businesses and the wider rural community, who have an important role to play in this process, to listen to their concerns on red tape issues. It is only by working together can we ensure that there are proportionate measures in place to regulate in an accountable way which best protects the public and at the same time allows businesses to grow.

Single Farm Payment Scheme

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress her Department has made on making payments under the Single Farm Payment Scheme to farmers.

(AQW 6753/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: A total of 37,854 potentially eligible applications were submitted under the 2011 Single Farm Payment Scheme. My Department's targets for processing such claims were to complete 83% for receipt of any payment due by the end of December 2011 and 90% by 31 January 2012. I am pleased to say that we were able to exceed the December target with 85.3% having been completed, and we have also since achieved the January payment target of 90%. Single Farm Payments worth a total of £234.4 million were paid out by the end of January.

Food Production Sector: Jobs and Growth

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps have been taken to promote jobs and growth in the food production sector.

(AQW 6755/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: DARD is working in partnership with other Departments to support the agri-food sector in its efforts to become more market-led and to move forward with confidence in building an export-led economic recovery.

My Department's main financial mechanism to support the sector in developing business opportunities is the Rural Development Programme (RDP). Schemes such as the Processing and Marketing Grant (PMG) Scheme, provide support towards capital investment in the sector, I have recently announced that the PMG scheme has reopened for applications until 24 February 2012. This scheme, along with the Supply Chain Development Programme are together worth approximately £23m over the course of the current RDP

Further support is provided through the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) including dedicated food technologists and a food incubation centre at Loughry campus. These facilities support agri-food businesses develop innovative products, while scientific research support is available through AFBI.

My Department also administers the EU Protected Food Names Scheme. This provides a system for the protection of food names on a geographical or traditional basis and is a valuable promotional tool. I am delighted that the "Lough Neagh Eel" has been recognised by the EU and, as you may have seen from the press, "Comber Earlies" are set to become our second protected food name. I would encourage other groups to consider the benefits of this scheme.

Another support mechanism is DARD's Regional Food Programme which has allowed organisations such as the Pork and Bacon Forum and Dairy Council to actively promote the quality products provided by our producers and processors. By raising the profile of produce through the schemes I have outlined, we can send out a strong message to consumers that local food is good quality, wholesome food. In doing so we can stimulate demand and increase sales, assisting DARD's aim of developing a thriving, sustainable rural economy.

I am delighted that the importance of the sector has been recognised by the Executive and the draft Programme includes a target to develop a strategic plan for the agri-food sector. In support of this, my Department is working with DETI/InvestNI to establish a Food Strategy Board (FSB) whose role will be to develop and implement this strategic plan.

The FSB will be industry-led as it is vital that the industry itself identifies and agrees its growth targets. Government will continue to play an important supporting role, however ultimately the growth of the sector can only be achieved by the industry itself.

The work of the FSB will be instrumental in helping to shape the future of the sector. I look forward to the Board being established so that it can begin the important work of further developing a strategic vision to support growth and employment in this important sector.

Farmers: Inspections

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in reducing the regulatory burden of inspections for farmers.

(AQW 6756/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: From the introduction of SFP in 2005, my Department has worked to streamline its inspection process. Currently my inspectors undertake land eligibility and cross-compliance GAEC inspections in one visit with farmers to be inspected for cross-compliance purposes selected mainly using a risk analysis methodology with a smaller element chosen on a random basis. Moreover, the current practice in this risk analysis allows for positive weightings for membership of, for example, Farm Quality Assurance Schemes and Organic Schemes.

Furthermore, from 1 January 2011 the minimum level of Cattle Identification Inspections (CIIs) was reduced allowing my Department to reduce the number of CIIs from 5% to 3% which is approximately 700 inspections based on a total of approximately 23,300 holdings.

At this time Veterinary Service is making every effort to ensure that routine Brucellosis herd tests are synchronised, with any TB herd test that is due, so as to reduce the regulatory impact of these essential tests on farmers. The average level of synchronisation in 2010/11 was 87% in herds of twenty animals or less and 92% in herds of more than 20 animals.

Looking to the future, my Department is also making good progress towards eradicating Brucellosis in the north of Ireland and if this progress is maintained we could see brucellosis eradicated within 3 years. This is expected to lead to obtaining officially brucellosis free status here, allowing significant easements in the testing regime and hence reduced regulatory burden. However, it is essential that the current programme is sustained for the present as experience has taught us that brucellosis hotspots can develop with risk of considerable spread.

The south has already achieved EU officially brucellosis-free status and we are liaising closely with them so as to maximise the benefits to the north and south that freedom from Brucellosis will support.

DARD's Brucellosis programme (testing, laboratory costs, animal compensation, etc) is some £10 million with a further annual compliance cost to farmers of some £7 million. However, achieving success in the eradication of Brucellosis Programme will considerably reduce costs and farm business disruption in the future and is therefore a key component of my Departments strategic efforts to reduce regulatory burden.

My Department is continuing to investigate the use of new technologies, such as aerial photography and satellite imagery, to reduce the impact on farmers of land eligibility inspections for Single Farm Payment and Less Favoured Area Compensatory Allowance scheme.

My Department's inspection regime is based upon what is required by law and it is my Department's policy to maintain inspection levels at the minimum that is required.

DARD: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when her Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 6815/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 14 January 2012.

Flooding: Finaghy

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide details of any investigative or remedial work carried out in response to reports of flooding in the vicinity of (i) Ormonde Park, Finaghy; (ii) Finaghy Park Central; and (iii) Lille Park, Finaghy, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6824/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Minister for Regional Development has received this same question (AQW 6825 -11-15) and I shall answer on his behalf in this answer.

My colleague, Danny Kennedy MLA, Minister for Regional Development has advised that his Department's Roads Service is aware of the flooding in the area of Ormonde Park, Belfast. This has been an ongoing issue for some years and Roads Service officials

have been involved in investigations and discussions with residents, elected representatives and other statutory agencies, including Rivers Agency and NI Water, regarding the problem.

The majority of the storm water carriageway gullies in this area discharge into a storm sewer, which subsequently discharges into an undesignated watercourse to the rear of Ormonde Court. Roads Service has previously undertaken cleaning and jetting operations in the storm sewer, and indeed, further remedial works are currently ongoing to ensure that the storm sewer is operating normally to its discharge point, into the undesignated watercourse

I am further advised that drainage investigations carried out by NI Water (NIW) appear to indicate that blockages in this undesignated watercourse, which is an old drainage pipe that is not part of the public sewerage system, are the cause of the flooding in the area. However, as the undesignated watercourse falls under riparian ownership, it is the responsibility of the landowner, under whose land the natural drainage water passes, to ensure its safe and unimpeded passage through their land.

NI Water has an occasional discharge to this system through a combined storm overflow (CSO) in Upton Park. This overflow is legally consented and acts as an important relief to prevent flooding in other areas of the estate, including potential internal flooding of homes. NI Water is currently undertaking a Drainage Area Study of the area and will review the use of this CSO as part of potential upgrade proposals for the sewer network.

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Common Agricultural Policy: Reform

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what role her Department will play, alongside the Department of the Environment, in taking forward Common Agricultural Policy reform, particularly the greening of Pillar 1.

(AQW 6846/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The formal negotiations on the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post 2013 began with the publication of legislative proposals on 12 October 2011. These proposals represent the Commission's opening position and the final agreement will probably be noticeably different.

The negotiations are unlikely to be concluded until 2013 and so we are clearly at the early stages of these discussions. The reform of CAP is crucial not just to our farmers and rural communities, but it will have considerable implications for the agricultural environment also. Consequently, I have met the Minister of the Environment, Alex Attwood MLA, and we have agreed the need to for our Departments to work together on this important issue.

Senior Officials from DARD, DOE and NIEA met on 30 January 2012 for detailed discussions on CAP reform, including 'greening' and will continue to work together as the negotiations progress. Of course, these discussions will continue beyond the point where a final agreement on CAP reform is reached when the focus will turn to the design of specific agri-environment measures for the north and their implementation and control.

My approach to the negotiations is to use every avenue of influence open to me. I am continuing to build alliances across the board to maximise our influence on the EU Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament.

I have already taken a number of steps to influence the negotiations. I attended the October and the November EU Council meetings and met with Agricultural Commissioner Dacian Cioloş on two occasions. I have also held a number of meetings with Defra, Scottish and Welsh Ministers as well as the Irish Minister, Simon Coveney TD. CAP Reform is also discussed at the North South Ministerial Council. I am seeking further meetings with the Commission and plan to brief MEPs from both the north and the south within the next month or so.

Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, regarding the Draft Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill.

(AQW 6878/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The regulation of issues affecting competition is a reserved matter. You will therefore appreciate that the introduction of a Groceries Code Adjudicator is not within my direct remit. However, I support fully the concept of fair pricing and welcome the publication last year of the draft Groceries Code Adjudicator Bill. I believe that this is a crucial issue for our producers and processors and I want to see the early introduction of an Adjudicator with real power.

On 23 August 2011 I, along with the DETI Minister, wrote to the Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) who has responsibility for this draft Bill. We set out our support for the Bill and argued for it to be strengthened in relation to anonymous complaints, costs and sanctions. My aim remains to see a food industry where both farmers and other suppliers are getting a fair deal.

I will continue to monitor the progress of the Bill and engage as necessary with the BIS Minister and Defra Secretary of State as the Bill progresses.

Potatoes Exported to the Republic of Ireland and the Russian Federation

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the quantity of potatoes exported to the (i) Republic of Ireland; and (ii) Russian Federation in the last five years.

(AQW 6981/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The potato marketing year runs from 1st July to 30th June. To provide a complete response, export figures are provided for the previous 5 full marketing years and to the end of December 2011 for the 2011/12 marketing year.

Quantities of certified seed potatoes in tonnes were exported as follows;

	(i) south of Ireland	(ii) Russian Federation
2006	1332 t	0
2007	1462 t	20 t
2008	1423 t	0
2009	1499 t	0
2010	1204 t	0
2011	152 t to end on December 11	0

Quantities of certified ware potatoes for consumption were exported as follows;

	(i) south of Ireland	(ii) Russian Federation
2006	0	0
2007	0	0
2008	0	0
2009	0	0
2010	0	9545 t
2011	0 to end December 11	0

Ware potatoes for consumption or processing are freely traded within the EU. Consignments within the EU are inspected and sealed only if specifically requested by the exporter of the ware potatoes. There is a significant reciprocal movement of ware potatoes for consumption between the north of Ireland and the south of Ireland. As these are not officially inspected there is no official record of the tonnages involved.

Equine Industry: Strategy

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the implementation of the Strategy for the Equine Industry.

(AQW 7151/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in NI' was developed by and for the equine industry and it identified the requirement for a single body to take forward the Strategy's recommendations. The Equine Council (ECNI) is the body tasked with taking forward the industry's Strategy. The Department fully supports the ECNI and recently made funds available for start-up costs, including the appointment of a Development Officer. Its Development Officer, appointed on 1 October 2011 is currently working on an implementation programme for delivery of the Strategy.

Equine Sub-group of the Rural Stakeholder Forum

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) to detail the membership of the Equine Sub-Group of the Rural Stakeholder Forum, which was established in 2003; (ii) for her assessment of the accomplishments of the sub-group to date; and (iii) whether the sub-group met its targets.

(AQW 7152/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The membership of the Equine Sub-Group (ESG) established in 2003 comprised 21 members, representing 31 organisations across the Thoroughbred and Sport Horse Sectors, Equestrian education, Leisure and Tourism, and the Ancillary Sector.

The ESG was established to provide an effective two way communication with government on issues affecting the Equine industry and to devise a long term strategy for the industry. In 2005 the ESG assisted consultants to complete the report 'Research on the Equine Sector in NI', which allowed the ESG to develop a long term strategy. The ESG subsequently achieved its objectives and met its target through the publication of the resultant 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in NI' in March 2007.

The strategy set out some 75 actions to be taken forward by the industry, through a single body, namely the ECNI. The ECNI is now fully operational and has the Department's full support in its work going forward.

Horses: Redesignation

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the implications of the horse being redesignated from a domestic to an agricultural animal.

(AQW 7153/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The implications of the horse being redesignated from a domestic to an agricultural animal have not been determined. The matter is a key consideration within the 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in NI' and is one of the priority actions to be taken forward by the Equine Council (ECNI), in its programme for delivery of the Strategy. It is anticipated that the ECNI will make its case, which will include the implications of any redesignation of the horse, to DARD in due course.

Horses: Redesignation

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what funding streams, currently inaccessible to the equestrian industry, would be opened up if horses were to be reclassified as agricultural animals rather than domestic animals.

(AQW 7195/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The implications of the horse being redesignated from a domestic to an agricultural animal, which would include potential access to funding streams, have not yet been determined. The matter is a key consideration within the 'Strategy for the Equine Industry in NI' and is one of the priority actions to be taken forward by the Equine Council (ECNI), in its programme for delivery of the Strategy. It is anticipated that the ECNI will make its case, which will include the implications of any redesignation of the horse, to DARD in due course.

Horses: Passports

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of horse passports in each council area.

(AQW 7196/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not hold detail on numbers of horse passports by council area. The National Equine Database (NED), which maintains data on horse passports, has confirmed the number of passports issued for horses in the north is 35,615. However, NED is not in a position to detail the number of passports in each council area.

Common Agricultural Policy: Reform

Ms Gildernew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the ongoing negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy.

(AQO 1161/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have already taken a number of steps to influence the negotiations. This includes attending the October and the November EU Council meetings in 2011. I have also held a number of meetings with Defra, Scottish and Welsh Ministers as well as the Irish Minister, Simon Coveney TD. CAP Reform is also discussed at the North South Ministerial Council.

I have now met with Agricultural Commissioner Dacian Ciolos on two occasions – most recently in Dublin two weeks ago. These meetings have given me the opportunity to raise key issues such as greening, the active farmer definition and the need for a better share of Pillar II funding.

I am seeking further meetings with the Commission and plan to brief MEPs from both the north and the south within the next month or so. I will, of course, attend EU Councils where CAP is a significant item on the agenda.

There is an ongoing DARD consultation on the legislative proposals for reform of the CAP post 2013 which closes on 7 February and I look forward to reviewing the responses received. The views of stakeholders will help inform my position as the negotiations continue over the course of 2012 and beyond. Over the next six weeks my Department is planning a series of stakeholder roadshows throughout the north and CAP reform will also feature in each of these events giving stakeholders a further opportunity to engage on this important issue.

I will, of course, continue to build alliances across the board to maximise our influence on the EU Commission, the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. I will continue to push hard for change to the proposed reforms to achieve the best outcome possible for the farmers in the north of Ireland.

INTERREG

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the Interreg programme, administered through her Department, has proven successful.

(AQO 1156/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Interreg Four A is a European Union Structural Funds programme which seeks to address the economic and social problems which result from the existence of borders. The current (2007-2013) programme has a specific Rural Development theme (€10M) targeting the strategic regeneration of disadvantaged rural areas through cross-border cooperation.

DARD and the Department of Environment, Community & Local Government (Ireland) are the accountable departments for this funding and SEUPB is the Managing Authority. The 6 rural projects that have been awarded funding have been selected because they demonstrated the strongest potential to deliver positive benefits for rural communities through cross-border cooperation. The actual makeup of each of the projects is unique but overall they involve councils from both sides of the border, plus enterprise bodies, universities and community based organisations. The activities being delivered include the development of a specialist ICT facility for rural businesses in the North West, the harnessing of natural resources such as loughs, forests and trails for outdoor recreation and rural tourism and the establishment of the first north-south network for Social Farming.

I have attended two project launches and from what I have seen in relation to cooperative working and the drive and determination of the stakeholders involved I am confident that these projects will deliver for rural communities right across the region.

Rural Investment Fund

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in relation to her Department's announcement of a £1 million Rural Investment Fund, when the application process will open and who will be eligible for the funding.

(AQO 1158/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I take it the member is referring to my announcement in December regarding the re-focus of Axis 3 of the Rural Development Programme. It has become increasingly clear to me in recent months that getting funds quickly to the rural community by way of Axis 3 has not been realised and while commitments through Letters of Offer have been healthy, spend has been disturbingly low. I realise that the dire economic circumstances we find ourselves in have contributed to that. However it is even more crucial to maximise spend as quickly as possible to assist the economic recovery in rural areas and ensure that the real potential impact of this Programme is being felt in rural communities, and that rural businesses, tourism initiatives, village renewal plans and farm diversification etc are all being afforded the opportunity, through funding on the ground, to assist the economic recovery.

I have asked the seven clusters to review their strategies and prepare a list of suitable strategic projects with a value up to £1 million by the end January. The projects must be capable of timely spend and I know that within village plans drawn up under the Village Renewal Measure there already are a number of larger projects which are quite likely to have Council buy in and are capable of being developed in some cases through a community development process. This combined with a critical look by councils at other rural strategic projects should mean we can submit a change to the Programme to the European Commission in April to facilitate new grant levels. I would hope that through the spring and summer clusters can open calls and work through the assessment of these projects with a view to issuing letters of offer once the Commission approval comes through in late summer. This change has the potential to make a difference.

As I said recently in the press my aim is to assist rural businesses to maintain and create jobs through this Programme, and to help drive forward the opportunities for growth which exist in the rural community.

DARD: Headquarters

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when she expects a decision to be taken on the future site for her departmental headquarters.

(AQO 1159/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Work on pursuing a new Headquarters location for my Department is progressing well. I am pleased to be able to inform you that my Department has now received approval from the Department of Finance and Personnel in respect of the Strategic Outline Case. This is a significant step forward within the NI Executives appraisal and business case processes. It is however only the first formal approval stage and work is now underway to develop a shortlist of potential locations as part of the ongoing process.

In line with the commitment contained in the Draft Programme for Government, I remain fully committed to the relocation of the DARD headquarters to a rural area. I hope to be in a position to make an announcement on the preferred location by the end of 2012.

Single Farm Payments: Inspections

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the timeframe between a farm inspection being carried out for Single Farm Payment purposes, and the inspector uploading the findings for further processing.

(AQO 1160/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The average timeframe between a farm inspection being carried out for Single Farm Payment purposes, and the inspector uploading the findings for further processing is 16 days. Due to the variation in the complexity of farm inspections in relation to factors such as land eligibility, cross compliance checks and map changes required, the onward processing of inspection findings after upload can also be time consuming.

DARD: Staff over Retirement Age

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many civil servants are continuing to work in her Department, even though they have reached retirement age and have earned full pension rights.

(AQO 1162/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The NI Civil Service default retirement age was removed some time ago, giving staff a wider range of retirement options.

In my Department there are 175 staff aged 60 and over. For the majority of these staff the pension age for the pension scheme applicable to them is 60. So these staff could choose to retire and access their pension, if they so wished. However, pension entitlement is directly proportionate to the length of service so in cases where the maximum years service has not been achieved (in most cases this is 40 years) the pension entitlement would be affected.

Specific details of pension entitlement are determined only when an individual indicates that they wish to retire, as calculations are done on a case by case basis.

Food Strategy Board

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the Executive's overall economic strategy of focusing on rebuilding and rebalancing the economy, whether the proposed Food Strategy Board will be given the authority, finance and resources, including adequate private sector involvement, needed to enable it to put in place a strategy to allow expansion of the agri-food sector.

(AQO 1163/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am grateful for this opportunity to outline our approach to the expansion of the agri-food sector. This sector already makes a significant contribution to the economy and has a strong track record of export-led growth but I believe that there is room for further expansion and that to achieve this we need a longer-term strategy plotting out key growth targets.

I am delighted that the importance of the sector has been recognised by the Executive whose draft programme for Government includes a target to develop a strategic plan for the agri-food sector. In support of this, my Department is working with DETI/ InvestNI to establish a Food Strategy Board (FSB) whose role will be to further develop and implement this strategic plan.

To achieve this it will be vital that the FSB has the necessary authority and industry involvement. That is why the FSB will have an independent Chair and will be predominantly made up of industry representatives.

As regards resources, my Department's Rural Development Programme will be our main funding mechanism for future activity related to the strategy. My Department has also committed staff resources to support the work of the Chair and the FSB.

Work is well advanced to getting the Food Strategy Board into place and I hope that the FSB will be up and running soon. I am committed to working with everyone involved to help secure the growth of this important sector.

The key is to grasp the opportunities that lie ahead. While this will require Government to play a supporting role, ultimately recognising the full potential of the sector can only be achieved by industry itself playing a leading role in the development and implementation of the new strategic plan.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to eradicate Tuberculosis in livestock. (AQO 1164/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My aim is to reduce and ultimately eradicate TB in cattle here and I will continue to work towards this end. My Department has a rigorous EC Commission approved programme for TB eradication in place. This eradication programme is vital in safeguarding our annual £1,000 million plus export-dependent livestock and livestock products industry. I am pleased that progress has been made in reducing TB incidence in cattle here. The annual herd incidence has reduced from nearly 10% in 2002 to 5.7% at 30 November 2011.

Considerable work has been undertaken to enhance the TB eradication programme in recent years. We now remove as reactors those animals that give an inconclusive result to a second consecutive TB test rather than after a third test as before. We have improved communications with Private Veterinary Practitioners and strengthened the supervision process. We have improved DARD's own delivery of TB testing through monitoring Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). We also use DNA identity tags on reactors to help reduce reactor identity queries, substitution fraud and associated disease risks.

However, TB is a very complex disease and there is no simple solution or 'quick-fix'. Additional funding of some £4 million has been reserved in my Department's budget to commission a programme of TB and wildlife research and studies to help ensure we have well informed and evidence based strategies to address the issue of cattle to cattle spread as well as the wildlife issue. We have engaged with industry and wider stakeholders to help us identify and refine our TB evidence needs and priorities.

The issue of badgers and bovine TB is complex, emotive and contentious. While science has established that there is a link between TB in badgers and TB in cattle, it has not yet established, with certainty, how the disease is spread between them and what can be done to prevent its spread. A badger cull is not planned in the north of Ireland. As the badger is a protected species, any direct interventions in the badger population here would be subject to the agreement of the Environment Minister; to the issue of appropriate licences; and also to the availability of the substantial additional funding that would be needed. We would need to be certain that the benefit would justify the considerable costs.

I shall be very interested to see how the Defra trial badger cull pilot proposals are implemented in England and if they successfully withstand legal challenge. I will also be interested to see the outcome of the review of the scientific evidence base for the eradication of bovine TB in Wales.

Vaccination may be the best way forward for the future. We are closely tracking badger vaccine development progress in England and in the south of Ireland. An international vaccination experts' workshop is planned on the island of Ireland for 2012 to inform how best to proceed on badger vaccination.

Rural Poverty

Mr Brady asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress is being made in implementing her tackling rural poverty strategy. (AQO 1165/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under the DARD Anti Poverty and Social Inclusion Framework a package worth £10m was successfully implemented over the 2008-09 to 2010-11 Budget period. The agreement of 2011/12-2014/15 budget confirmed an enhancement to the commitment to tackling poverty and social exclusion in rural areas raising expenditure to around £16m. Officials continued to discuss, develop and deliver potential and continued intervention with a range of departments, agencies and stakeholders under the original framework agreed in 2009 and have completed a review of that framework to ensure that interventions remain targeted and focused on need. Revised framework and action plan will be launched in the next few weeks but I am pleased to say that intervention on the ground has continued through support for transport, maximising access, rural support and community development. Development of rural schemes for: the elderly; youth unemployed; those facing health issues; and those with no access to main waters are well advanced with activity to commence this financial year. I look forward to updating you on all this work as it progresses.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Fishing: Bag and Drift Net Operations off the County Antrim Coast

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what procedures are in place to verify the accuracy of returns made by the bag and drift net operations off the County Antrim coast, in respect of salmon caught. (AQW 6589/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): A combination of boat and shore patrols by Fisheries Protection Officers are used to inspect the DCAL licensed coastal salmon nets to ensure compliance with the Fisheries (Tagging and Logbook) Byelaws (Northern Ireland) 2001 and other Fisheries legislation.

Each catch is not individually verified. Catch figures, broken down by time and date, are determined by annual returns required to be submitted by licence holders to the Department.

Catches are subject to random inspection and verification at the point of capture and at licence holders' premises, such as their cold store.

Gyms for Community Use

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether councils can apply to her Department for funding for the setting up of gyms for community use.

(AQW 6768/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI, rather my Department, is responsible for operating exchequer funding programmes for the setting up of sports facilities including gyms intended for community use. Whilst the eligibility criteria may differ between programmes, statutory bodies, such as district councils, are not normally eligible to apply to SportNI for exchequer funding. Furthermore, district councils, not the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, are statutorily responsible for local recreational provision in their respective areas under the Recreation and Youth Service (NI) Order 1986.

This responsibility extends to the provision and management of gyms for community use where existing provision is deemed to be inadequate within the council area.

Fishing: Review

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) whether she has any input, particularly on behalf of eel fishermen, into the review of fishing being carried out later this year in Brussels; and (ii) to detail the timescale for the review.

(AQW 6780/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) Scientific monitoring and supervision of conservation fishing has been ongoing since my Department submitted 3 Eel Management Plans to the Commission in December 2008. The Department shall report to the Commission in accordance with the requirements of the EC eel regulation in June 2012. Where there are grounds to argue that the Lough Neagh fishery remains sustainable and in compliance with the regulation, we shall present that case. The Department shall promote the success of the conservation fishery on Lough Erne that has provided opportunity for eel fishermen to receive an income while contributing to recovery of the European eel stock.
- (ii) Under the terms of COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 1100/2007 of 18 September 2007 establishing measures for the recovery of the stock of European eel each Member State shall report to the Commission, initially every third year, with the first report to be presented by 30 June 2012. Reports shall outline monitoring, effectiveness and outcome of the implementation of Eel Management Plans prepared in accordance with the regulation.

Northern Ireland Mountain, Cave and Cliff Rescue Co-ordinating Committee

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the funding her Department has allocated, through SportNI, to the Northern Ireland Mountain, Cliff and Cave Rescue Coordinating Committee, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6831/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In each of the last five years Sport NI has allocated funding to the mountain, cave and cliff rescue teams broken down by capital and revenue awards as follows:

	2006-07		2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11	
	Capital	Revenue	Capital	Revenue	Capital	Revenue	Capital	Revenue	Capital	Revenue
Irish Cave Rescue organisation		£6,090		£7,800	£17,500	£5,526	£3,000	£5,200	£4,000	£4,800
NW Team		£12,338	£47,855	£5,800	£57,234	£9,600	£9,856	£25,580	£24,453	£9,760
MourneTeam		£10,956	£47,855	£10,800	£13,031	£16,154	£11,109	£15,490	£8,417	£15,750
Search & Rescue Dogs Association						£9,416				
Totals	£0	£29,384	£95,710	£24,400	£97,181	£31,280	£23,965	£46,270	£36,870	£30,310
Totals		£29,384		£120,110		£128,461		£70,235		£67,180

Northern Ireland Mountain, Cave and Cliff Rescue Co-ordinating Committee

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the work of the Northern Ireland Mountain, Cave and Cliff Rescue Coordinating Committee.

(AQW 6833/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The North of Ireland Mountain, Cave, and Cliff Rescue Coordinating Committee (NIMCCRCC) coordinates the organisation and administration of search and rescue provision.

The remit of NIMCCRCC is as follows:

- To make and review arrangements for the planning, operation and administration of an effective mountain, cave and cliff rescue service in the north of Ireland within an overall UK Search and Rescue Framework;
- To co-operate with Sport NI to encourage the development of Voluntary Mountain, cave and cliff rescue teams where a need is identified;
- To provide official recognition of such teams where they are competent and there is a need for their services; and
- To identify, prioritise and monitor the training and resourcing needs of the mountain, cave and cliff rescue services and to provide advice to Sport NI and others in this regard.

The PSNI has the statutory primary role in respect of the command, control and co-ordination of all mountain and cave rescue incidents.

Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medals

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list the organisations that are funded by her Department which will receive the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medals.

(AQW 6834/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A total of 47 Mountain, Cave and Cliff Rescue volunteers in the North of Ireland will be eligible to receive the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal. These volunteers are members of the following Mountain, Cave and Cliff Rescue Operational Units, which are in turn members of the Sport NI funded Northern Ireland Mountain Cave, and Cliff Rescue Coordinating Committee (NIMCCRCC):

- Mourne Mountain Rescue Team;
- Irish Cave Rescue Organisation;
- North West Search and rescue Team; and
- Search and Rescue Dogs Association Ireland North.

Magherafelt Library: Reduced Opening Hours

Mr I McCrea asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the reduction of nine hours in the opening hours of Magherafelt Library will have an impact on staff numbers.

(AQW 6851/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As a result of the additional funding allocated by my Department to Libraries NI the level of savings required are not as great as initially envisaged, but savings are still required.

Levels of staffing in libraries is an operational matter for the Board of Libraries NI. I have been informed that Library staff are a mixture of permanent, temporary and agency staff and a process is in place to reduce the number of staff hours overall through a range of measures, including voluntary redundancy, flexible retirement, family friendly policies etc.

It is not possible for Libraries NI at this stage to be definitive about the impact on any individual library, given that the process of considering requests from individual members of staff for voluntary redundancy, flexible retirement, different working patterns etc is still underway.

The reduction in opening hours in Magherafelt Library will mean fewer staff hours will be required in the library, but this does not necessarily mean a reduction in the number of staff who are based in Magherafelt Library for some or all of their working hours.

Fishing: Bag and Drift Nets for Salmon Fishing in Coastal Waters

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether, under the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, her Department has the power to ban (i) bag nets; and (ii) drift nets for coastal salmon fishing; and what action she intends to take to address the dwindling number of salmon returning to rivers to breed.

(AQW 6935/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am currently considering powers under the Fisheries Act to introduce a range of salmon conservation measures, which will include consideration of provisions relating to bag nets and drift net licences.

Stakeholders have been asked to support a range of voluntary conservation measures for 2012 to allow DCAL time to consult on the way forward to contribute to the long term sustainability of wild Atlantic salmon stocks.

Fishing: Bag Nets for Salmon Fishing in Coastal Waters

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department has licensed the use of bag nets for salmon fishing in coastal waters.

(AQW 6936/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In 2011 the Department licensed 2 bag nets for salmon fishing in coastal waters in the DCAL jurisdiction.

Fish: Catch and Release

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what discussions her Department has had with fishing and angling clubs, that fish on rivers which are under the control of her Department, regarding its plans to promote 'catch and release' for the 2012 season.

(AQW 6983/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has presented a series of proposals to the Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum which is the advisory body set up by the Department to reflect the views of all stakeholders, including fishing and angling clubs.

The forums members include representatives of the Ulster Angling Federation which is the recognised representative body for game angling clubs in the North.

The Department has also provided detailed guidance on catch and release best practice for the information of all anglers on the NI Direct angling website at www.nidirect.gov.uk/angling.

The Department will be holding a public consultation process on the future of salmon exploitation in the DCAL jurisdiction in the near future and will welcome responses from angling clubs and individual anglers.

Fishing: Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline how a member of the Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum appoints, or selects, a proxy to attend meetings on their behalf; and how the selection process is conducted.

(AQW 6990/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Salmon and Inland Fisheries Forum at its inaugural meeting on 10 December 2009 agreed item 5 of the proposed Standing Orders which stated:

"The Forum should only accept substitute members in exceptional circumstances to be agreed by the Chair in advance of each meeting."

Fishing: Monitoring of Nets

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 5920/11-15, whether her Department has had to reimburse fishermen who had their nets seized from their premises.

(AQW 7084/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has not had to reimburse fishermen who have had their nets seized from their premises.

Rory McIlroy: US Open Golf Tournament

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she will use the international media attention that will be on Rory McIlroy at the US Open Golf Tournament in San Francisco in June 2012, to promote Northern Ireland as a centre of sporting excellence.

(AQO 1239/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am already seeking to develop and promote the north of Ireland as a centre of sporting excellence through the use of my Department's 10 year strategy for sport, Sport Matters. Under Sport Matters, government is committed to establishing world class sports services, facilities and places for playing and watching sport in the north. Government is also committed, under Sport Matters, to establishing the north as a world class venue for sporting events.

To help deliver on these commitments, Sport Matters sets out 26 high level targets to be achieved over the life of the strategy which focus on the key pillars of sporting excellence, namely Participation, Performance and Places for sport. These targets are underpinned by an action planning structure which identifies, amongst other issues, increased media coverage of sport in the north, both local and international, as a key step to success. I have, and continue, to promote such coverage by recognising, through the media, sporting success and excellence in the north including achievements of Rory McIlroy. I anticipate that there will be further opportunities for me to do this on the back of international media attention that is likely to be on Rory McIlroy at the US Open Golf Tournament in San Francisco in June 2012.

Boxing

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her priorities for the sport of boxing.

(AQO 1172/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Priorities for boxing are set by the governing body of the sport, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IBA). However, I recognise the cultural importance of boxing to many people in the north of Ireland and particularly those in areas of high social need. Furthermore, amateur boxing has been one of the north's major sporting success stories, for example, finishing top of the boxing medal table at the 2010 Commonwealth Games with 3 gold and 2 silver medals.

Given the importance of boxing, I have recently agreed that Sport NI should assist the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council in developing a strategic implementation plan for the sport which will give effect in the north to the IBA's 5-year strategy for boxing across Ireland. I have also asked Sport NI to develop a suitable business case to help identify required investment needs for the sport. This work is due to commence shortly.

Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action she intends to take to update the Fisheries Act 1966. **(AQO 1173/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Fisheries Act (NI) 1966, as amended, has been in place for 45 years and I am aware that some of its provisions have been superseded by more recent European Directives.

The Act provides a sound foundation for the conservation and protection of fisheries and can address changing circumstances through the making of subordinate legislation.

There is no immediate requirement to replace the 1966 Fisheries Act as it is reviewed frequently to take account of changing circumstances. It still meets the requirements today to protect and conserve fisheries, which was the original purpose of the creation of the Act

The Fisheries Act is a considerable and wide ranging piece of primary legislation and a review of the Act would be resource intensive for DCAL.

DCAL: Legislation

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the legislation her Department plans to introduce in this Assembly mandate. **(AQO 1174/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials are engaged in comprehensive scoping work on renewed proposals for an Irish Language Bill which I intend to bring forward to the Executive Legislative Programme 2011-2015.

Cuireann Cumann Forbartha Charn Tóchair

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support she can offer to Cuireann Cumann Forbartha Charn Tóchair in its bid to obtain Gaeltacht status. **(AQO 1175/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: Carntogher Community Association promotes a range of economic, social, cultural and environmental projects aimed at developing a prosperous and environmentally sustainable rural community.

I believe that the establishment of a Gaeltacht Quarter, as shown in West Belfast, has the potential to make a useful contribution to economic, social and cultural development in the area. Using Irish language and culture as the unique selling point will have significant tourism opportunities.

Officials from my Department are arranging to meet with the Association to see if it is possible to offer further support.

Suicide Prevention

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any discussions she has had with her ministerial colleagues regarding suicide prevention. **(AQO 1176/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Edwin Poots MLA, has responsibility for suicide prevention in the north and I met with him in December 2011 to discuss the contribution of sport and arts to health promotion including suicide prevention. DCAL has identified a number of areas where it can be involved in helping DHSSPS deliver Protect Life. These have been submitted to DHSSPS for consideration within the final version of refreshed Protect Life Action Plan.

2012 Olympics: Training

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the number of Olympic teams which plan to use training facilities in Northern Ireland. **(AQO 1177/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: To date Sport NI have secured three pre Games training camps in the run up to the London 2012 Games.

The three teams are the Chinese Artistic Gymnastics team, the Australian Boxing team and the Irish Paralympics Team.

In addition a number of pre Games events involving International athletes have taken place in the north of Ireland. These are the Boccia World Cup, a 2012 Paralympic qualifying event; a table tennis tournament; and the Yonex Irish Badminton Championships, a 2012 Olympic qualifying event. An International Wheelchair basketball tournament will take place in February 2012.

Sport NI is involved in sensitive negotiations with a number of other countries about pre Games training and qualifying events. This is a highly competitive process and therefore I am unable to detail these Countries or sports.

Re-imaging Communities

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her Department will allocate resources to support the Re-imaging Communities Programme.

(AQO 1178/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In November 2009 the Arts Council submitted an application to the Peace III Programme which builds upon the key successes of the Re-Imaging Programme and looks to the development of artistic interventions on an intra-community, cross-community and cross-border basis. They are currently at the final stages of this application process.

If successful, the proposed programme will deliver long-term cross-community and cross-border projects which will, in turn, compliment current work by addressing issues of sectarianism; racism and prejudice between communities and contributing to achieving a society rooted in mutual recognition, respect and trust.

Football: DCAL Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action she is taking to ensure that Irish League Football derives maximum benefit from funding from her Department.

(AQO 1179/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: SportNI is responsible for the provision of exchequer funding to sport including to Irish League football clubs. All exchequer funding programmes developed by SportNI are designed to contribute towards DCAL's strategic priorities and targets as set out in the Department's 10 year sports strategy, Sport Matters.

To enable sports, including Irish League Football clubs, derive maximum benefit from available exchequer funding, SportNI advertises all funding programmes in the press and on its website. In addition, SportNI regularly hosts local road shows across the north to ensure that potential applicants are aware of the opportunities available and the aims and criteria of its programmes. All applicants and potential applicants to SportNI programmes can also contact SportNI for advice and one-to-one support on the development of individual applications.

Conservation Legislation

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when a new legislative programme will be brought forward to ensure that her Department is meeting its European Conservation obligations.

(AQO 1180/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Fisheries Act (NI) 1966, as amended, has been in place for 45 years and I am aware that some of its provisions have been superseded by more recent European Directives. I consider that the Act still provides a sound foundation for the conservation and protection of fisheries and can address changing circumstances through the making of subordinate legislation.

DOE is the lead Department in the devolved administration for the implementation of the Habitats Directive to meet European conservation measures. DCAL seeks to ensure compliance with the requirements of European Conservation obligations and implementing legislation in the north of Ireland through the discharge of its responsibilities in relation to the conservation and protection of salmon and inland fisheries.

Department of Education

Bain Report: Pupil Numbers

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to list the schools which can hold the pupil numbers recommended in the Bain Report, broken down by school type.

(AQW 6153/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Enrolment numbers are currently the way in which the Department defines the capacity of schools. However as we develop a more strategic approach to planning on an area basis a greater understanding of need and capacity within the system will emerge.

I have arranged for the information requested, to be placed in the Assembly Library.

GCSEs: Lower Tier Exams

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last three years, to detail the percentage of pupils, attending each school, that uses academic selection as an admission criterion, who have taken lower tier exams in GCSE (i) Maths; and (ii) English. **(AQW 6249/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: Data are not available for all awarding bodies and the following information relates to CCEA examinations only. It is not possible to supply GCSE mathematics data as CCEA offers this qualification as a mixed tier GCSE. Candidates may take a mix of both foundation and higher tier papers.

The information below relates to pupils who were admitted to schools that use academic admissions criteria who have taken lower tier exams in GCSE English.

Percentage of examination entries in lower tier CCEA GCSE English for schools using academic selection as an admissions criterion 2008/09 to 2010/11

Entries in lower tier CCEA GCSE English as % of total entries in CCEA GCSE English in each year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Abbey Christian Brothers, Newry	6.1	8.3	1.6
Antrim Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.0
Aquinas Grammar School	0.0	0.8	0.0
Assumption Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.0
Ballyclare High	0.6	0.0	0.0
Ballymena Academy	0.0	0.0	0.0
Banbridge Academy	1.6	1.6	2.2
Bangor Grammar School	0.0	0.0	0.0
Belfast High School	0.0	0.0	0.0
Belfast Royal Academy	0.0	0.0	0.0
Bloomfield Collegiate	0.0	1.0	0.0
Cambridge House	6.4	6.7	3.6
Campbell College	2.9	12.5	4.1
Carrickfergus Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.8
Christian Brothers Grammar, Omagh	0.0	2.2	0.7
Coleraine Academical Institution	6.8	10.2	22.3
Coleraine High	0.8	3.3	4.9
Collegiate Grammar School , Enniskillen	0.0	0.0	0.0
Dalriada School	0.0	0.0	0.0
Dominican College, Belfast	0.0	0.0	0.0
Dominican College, Portstewart	4.2	9.7	9.3
Down High School	3.1	1.4	6.5
Foyle College	0.0	0.0	0.0
Friends School	0.0	0.0	0.0
Glenlola Collegiate	0.0	1.3	0.6
Grosvenor Grammar	0.6	0.6	0.6
Holy Cross College, Strabane	0.0	0.0	0.0
Hunterhouse College	0.0	6.0	1.9
Lagan College	48.3	63.1	53.3

Entries in lower tier CCEA GCSE English as % of total entries in CCEA GCSE English in each year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Larne Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.0
Limavady Grammar	8.3	3.1	3.9
Loreto Grammar, Omagh	0.0	0.0	0.0
Lumen Christi	0.0	0.8	0.0
Lurgan College	0.0	0.0	0.0
St Mary's Grammar, Magherafelt	0.0	0.0	1.2
Malone Integrated College	0.0	100.0	100.0
Methodist College	2.9	3.2	0.4
Mount Lourdes Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.0
Omagh Academy	6.1	0.0	0.9
Our Lady And St Patricks College	0.5	0.0	0.0
Our Lady's Grammar, Newry	0.0	0.0	0.0
Portadown College	0.0	0.0	0.0
Portora Royal School	0.0	0.0	0.0
Rainey Endowed School	0.0	0.0	0.0
Rathmore Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.0
Regent House	10.0	4.8	7.0
Royal Belfast Academical Institution	0.0	0.0	0.0
Sacred Heart Grammar	0.0	0.0	0.0
St Colman's College, Newry	1.6	2.4	2.2
St Columb's College	0.0	0.5	0.0
St Dominic's High School	6.0	0.6	1.5
St Joseph's Grammar, Dungannon	2.7	0.0	1.4
St Louis Grammar, Ballymena	0.0	0.0	2.8
St Louis Grammar, Kilkeel	0.0	2.3	4.7
St Macnissi's College	0.0	2.2	0.0
St Malachy's College	2.7	2.6	2.7
St Mary's Cbs, Belfast	21.3	22.8	39.1
St Michael's College	1.0	10.6	7.8
St Michael's Grammar, Lurgan	0.0	0.0	0.0
St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon	0.0	0.0	0.0
St Patrick's Grammar, Armagh	0.0	0.0	0.0
St Patrick's Grammar, Downpatrick	0.0	0.0	0.0
St Patrick's College, Maghera	9.1	7.5	1.1
Strabane Academy	0.0	100.0	0.0
Strathearn School	1.8	0.0	0.0
Sullivan Upper School	0.0	0.0	0.0

Entries in lower tier CCEA GCSE English as % of total entries in CCEA GCSE English in each year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
The Royal School, Armagh	6.3	5.0	3.0
The Royal School, Dungannon	9.9	3.9	2.0
Thornhill College	0.0	0.0	0.0
Wallace High School	0.0	0.0	0.0

Source: CCEA

Joint Efficiency Review: Stage One Report

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what steps are being taken to ensure savings of approximately £10,000 per annum, as indicated in his Department and the Department's of Finance and Personnel's Joint Efficiency Review: Stage One Report. **(AQW 6535/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: Stage 1 of the review involved the identification of broad areas within the education sector where there appeared to be scope to make savings. Areas covered were: home to school transport; school meals; Education and Library Board (ELB) administration; school cleaning; Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) running costs; professional development; teachers' pay & pensions administration; and ELB procurement.

The Stage 1 Report has been taken into account in the development of the Savings Delivery Plan (SDP) for my Department. The SDP requires ELBs and other bodies to deliver core services within reduced budgets and as such incorporates requirements for cost reductions in most of the areas identified in the Stage 1 Report.

In addition, a Stage 2 review has been carried out which considered home to school transport and school meals service as areas most suited for a more in depth review. The Stage 2 reports on these areas are due to be finalised and published very soon and I am determined to ensure that action is taken on recommendations to drive out further savings. This is very much part of my programme of work to ensure the maximum possible funding is delegated to the classroom to support teaching and learning.

Schools: Viability Audits

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education whether the viability audits will be published, and if so, to detail the timescale. **(AQW 6556/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: My Department received the first viability audit reports from the Boards on Monday 16 January 2012. The Boards have also sent each school a copy of the information specifically relating to that school. My officials have made an initial assessment of the reports and are engaging with the Boards to obtain further information. Boards have been asked to resubmit the viability audits by 6 February and to submit proposals to address the position by the 15 February.

When the information is complete the five reports will be published by the Boards as soon as practicable.

Middletown Centre for Autism: Building Integrated Project Team

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the Middletown Centre for Autism's Building Integrated Project Team (ii) the number of times it has met since its establishment; and (iii) the associated costs to date. **(AQW 6575/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: (i) The Middletown Centre for Autism Building Integrated Project Team was charged with drawing up plans for the refurbishment of existing buildings and the proposed new build. The Team comprises a Building Project Manager, Architect led Design Team, Cost Consultants, representatives from DE and DES, a Director of MCA Ltd (the operational company) and senior management from the Middletown Centre for Autism.

(ii) The Integrated Project Team has met on 30 occasions.

(iii) A total of £620,451 has been paid in fees to the project managers, design team and cost consultants to date. The DE share is £310,225.50

Preschool Places: Banbridge/Lurgan/Portadown

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Education how many children in (a) Banbridge; (ii) Lurgan; and (iii) Portadown might benefit from his Department's plan to provide a one-year funded pre-school place. **(AQW 6640/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: This information is not held in the format requested. However, provisional figures for District Council areas for the current 2011/12 school year (which may be subject to minor changes once the Education and Library Boards have completed their validation processes), provide the number of children enrolled in funded pre-school places in nursery schools/units and voluntary/private pre-school settings. These are Banbridge District Council - 606, and Craigavon District Council (including Lurgan and Portadown) - 1275.

The Department is already working with the Education and Library Boards on establishing the number of pre-school places likely to be required for the 2012/13 school year. I also made a statement to the Assembly on 17 January, in respect of the outcomes of the Review on the Pre-school Admissions Arrangements. That Review makes recommendations on how improvements might be made to the process. This will be an important factor in terms of considering what changes are needed and the best way forward in light of the draft PFG.

Area-based Planning Process

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether the area-based planning process may work towards dissolving the different sectors in education or ensure their continuing existence.

(AQW 6647/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The focus of the area planning process is on developing a planned network of viable and sustainable schools to provide high quality education to meet the needs of the children and young people in an area.

Our educational system is diverse, including controlled and maintained schools, voluntary grammar schools, integrated schools and Irish-medium schools. This diversity is a reflection of parental choice.

The Terms of Reference for Area Planning, published on 15 December 2011, make it clear that, as part of the process, the Boards will engage with, and seek input from, the other school sectors. This will facilitate the development of a broad vision of the type and scale of education provision required to meet the future needs and will provide opportunity to advance innovative solutions, including those for shared schooling that may span more than one sector.

Education and Library Boards: Staff

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education for an estimate of the cost of the financial packages that will be offered to staff in the Education and Library Boards, following the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority.

(AQW 6710/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The announcement on the establishment of ESA has changed the context within which the RPA will be implemented in education. ESA will subsume the functions of 8 bodies including the Education and Library Boards; Council for Catholic Maintained Schools; Staff Commission and the Youth Council. The Executive has decided that the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) will remain separate for the time being and its functions and staff will not transfer to ESA.

The estimated cost of the financial packages that will be offered to staff in the Education and Library Boards, following transfer to ESA cannot be determined until the Voluntary Severance Programmes for 2011/12 and 2012/13 are completed and the impact of CCEA remaining separate for the time being is quantified, however funding of £50m in 2011/12, £55m in 12/13, £51m in 13/14 and £61m in 14/15 has been set aside to support the severance programmes across the budget period.

All staff in the affected organisations in post on the date of the establishment of ESA will have the right to transfer into this organisation under the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE).

Preschool Education: Facilities

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail all pre-school education facilities, including whether they are statutory, voluntary, private or reception units, broken down by council area.

(AQW 6723/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested has been placed in the Assembly library.

Schools: Newbuilds

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education with which schools he, or his officials, have met in the last 12 months in relation to new builds.

(AQW 6744/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In the last 12 months I or my predecessor have met with the following school authorities to discuss new build programmes or proposals:

- Gaelscoil Eanna
- St Mary's College, Banbridge
- Lagan College
- Torbank
- Foyle and Londonderry College
- Ebrington Primary School

Officials from my Department, as part of their routine responsibilities in relation to the support and governance of infrastructure development, regularly meet with schools and their managing authorities regarding a range of matters pertaining to the schools' estate. During the course of these meetings the potential for new capital projects may have been discussed. It would not, therefore, be possible to identify which of these meetings solely related to new builds.

Schools: Religious Background of Pupils

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what percentage of pupils currently attending (i) controlled; (ii) maintained; (iii) integrated; and (iv) Irish-medium primary schools come from a (a) Catholic; (b) Protestant; or (c) other religious background. **(AQW 6796/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is detailed in the table below.

Religion of pupils attending primary1 schools by type – 2010/11

Religion	Management type			
	Controlled ²	Maintained ³	Integrated ⁴	Irish medium ⁵
Protestant	72.1	1.2	38.6	0.2
Catholic	5.6	96.9	37.2	96.0
Other religion ⁶	22.3	1.9	24.2	3.8

Source: school census

Notes:

- Figures for primary include children in nursery, reception and year 1 – 7 classes.
- Figures for Controlled schools exclude the Controlled Irish medium school and Controlled Integrated schools.
- Figures for Maintained schools include non Irish medium Catholic Maintained and non Irish medium Other Maintained schools, but exclude Irish medium schools and units.
- Figures for Integrated schools include controlled integrated and grant maintained integrated schools.
- Figures for Irish medium schools include Irish medium schools and units from all sectors.
- The 'other religion' category includes other Christian, non Christian and no religion specified/religion not known.
- Figures for 2011/12 will be available at the end of February.

Schools: Accrued Money

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education, in light of the Minister of Finance and Personnel's statement to the Assembly on 17 January 2012, in relation to the accrued money held within schools, or on behalf of schools by his Department, to detail the amount held on behalf of schools in the (i) Belfast Education and Library Board; and (ii) the South Eastern Education and Library Board.

(AQW 6848/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Budget cover held by the Department on behalf of schools in the Belfast Education and Library Board, and the South Eastern Education and Library Board, is as follows:

Board	£000
Belfast Education & Library Board	1,315
South Eastern Education & Library Board	2,500

Note: Figures reflect requirements as advised by the respective ELBs in December 2011.

School Principals: Redundancy

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of Education whether school principals are included in his redundancy offer to teachers aged over 55.

(AQW 6858/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Principal posts are prescribed posts and it is therefore not possible to make a principal redundant unless a school is closing or amalgamating with another school.

In line with teacher appointment procedures, all Principal posts must be publicly advertised. It is therefore not possible for a Principal to volunteer for a transferred redundancy.

I have made funding available to allow employers to offer enhanced discretionary compensation to teachers made redundant at August 2012. Employers may pay discretionary compensation to any teacher eligible for a redundancy payment, not only those aged over 55.

Teachers: Redundancy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education who has the responsibility for setting the terms under which teachers can avail of the recently announced funding for teacher redundancies.

(AQW 6879/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Responsibility for determining the compensation to be paid to redundant teachers rests with the "appropriate person" under the Teachers' (Compensation for Redundancy and Premature Retirement) Regulations (NI) 2010.

For controlled and maintained schools, this is the Education and Library Board.

For voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools, this is the Board of Governors.

Boards of Governors: Vacancies

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, given that 27 voluntary grammar schools have a total of 104 vacancies on their Boards of Governors, whether he intends not to proceed with appointments until adequate nominations have been received.

(AQW 6918/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In accordance with the guidelines issued by the Commissioner of Public Appointments, it is my preference to have a choice of candidates for each DE governor post. In some schools I do not have a 2:1 choice for all of the governor vacancies. I have already given a commitment to making appointments for each post for which I do have a choice of candidates.

Following the recent advertising campaign, my Department has received 103 additional applications from persons expressing an interest in being a school governor. We are processing these applications and I hope to be in a position to make further appointments to voluntary grammar schools shortly.

School Inspections

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education what measures he will put in place to ensure that school inspectors take account of the difficult budget situation facing schools when they are conducting future inspections.

(AQW 6931/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Inspectors, when evaluating the quality of provision, consider each school in its context. Inspectors will continue their practice of evaluating the effectiveness of the use of resources by the school, to ensure it provides a high quality education for the pupils and meets the needs of the community which it serves.

Entitlement Framework: Budget Cuts

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education whether he is aware of school principals' concerns that school budget cuts have the potential to hinder their progress in relation to the future stability of the Entitlement Framework.

(AQW 6932/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Entitlement Framework is about putting the needs of pupils first. All pupils, no matter what school they attend or where they live, are entitled to receive a high quality education with access to a broad and balanced curriculum to enable them to reach their full potential. Our economy demands a flexible and skilled workforce to respond to the areas of growth and opportunity both now and in the future. That is why I have moved to commence the legislation making the Entitlement Framework statutory from September 2013.

I have listened to the concerns of school principals and given the difficult budgetary situation, I decided to phase in the full requirements of the Entitlement Framework, starting with interim targets for fewer course numbers from 2013. I have argued the case with Executive colleagues for further investment to help alleviate pressures on school budgets. I am, therefore, pleased that, as a result, additional allocations totalling £120 million over the next three years has been made available for schools.

Area Learning Communities provide the forum within which schools can work together to come up with imaginative and innovative solutions to address the issues of broadening the range of curricular pathways for their pupils, the pooling of resources, the sharing of expertise and the avoidance of duplication of provision.

Where a school appears to be at risk of not being able to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum by September 2013, I expect managing authorities to work alongside the Department to take action. That action will, of course, include exploring what support the school may need and it may also involve a further assessment of the viability of the school in the longer term.

Higher Education: Participation

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what progress has been made on the recommendation by FSG McClure Watters that his Department and the Department for Employment and Learning work together to deliver improved academic attainment and increased participation in higher education.

(AQW 6933/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since taking office, I have been working closely with the Minister for Employment and Learning and we meet regularly to discuss areas of common interest.

In recent years, we have seen continued improvement in the achievements of school leavers and an increase in the proportion entering higher education. But we still have more to do to tackle underachievement and ensure more of our young people leave school with the skills and qualifications needed to progress to further or higher education, training and employment. I am continuing to implement a range of policies aimed at raising standards, which will make a significant contribution to DEL's strategies on widening participation in higher education and reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Schools: Pupils with June Birthdays

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what extra support his Department provides for primary school pupils whose date of birth falls between 15-30 June.

(AQW 6963/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am aware of research and analysis that has been carried out to examine the impact of the month of birth on pupils' educational outcomes. My Department's focus is on every child reaching their full potential and we need to ensure our policies help to achieve this no matter when the month of a child's birth falls.

Each child is unique and the teacher will use their professional judgement to assess their strengths and where they need additional support, to tailor their teaching to accommodate the educational needs of each child.

Within all stages of a child's education in school, my Department's focus is on supporting and promoting high-quality teaching and learning and our school improvement policy is designed with this purpose in mind. This policy along with our literacy and numeracy strategy, Count, Read: Succeed, set out the clear expectation that teachers and schools will meet the needs of all their pupils and provide the support they need to achieve to their full potential.

As pupils develop and move up through primary school, teachers regularly monitor their strengths, progress and areas for improvement to ensure that they learn as effectively as possible. This monitoring can take many forms, including teacher observation, marking class work and home work as well as a wide variety of more specific assessments. Diagnostic assessment provides teachers with information to inform their professional judgement of pupils' strengths and areas for improvement. The assessment outcomes are intended to help teachers plan their teaching during the school year to meet the needs of their pupils and to monitor their progress. One important element in support of schools' use of diagnostic assessment is that the legislation provides for the assessment of pupils in Years 4 to 7 during the autumn term, using a computer-based method specified by the Department. Computer-based assessments are an integral part of the Department's wider efforts to raise outcomes in literacy and numeracy for all young people.

I am also aware that evidence does suggest that class size in the early years of education can have an impact on pupil outcomes so it is my Department's policy to limit class sizes for Years 1-4 to a maximum of 30 pupils.

Schools: Pupils with June Birthdays

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last five years, to detail the number of pupils, whose birthday falls between 15-30 June, who have repeated an academic year of education in (i) nursery schools; (ii) primary schools; and (iii) post-primary schools.

(AQW 6965/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not have this information available. While the school enrolments census collects information on children's date of birth, it does not collect information on those children who have repeated an academic year of education.

Schools: Pupils with June Birthdays

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to detail his Department's policy for dealing with pupils whose date of birth falls between 15-30 June and who are experiencing difficulties at nursery school.

(AQW 6967/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not collect data on the individual dates of birth of children who require additional support and are, therefore, not in a position to specifically identify children born between 15-30 June who may fall into this category.

However, early intervention and support is of paramount importance to help ensure all young children have the support they need at the earliest possible stage, to help prevent them falling behind at the very start of school, and the subsequent impact on their future years.

Article 4 of the Education (NI) Order 1996 placed a statutory responsibility on the Department to issue a Code of Practice giving practical guidance to the Education and Library Boards (ELBs) regarding their functions in relation to children who may have special educational needs (SEN).

Under this legislation if a child is identified as having SEN the statutory responsibility for securing provision rests with both schools, and the 5 ELBs which are responsible for identifying, assessing and, in appropriate cases, making provision for children with SEN in their areas.

Article 3 (2) of the 1996 Order explains that a child has SEN if he or she has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made.

Statutory Nursery schools and classes are expected to follow broadly the same procedures for identifying and meeting young children's special educational needs as are recommended for children of compulsory school age.

The initial pathways for young children attending a non statutory pre-school setting are generally made through primary/core health services, such as the GP or Health Visitor, with a referral made to a child development centre or team to provide a multi-professional view at a very early stage, and before a referral to the ELB Educational Psychologist.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the funding his Department has allocated to deal with drug and alcohol abuse among young people.

(AQW 6992/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not directly allocate funding to deal with drug and alcohol abuse among young people. However formal and informal education play a significant role in developing young people's knowledge, understanding and skills to deal with issues such as drugs and alcohol.

Education and Library Boards (ELBs) receive funding, within their overall block grant allocations, to enable them to employ drugs and alcohol education officers. These officers provide training and support to teachers in delivering drugs and alcohol education as part of the Personal Development strand of the revised curriculum.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment has produced guidance and support materials to assist teachers in their delivery of the curriculum. This includes curricular resources which address the issue of drug and alcohol abuse.

In addition, my Department provides funding to each of the five Boards, and the Youth Council, to support youth provision. Health education programmes and interventions, which include drugs and alcohol awareness, are routinely provided for young people at youth clubs and units as part of the youth work curriculum.

My Department also provides funding for counselling support, available to all pupils of postprimary age, through the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS). The ICSS provides professional counselling to children and young people at vulnerable times in their lives.

The Department of Education has been working closely with colleagues in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to develop Phase 2 of the New Strategic Direction on Drugs and Alcohol, a fully integrated, inclusive and coordinated strategic direction for addressing alcohol and drug misuse.

Education and Library Boards: Staff

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of administrative staff in each Education and Library Board, broken down by council area.

(AQW 7013/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Please see table below, which details the number of administrative staff in each Education and Library Board, broken down by council area and pay grade as further requested. The pay scales for administrative staff in the Education and library Boards can be located through the following link:

<http://www.staffcom.org.uk/pdfs/jnccirculars/No%20176%20%2009%2010%20Pay%20Rates.pdf>

SEELB

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
Castlereagh	338	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	20
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	50
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	93
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	48
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	27
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	22
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	24
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	8
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	7
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	11

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	7
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 45	Solicitors	4
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 35	Education Welfare	14
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 67 TO 70	Senior Legal Adviser	1
Lisburn	3	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	1
Ards	3	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	1
North Down	1	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	1
Down	5	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	senior Clerical Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26-31	Senior Executive Officer	1

NEELB

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
Antrim	41	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	22
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	11
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	5
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	1
Ballymena	266	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	17
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	58
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	83
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	48

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	27
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	14
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	7
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	4
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	4
Coleraine	11	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	0
Moyle	6	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	6
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	0

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	0
N'abbey	8	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	5
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	0

BELB

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
Belfast	300	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	25
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	48
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	62
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	69
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	29
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	24
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	14
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	5
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	8
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	7
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	7

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
Down	1	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	1

WELB

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
Tyrone	237	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	17
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	69
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	56
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	53
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	18
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	7
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	11
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	0
L'derry	49	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	13
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	13
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	11
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	8
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	0
Fermanagh	21	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	8
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	5
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	2

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	0
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	0

SELB

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
Armagh	365	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	20
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	88
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 21	Senior Storeperson	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	101
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	67
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 33 TO 36	Administrative Officer	39
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 38 TO 41	Senior Administrative Officer	18
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	14
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 46 TO 49	Principal Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 49 TO 52	Senior Principal Officer (1)	6
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 52 TO 55	Senior Principal Officer (2)	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 58 TO 61	Education Officer	4
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 64 TO 67	Assistant Senior Education Officer	1
Banbridge	1	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	1
Cookstown	1	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	1
Craigavon	41	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	5
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	13
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	10
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	12
Dungannon	9	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	1

Council	Council Count	System Grade Description	Grade Description	Grade Count
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	2
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 42 TO 45	Assistant Principal Officer	1
Newry And Mourne	17	APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 4 TO 13	Clerical Officer	5
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 14 TO 17	Senior Clerical Officer	6
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 18 TO 25	Executive Officer	3
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 22 TO 25	Senior Driver	1
		APTC SALARY SCALE PTS 26 TO 31	Senior Executive	2

Education and Skills Authority: HQ Location

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed location of the headquarters of the Education and Skills Authority.

(AQW 7014/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No decisions have been taken yet on the location of the headquarters of the Education and Skills Authority.

Sentinus: Budget Allocations

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education whether funding for Sentinus will be extended after April 2012.

(AQW 7078/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As you will be aware, the education budget faces significant challenges over the period to 2014-15. I am currently reviewing my budget allocations for the next three years and until this exercise is complete I am unable to confirm any future budget allocations for Sentinus.

Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Carrick Primary School, Warrenpoint.

(AQW 7081/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A new build for Carrick Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete August 2012.

Corranny Primary School and Cornagague Primary School, Roslea

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new builds for (i) Corranny Primary School; and (ii) Cornagague Primary School, Roslea.

(AQW 7082/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A new build school on a new site to accommodate the amalgamation of the two existing schools for Corranny and Cornagague Primary schools commenced construction work on 17 January 2011 and is due to complete February 2012.

Teachers: Catholic Background

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education how many teachers from a Catholic background are currently employed in the controlled sector in the Southern Education and Library Board, broken down by (i) nursery; (ii) primary schools; and (iii) post-primary schools.

(AQW 7114/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Fair Employment and Treatment (NI) Order 1998 provides for employers to make annual monitoring returns to the Equality Commission about the composition of the workforce and those applying for employment. However, this provision does not apply to recruitment as a teacher in a school. Therefore, employers of teachers in controlled schools do not hold information on their religious background.

Teachers and Classroom Assistants: Redundancy

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, given the extra £120m funding for schools over the next three years, for his assessment of the backloading of the expenditure which may result in a failure to mitigate the threat posed to educational

provision in the early years, in the event that financially induced teaching and classroom assistant redundancies will have done irreparable harm.

(AQW 7118/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The greatest financial pressure over the Budget 2011-15 period facing classrooms is in 2014-15. This is as a result of the cumulative effect on schools budgets of inescapable pay and price pressures. It is clear therefore that, to address this pressure, any additional funding that would become available for schools would be most needed in 2014-15. On 12 January 2012 I announced additional funding of £30m / £15m / £75m over the next 3 years to be allocated directly to schools. The profiling of this funding fully reflects the fact of the above analysis.

DE: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked inister of Education, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 7134/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department submitted its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 20 December 2011.

Educational Attainment in Disadvantaged Areas

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to improve educational attainment in disadvantaged areas, particularly among Protestant males.

(AQW 7139/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am determined to take action to break the link between social disadvantage and educational underachievement – through encouraging schools to set high expectations for all their pupils and supporting and, where necessary, challenging schools to improve. I also want to stress the value of education and work with local communities to ensure that young people receive clear and consistent messages about the importance of doing well at school, are encouraged to have high aspirations, and are supported to achieve to their full potential.

I am continuing to implement Every School a Good School – a policy for school improvement, which stresses the central role of well-led schools, with high quality teaching for all their pupils and strong links to their communities, in improving outcomes for pupils. It is supported by a range of policies aimed at raising standards, including the literacy and numeracy strategy, the revised curriculum and Entitlement Framework, the Extended and Full Service Schools Programmes and work to finalise strategies on early years and Special Educational Needs and Inclusion.

Schools: Viability Audits

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the statement released by his Department on 27 January 2012, on school viability audits, in what respect each of the Education and Library Boards has failed to provide the complete information.

(AQW 7290/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I asked for the viability audits to be resubmitted as they did not fulfil the requirements as set out in the terms of reference.

Education and Library Boards were asked to identify schools facing significant viability challenges in terms of enrolment trends, quality of education and financial stability. Where there were problems, they were to determine the root cause and present proposals to address them, in order to protect the education of the pupils.

While the reports go some way toward this, the information submitted was not detailed enough to reflect the extent of the challenges – particularly around quality of education and financial stability.

It has been claimed that the purpose of this audit is to compile a “hit list” of schools for closure. That is not the case. It should not be assumed that where schools are facing significant stress, closure is the only, or even a desirable, option. It is likely, in some instances, that it will be more appropriate to plan intervention to safeguard pupils' education rather than to close a school.

Primary Schools: Reception Classes

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Education what is the required teacher to child ratio for reception classes.

(AQO 1183/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A school's ability to admit reception-age children is limited by the school's admission and enrolment number in the same way that these numbers limit the schools admission of P1-7 children. The number of children admitted to reception places, therefore, changes on an annual basis depending on the overall number and age of children admitted each year.

Whilst there is no policy which stipulates the child:pupil ratio in reception and primary classes, it is the Department's policy to keep classes for our youngest pupils at 30 or fewer. This policy covers Foundation and Key Stage 1 (Years 1-4). This is also set out in 'The Class Sizes in Primary Schools Regulations (NI) 2000', although the Regulations do not specify reception classes.

One of the actions within the Review of Pre-School Admissions Arrangements, which I announced in the Assembly on 17 January, is to bring forward legislative amendments to the Education (NI) Order 1997 required to prevent reception provision.

Removal of reception places will, however, require a plan to replace this provision with alternative pre-school places. This task will be undertaken as part of the implementation of the Review.

Schools: Newbuilds

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Education how many primary and post-primary school new builds are planned over the next two financial years.

(AQO 1181/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As I set out in my Statement to the Assembly on Monday 26 September 2011, I have commissioned the five Education and Library Boards, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectors, to co-ordinate a strategic area planning process to shape the future pattern of education delivery.

All previously identified new build projects will be critically assessed alongside all other potential projects as part of the area planning process. This will determine how potential projects will contribute to the overall infrastructure needed and if identified as a priority within the area plan, might be taken forward within the funding available.

Until the area planning process has been completed I am not in a position to state how many school buildings will be planned over the next two financial years

DE: Budget

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Education why his Department had to surrender £10 million to the Minister of Finance and Personnel, at a time when schools are being forced to close or to make cutbacks, and when teachers are being made redundant.

(AQO 1189/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In line with the new arrangements my Department made a bid for £20.5 million, based on the latest information then available from Boards and schools, for the drawdown of school surpluses which was approved in the June Monitoring Round. The process - to use Monitoring Rounds - was recommended by the Finance Minister in his June Monitoring Executive Paper . In December 2011, in line with the arrangements agreed with DFP, my officials reviewed the position with the ELBs and this showed a forecast drawdown of £10.0m. Hence £10.5m was returned in the January 2011/12 Monitoring round to DFP and returned to the stock of Schools Surplus EYF. I have agreed with the Finance Minister that my officials will revisit the procedures around this process to ensure they are as robust as possible but I am conscious that the amount drawn down is based on the individual decisions of the c800 schools with surpluses.

No money has been lost by schools.

Schools: Measurement of Disadvantage

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education to outline the measurements that are used to determine disadvantage in school age pupils.

(AQO 1190/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The main measure used by the Department to determine disadvantage in school age pupils is free school meals entitlement. This measure is used for a number of reasons:

- It is highly correlated with the multiple deprivation measure;
- It relates to an individual – and therefore more robust than a spatial measure which assumes everyone in an area is alike;
- It is current;
- It is readily available as part of the annual census return;
- It provides an indication of the relative concentration of potentially 'disadvantaged' pupils in a given school in a way that no other indicator currently does.

In addition, as part of the formula for the allocation of funding through the Extended schools Programme, the Department utilises the Multiple Deprivation Measure for the North (MDM). This measure, used by all Executive Departments, takes administrative and survey data from a number of domains to produce a score and rank for an area.

Education and Skills Authority: Time Frame

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the timeframe for the Education and Skills Authority becoming fully operational.

(AQO 1191/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The timetable remains as set out in the draft Programme for Government. I intend to bring a draft Bill to the Executive in the very near future, aiming for introduction before the Easter recess. The Education and Skills Authority will be fully operational from 1 April 2013.

Schools: Employment Skills

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Education what steps he will take to increase the teaching of employment specific skills in post primary schools.

(AQO 1192/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Employability is an integral part of the revised curriculum delivered at post-primary through the area of Learning for Life and Work (LLW). It aims to prepare all our young people for all aspects of life and work and to enable them to develop as confident and articulate individuals, able to play their full part in society and our economy.

The employability strand of LLW consists of Work in the Local and Global Economy, Career Management and Enterprise and Entrepreneurship. Pupils will reflect on their own skills and areas for self-development and explore the changing concept of 'career' and various types of jobs, including in the local area. They also explore enterprise and entrepreneurship which provides opportunities to investigate the need for creativity and enterprise, whether as an employer or employee, and to identify and practise some of the skills and develop the attributes associated with being enterprising.

Schools receive delegated budgets to enable them to deliver all aspects of the curriculum, including LLW areas of learning. In addition, my Department also provides funding to a number of organisations for programmes either in school or at larger events designed to promote enterprise and entrepreneurship and to introduce young people to the world of work. Such events help to create an enterprise culture within the classroom and further develop the skills and attitudes our young people need to become employable.

Preschool Provision: Social Disadvantage

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education, in relation to pre-school provision, how widening the definition of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, will improve young people's overall attainment in the long term.

(AQO 1194/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: One of the primary objectives underpinning all Departmental policy is to raise educational standards overall and to close the gaps in achievement between the highest and lowest achievers.

Research indicates that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds tend to experience more difficulty at school than other children.

Reviewing and widening the definition of social disadvantage for the purpose of admission to pre-school places will ensure that more children who will benefit most from pre-school education will receive priority in accessing a funded pre-school place.

Early Years Strategy

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Education for an update on the development of the Early Years (0-6) Strategy.

(AQO 1195/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I want to ensure that Early Years services provide all children with the best possible start in life by providing access to high quality cohesive services for our youngest children and their families and the forthcoming Early Years Strategy will set a framework for that.

Departmental officials are currently considering the wide range of responses to the public consultation on the draft Early Years Strategy. Given the volume of responses, and the level of complexity in the range of views expressed in a number of cases, it has taken longer than expected to analyse the responses to the consultation. Once the analysis is complete I will need to consider how best to take forward the strategy in light of the views expressed. Officials continue to work with the Stakeholder Advisory Group to progress work in this area.

In the meantime we have a commitment in the draft Programme for Government to ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it and are taking forward work on the outcome of the Review of Pre-School Admissions Arrangements, which I announced on 17 January 2012.

Department for Employment and Learning

Holylands, Belfast: Liaison Officer

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 5394/11-15, (i) whether this matter has been reported to the police; (ii) whether the liaison officer was physically or verbally abused; and (iii) whether she sustained an injury.

(AQW 6265/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): The University of Ulster has advised that as the question relates to a specific individual within the University, it is not appropriate to release any further information.

Trade Unions: Funding

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the level of funding his Department allocated to each trade union in the (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11 financial years.

(AQW 6496/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department for Employment and Learning funds Civil Servants on secondment to NIPSA to carry out full-time trade union duties. Details of the allocations for each of the years noted above are set out in Table 1 of the attached Annex.

Salary costs have been provided in terms of pay bands as release of the information requested would result in a breach of the Data Protection Act 1998, in particular the first data protection principle of the Act.

During 2 of the years outlined above, the Department allocated funding to 13 trade unions via the Northern Ireland Union Learning Fund (NIULF). The Fund was established in 2002 to promote activity by trade unions in support of the government's lifelong learning agenda. The Fund supports a wide range of learning opportunities, many in the Essential Skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT, and is open to union and non-union members. It is managed by the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NICICTU) on behalf of the Department.

The overall total funding allocations per financial year via the NIULF are detailed in Table 2 of the attached Annex.

Details of the allocations to each trade union are outlined in Table 3 of the attached

Annex

Table 1

Financial Year	Civil Servants seconded to NIPSA	Grade	Pay Band
2000/2001	1	Senior Instructional Officer	£21,491 - £26,340
2005/2006	1	Senior Instructional Officer	£24,304 - £30,525
	1	Deputy Principal	£24,804 - £36,650
	0.5	Administrative Officer	£12,268 - £16,112
2010/11	1	Senior Instructional Officer	£27,975 - £30,985
	1	Deputy Principal	£32,913 - £38,893

Table 2

	Financial Year 2000/01	Financial Year 2005/06	Financial Year 2010/11
Number of trade unions funded via the NIULF	0	7	10
Total Funding	0	£222,675	£293,759

Table 3

Trade Union	Financial Year 2005/06	Financial Year 2010/11
AMICUS	£35,000	
ATGWU (Amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union)	£23,275	
BECTU (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union)		£5,000
BFAWU (Bakers, Food & Allied Workers' Union)		£31,791
CWU (Communication Workers' Union)	£35,000	£25,000
FBU (Fire Brigades' Union)	£30,000	£25,000
PCS/NIPSA (Public and Commercial Services Union/Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance)		£25,000
POA (Prisoner Officers' Association)	£29,400	
TSSA (Transport Salaried Staff Association)		£26,575
UCATT (Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians.)	£30,000	£35,430

Trade Union	Financial Year 2005/06	Financial Year 2010/11
UNISON	£40,000	£33,830
UNITE		£52,633
USDAW (Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers)		£33,500
Total	£222,675	£293,759

DEL: 0845 Numbers

Mr Girvan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much revenue has been raised by his Department in each of the last three financial years by the usage of 0845 numbers.

(AQW 6510/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department has a total of 3 telephone lines dedicated to Northern Ireland domiciled students using the 0845 telephone number and 12 shared 0845 telephone lines available for all students. The help lines are operated on the Department's behalf by the Student Loans Company (SLC).

The administrative costs of providing the telephone service for students throughout the UK negate any revenue being raised. Therefore, no revenue surplus has been recorded for the last 3 financial years. Full details of the Northern Ireland share of telephone revenue raised and offset against administrative costs are provided in the following table.

Northern Ireland Prefix & telephone number (0845)	Revenue 2008-09	Revenue 2009-10	Revenue 2010-11
Overall Total	£4,485	£9,821	£10,075

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on how they have used EU polices, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to equip young people with the skills and ambition needed to contribute to the economy, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6540/11-15)

Dr Farry: My department will assist young people to improve their workforce skills and seek sustainable employment in 2011/12 using European Social Fund Programme monies and through this contribute to the 2007-13 output target of providing training to 4,500 ESF Priority 1 participants aged 16 to 19 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). To date over 1,644 young people have received ESF supported training through projects run by community and voluntary sector partners and the department is confident of reaching the agreed target of 4,500 within the life-time of the ESF Programme 2007- 2013.

Training for Success

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many young people are engaged in pre-vocational schemes that are not included in the Training for Success programme, such as Include Youth's Give and Take scheme.

(AQW 6598/11-15)

Dr Farry: Priority 1 of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund (ESF) Programme 2007-2013, entitled 'Helping people into sustainable employment', provides support for pre-vocational training projects not included in the Training for Success Programme. Projects supported under Priority 1 of the Programme commenced activity in April 2008 and have provided training for 6,000 young people aged 16 – 19 years old up to 30 September 2011. This includes 249 young people (aged 16 – 19 years) that commenced training with Priority 1 projects between January and September 2011 - the most recent period for which figures are available.

Also, LEMIS has a total of 43 young people in the 18 -24 year old age bracket who are either engaged on or who have recently completed a pre-vocational training course. These are broken down into the following areas:

Londonderry Cityside	10	West Belfast	7
Londonderry Waterside	17	Greater Shankill	5
Strabane	2	East Belfast	1
North Belfast	1	South Belfast	0

Lecturers: Non-attendance Rates

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for the non-attendance rates of lecturers, and those conducting sessions, at each regional college in each of the last three years, broken down by subject.

(AQW 6618/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not hold the information requested by the Member; employment related issues are a matter for each College Governing Body.

I have passed this query to the six Further Education College Directors to respond to the Member directly.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made with the key objective to optimise European programmes and policies for employment, learning and social inclusion, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6622/11-15)

Dr Farry: As part of the Barroso Taskforce, the Competitiveness and Employment Thematic Group, chaired by my Department, is conducting a mapping exercise of key EU employment, learning and social inclusion programmes and to ascertain if there are further opportunities for us within these. This exercise is set for completion by March 2012.

To assist my Department and others in our engagement with the European Union, four Desk Officers have been appointed for the Executive Office in Brussels in order to improve contacts with EU officials and help Departments pursue potential funding opportunities.

AccessNI Checks

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what financial support his Department offers to people on low incomes who require AccessNI checks as part of a job application.

(AQW 6658/11-15)

Dr Farry: Financial support is available for people working less than 16 hours a week, who are applying for jobs requiring AccessNI checks, through my Department's Adviser Discretion Fund. This fund facilitates the purchase of goods or services essential in assisting an unemployed person to apply for a job, or accept a job offer. If an unemployed person requires financial support to pay for an AccessNI check, he or she should make an appointment with an Employment Service Adviser in the local Jobs and Benefits office or JobCentre so that eligibility for funding can be determined.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on how he is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to reduce poverty and inequality with programmes to increase skills and employment, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6683/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am working towards this goal by a range of means.

My Department is the Managing Authority for the European Social Fund, and Priority Two of the 2007-13 Programme is designed to develop a skilled and adaptable workforce by increasing the number of workers qualified to levels 2 and 3, reducing the numbers of workers without Essential (basic) Skills; and reducing gender segregation in the workplace. By improving workforce skills, Priority Two will help to increase productivity, enterprise, and competitiveness and ensure the right workforce skills for future employment opportunities. It will also promote sustained employment and social inclusion by focussing on those who lack essential skills and level 2 and level 3 qualifications.

Priority Two has an allocation of 67,280,121 Euros and has a target of attracting 89,000 participants throughout the life of the programme. The Department is currently on target to meet this objective.

My Department is a partner in an application for funding to the PROGRESS programme. The application was submitted on 29th July 2011 and the Department is currently awaiting confirmation regarding the outcome.

The project aims to bring together experts from several partner countries to exchange different measures and initiatives, such as the promotion of inclusive labour markets through the re-skilling of workers, anti-crisis measures for job creation and community coaches for the inclusion of the people who stand furthest from the labour market.

My Department is active in promoting Erasmus and EU policies within the Higher Education sector. It has membership of several national advisory boards and strategic working groups whose main functions are to provide strategic oversight for the UK Higher Education International and Europe Unit, and to provide expert input on UK/European Higher Education activities.

My Department also engages with a range of European bodies and organisations on an ongoing basis, for example the Regional Skills Education and Training (ReSET) network, in order to identify partners for future projects in support of themes in the NI Skills Strategy.

Also the DEL LEMIS programme match funds one ESF programme - "Jobs4u" - a cross-community employment initiative run by East Belfast Mission (Stepping Stone) in the Lower Newtownards Road and Short Strand.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on how he is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to identify and reduce barriers to work for long-term unemployed people, lone parents and people with disabilities and health conditions, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6684/11-15)

Dr Farry: Priority 1 of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund (NIESF) Programme 2007-2013 focuses upon individuals at a particular disadvantage in the labour market and directly contributes to the achievement of objectives detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12' by identifying and addressing participants' personal barriers to entering and competing in the labour market. Priority 1 of the NIESF Programme 2007-2013 supports activities to extend employment opportunities for unemployed, long-term unemployed and inactive people and assists a broad range of participants, including lone parents, people with disabilities and health conditions.

Since the commencement of the programme in April 2008 a total of 38,127 participants have been assisted under Priority 1.

The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS), a community employment initiative designed to help the "hardest to reach" in targeted areas match funds one ESF programme: "Jobs4u", a cross-community employment initiative run by East Belfast Mission (Stepping Stone) in the Lower Newtownards Road and the Short Strand. The total cost of the project is £300k and the match is a cocktail of funding made up as follows: Belfast City Council £7k, East Belfast Mission £30k and LEMIS £12k (per year).

Job Training Initiatives

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what new job training initiatives his Department intends to target at unemployed young people.

(AQW 6691/11-15)

Dr Farry: Addressing youth unemployment is an Executive priority. I recently circulated to my Executive colleagues proposals for a new package of training and employment interventions targeted at young people. My ability to do more for young people will depend on the resources made available to my Department.

Unemployment: Reducing the Claimant Count

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps he is taking to reduce the claimant count.

(AQW 6739/11-15)

Dr Farry: Unless there is a significant improvement in the economy it is likely that the claimant count will remain high in Northern Ireland in the short to medium term. In the meantime the full range of Employment Service programmes and services remain open to the unemployed to help them find work as quickly as possible.

This includes:

- Steps to Work, our main adult back to work programme;
- Pathways to Work for people with health conditions and disabilities;
- the Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) targeted at the most disengaged in the most disadvantaged areas;
- the suite of programmes offered by the Disability Employment Service for people with more severe disabilities;
- through its network of 35 Jobs & Benefits Offices and Jobcentres, the Employment Service continues to offer a personal adviser service to help people find work.

We are continually developing provision. For example, LEMIS was extended to 3 new areas last September – Newry & Mourne, Cookstown and Moyle. LEMIS is also developing a province-wide service to help ex-prisoners, the homeless and those recovering from drug and alcohol problems.

In recent days we put in place Step Ahead 2012 and will, subject to resource availability, reinstate a variant of the main Step Ahead strand of Steps to Work, with a cap on numbers, in April. I am also considering, with Executive colleagues, an initiative to address youth unemployment which will not only meet the specific needs of young people but will also contribute to the rebuilding and rebalancing the economy. My ability to introduce new measures will be determined by the resources made available to my Department.

Certificate of Religious Education

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) for his assessment of whether it would be prudent and sensible to allow students from Stranmillis University College, Belfast to sit the Catholic Certificate of Religious Education at St Mary's University College, Belfast; (ii) whether this idea has been suggested and considered; and (iii) if not, why this is the case.

(AQW 6767/11-15)

Dr Farry: I believe that all students should be able to access the Certificate of Religious Education locally and the way forward you have suggested is one option in making this a reality.

Kuehnie and Nagel

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what actions are being taken to protect the jobs of workers who are currently employed at Kuehnie and Nagel but are due to transfer to Geiss.

(AQW 6800/11-15)

Dr Farry: The proposed transfer of workers from Kuehnie and Nagel to Geiss is a business decision that will have been taken by the respective companies, and is one in which my Department cannot intervene. Nor can my Department seek to protect jobs for employees, where they are facing either redundancy or transfer.

However, some of my officials met with representatives from Kuehnie and Nagel in December 2011 to offer my Department's Redundancy Advice Service to those employees who would be affected by redundancy. The Redundancy Advice Service works in partnership with the Social Security Agency, Further Education Colleges, HM Revenue and Customs and other agencies to provide advice on alternative job opportunities and access to training courses and a range of other issues such as benefits and taxation.

In offering the service, my Department will co-ordinate and deliver a tailored package of support. Employees will be provided with information and professional advice about the options and support available, including employment, training and education opportunities and careers advice.

It has been agreed that the Redundancy Advice Service will be offered free of charge to Kuehnie and Nagel employees during February.

Work Connect Programme

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the Work Connect Programme to help those on Employment and Support Allowance and Incapacity Benefit find Supported Permitted Work; and when this programme is due to begin.

(AQW 6804/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department is finalising the procurement process for the delivery of the Work Connect programme with the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel. It is anticipated that Work Connect will be available early in the 2012/13 financial year to improve participant's employability and assist them to find and keep suitable full or part time work.

Supported Permitted Work

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what assistance is currently provided by his Department to those on Employment and Support Allowance and Incapacity Benefit who are seeking Supported Permitted Work.

(AQW 6805/11-15)

Dr Farry: There are four categories of Permitted Work under which the Social Security Agency can allow clients who are in receipt of Employment and Support Allowance or Incapacity Benefit or Income Support in lieu of Incapacity Benefit (credits only cases) to undertake some work and retain their entitlement to benefit. Supported Permitted Work is one of these four options.

Supported Permitted Work is defined by the Social Security Agency as work that is supported by someone who is employed by a public authority or a voluntary organisation, whose job it is to arrange work for people with disabilities. This could be work done in the community or in a sheltered workshop. It also includes work as part of a hospital treatment programme.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has agreed to provide support to appropriate applicants on Supported Permitted Work with effect from the 1st February 2012. This support will be delivered by the Department's Disability Employment Service (DES) through its team of specialist Access to Work Advisers.

Access to Work Advisers will support the clients through a range of actions, including the following:

- addressing issues raised during the job settling in period ;
- advising the client in response to issues raised about benefit entitlement and where necessary, referring the client to the relevant Department;
- suggesting adjustments required to the working environment or employment duties;
- discussing or helping to address problems associated with transport to and from the workplace;
- discuss disability or health condition issues/concerns with the employer and/or with work colleagues;
- offering advice and guidance on Disability Employment Service and DEL employment programmes and products ;
- visiting the client at their workplace ;
- working with the employer to help structure the job and to ensure that the client is able to fulfil their full potential;

Clients requesting Social Security Agency approval to access Supported Permitted Work may also seek support from sources other than DEL. Alternative sources include disability organisations or certain health professionals.

DEL: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 6812/11-15)

Dr Farry: I have already submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

St Mary's University College, Belfast

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what meetings he or his officials have had, or have planned, with the Equality Commission in relation to employment disparity at St Mary's University College, Belfast.

(AQW 6828/11-15)

Dr Farry: I and my officials have had no meetings with the Equality Commission in relation to employment disparity at St Mary's University College. No meetings are planned in respect of this issue. This is a matter for which the Equality Commission has responsibility.

Unemployment

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, in light of the unemployment rate in the UK rising to its highest level in seventeen years, what action he will take to ensure a continuing reduction in the unemployment rate in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1201/11-15)

Dr Farry: Unless there is a significant improvement in the economy it is likely that unemployment will remain high in Northern Ireland in the short to medium term. In the meantime the full range of Employment Service programmes and services remain open to the unemployed to help them find work as quickly as possible.

This includes –

- Steps to Work, our main adult back to work programme.
- Pathways to Work for people with health conditions and disabilities.
- The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS) targeted at the most disengaged in the most disadvantaged areas.
- The suite of programmes offered by the Disability Employment Service for people with more severe disabilities.
- Through its network of 35 Jobs & Benefits Offices and Jobcentres, the Employment Service continues to offer a personal adviser service to help people find work.

We are continually developing provision. For example, LEMIS was extended to 3 new areas last September – Newry & Mourne, Cookstown and Moyle. LEMIS is also developing a province-wide service to help ex-prisoners, the homeless and those recovering from drug and alcohol problems. Some very innovative work is underway for these particular groups. In recent days we put in place Step Ahead 2012 and will, subject to resource availability, reinstate the main Step Ahead strand of Steps to Work in April.

As indicated in my earlier answer Executive colleagues are considering an initiative to address youth unemployment which will not only meet the specific needs of young people but will also contribute to the rebuilding and rebalancing the economy.

Programme-led Apprenticeships

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures his Department has taken to maximise the number of public sector employers involved in offering placements for participants in the Programme-Led Apprenticeships scheme.

(AQO 1202/11-15)

Dr Farry: I am aware that some training suppliers are finding it difficult to source the requisite work placements for participants on the Programme-Led Apprenticeship programme, particularly in the current economic climate.

To assist with this, my Department has secured 100 placement opportunities from the Northern Ireland Departments. In addition, a number of public sector placements are available with local councils, the Housing Executive, colleges of further education and schools.

Training suppliers have been urged to continue in their efforts in search of placements and to contact public sector bodies operating in their locality with a view to maximising these opportunities.

Employment: Construction Sector

Mr Murphy asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how his Department is helping to provide job opportunities for unemployed people within the construction sector.

(AQO 1208/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not create employment opportunities. Anyone within the construction industry who has become unemployed may volunteer to participate in the Department's main adult return to work programme Steps to Work which

offers opportunities to gain skills and experience in a range of sectors and providing people who are unemployed within the construction industry the opportunity to gain skills in a different area.

My Department is working closely with Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to ensure that robust social clauses for the long-term unemployed and apprenticeships are built into all upcoming public sector contracts. Following a request from the Minister of Culture Arts and Leisure, officers from my Department are currently working with those involved in the three Sports Stadia to include social clauses.

My Department has recently set up a Social Clause Delivery Forum to share best practice approaches across the public sector, to create local skills and training opportunities, and to create employment opportunities by maximising opportunities from public sector contracts. The group consists of other government Departments, local council representation, CPD and the Construction Employers Federation.

Broadband: Students

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether his Department will conduct a survey on the number of students in higher and further education who are disadvantaged by poor broadband provision.

(AQO 1209/11-15)

Dr Farry: Access to broadband in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Department for Enterprise Trade and Investment. All further education colleges and universities here have 1 Gigabit (1,000 Megabit) internet circuits, which gives them excellent broadband provision. Only 30 of the 600 further education colleges across the UK have such a high level of broadband capacity, with the rest having a capacity of 100 Megabits or less.

All our further and higher education institutions use this high speed broadband capability to enhance teaching, and students are able to take advantage of this technology in their learning.

North West Regional College: Governance

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Employment and Learning if he is in possession of all the details pertaining to the ongoing governance problems at the North West Regional College, and what measures he will take to resolve the matter.

(AQO 1205/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has maintained close contact with the Governing Body of North West Regional College regarding the ongoing dispute between the College's management and one of the College's Unions. The Governing Body is the employer of all College staff and, as such, oversees the employment policies and practices implemented by the College's management. In dealing with the immediate dispute, the Governing Body has taken a number of steps to address the concerns which have been raised. In addition to acting upon the findings of an independent review of the College's application of redundancy procedures, the Governing Body has announced a review of the business case and curriculum audit that led to the redundancy programme. A member of the College's staff and a representative of the Department will also participate in that exercise. The Governing Body is also committed to undertaking a comprehensive assessment of employee relations within the College as an initial step in the restoration of a harmonious working environment.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Invest NI

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in circumstances where InvestNI has returned £39 million of its annual budget to the Department, what action is being taken to ensure that (i) InvestNI is carrying out its functions properly; (ii) investment in local businesses is prioritised and promoted; and (iii) business investment budgets are managed and allocated correctly during the recession.

(AQW 6416/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Against the last Programme for Government, Invest NI met or exceeded all of its targets and goals. Invest NI's performance over the last four years has been exceptional.

However, it is recognised that in the last two years the economic climate has worsened, particularly across Europe and the USA. With declining demand, tighter funding conditions and reduced business confidence many companies continue to deliberately postpone or slow down investment plans to preserve cash, with a consequential impact on the local business base, largely comprising SMEs. This has a direct impact upon Invest NI's ability to utilise its budgets as drawdown is driven by external third parties over which Invest NI has no direct control.

Invest NI's performance is the subject of formal quarterly review by my Department and the agency's performance against key indicators is also reported on as part of the monitoring of the implementation of each Programme for Government. Invest NI activity is heavily focused on supporting local companies, and SMEs in particular.

Provisional results for the period April to December 2011 show that:

- offers to local companies represented around 94% of activity;

- 67% of all assistance offered was to SMEs;
- there was a 69% increase in the number of offers made to SMEs compared to the same period last year; and
- support to local SMEs increased by 23% on the same period last year and accounted for 97% of all assistance offered to local companies.

In addition:

- Boosting Business initiative was launched in November 2011, including the Jobs Fund; and
- All services have been reviewed to determine how they can be made available to a wider business base and changes implemented to make them easier for companies to avail of.

Since then, over 2,250 enquiries have been received from local SMEs keen to find out about the support available, while over 650 individuals registered to attend one of the "Focus on Finance" seminars, with demand being such that an additional three events have already been scheduled.

In order to assess the level of Programme budget required, an evaluation of the following three components is carried out: -

- Brought forward commitments; an estimation of the budget that is required to fund existing contractual commitments to client companies from previous years.
- Work in Progress; an assessment of the impact that current work in progress will have on budget allocations.
- New business; refers to the level of business/ offers that is required to deliver the Corporate Plan and Programme for Government targets.

An annual budget is allocated to the appropriate programmes on the basis of the above assessment. Then a forecast of how the budget will be drawn down on a monthly basis is prepared. This profiling will be based on information received from client companies overlaid with an assessment of any other relevant factors including how companies have performed against previous financial assistance offers.

The current challenging economic circumstances, which has resulted in delays to existing projects and new investments plans, makes it very difficult to predict the demand for Invest NI funding as companies predictions of what they can deliver are often over optimistic or may alter, at very short notice, as global conditions fluctuate in different markets. However the current economic conditions have required us to be even more robust in our review of current and planned projects and we have attempted, wherever possible, to mitigate against known shortfalls through allocating budget to new projects and accelerating other existing projects.

Electricity Generation: Costs

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current average cost, excluding all capital costs, of electricity generation from wind compared to the combined average cost of electricity generation.

(AQW 6422/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Excluding capital costs, the cost to wind generators of generating electricity is their annual operating costs as their cost of fuel is effectively zero. The Arup review of generation costs and deployment potential of renewable electricity technologies in the UK published in June 2011 identified average annual operating costs for onshore wind of between £30,000 and £70,000 per MW installed depending on the site conditions, technology type and turbine size.

Conventional generators also have annual operating costs however generation costs are calculated per MWh. Work undertaken by the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation suggests that the average cost of electricity generation within the Single Electricity Market for 2011 is £36 (€42) per MWh. This figure is made up of the cost of fuel plus variable running costs and excludes capital and fixed running costs. SEM generators are paid in Euros and the sterling figure is calculated from average currency conversion figures for 2011.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 5407/11-15, (i) to detail the chemicals that were used, and in what quantities, to conduct each hydraulic fracturing operation; (ii) from where the water was taken to conduct these operations; (iii) how much water was used in each of these operations; and (iv) how the waste water was disposed of.

(AQW 6424/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

(i) The chemicals used in the hydraulic fracturing operations at the wells were as follows:

Name	Units	Slisgarrow No. 2	Knock Beg No. 1	Mullanawinna No. 1
15% Hydrochloric acid pre-flush	Gallons	105	105	245
Nitrogen (Base gas)	MMSCF*	4.44	1.52	3.5
20/40# Sand (Proppant)	lb	358,000	455,000	375,000

Name	Units	Slisgarrow No. 2	Knock Beg No. 1	Mullanawinna No. 1
Envirohib Corrosion Inhibitor	Gallons	0.2	0.2	0.5
CMHPG Guar gellant	lb	2240	1665	1919
Foam surfactant	Gallons	298	222	255
Breaker E Enzyme Breaker	Gallons	224	166	192
X-cide 207 Bactericide	lb	8.5	6.3	7.3

* MMSCF - Million standard cubic feet

- (ii) The fresh water was brought by tanker in to the well sites.
- (iii) The following volumes of water were used in the hydraulic fracturing of the three wells:
- | | |
|--------------------|----------------|
| Slisgarrow No. 2 | 74,500 gallons |
| Knock Beg No. 1 | 55,000 gallons |
| Mullanawinna No. 1 | 63,500 gallons |
- (iv) The waste water was removed by tanker for offsite disposal.

Go for It Programme: Invitation to Tender

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to explain the delay in drawing up the Invitation to Tender for the Go for It programme.

(AQW 6430/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There was no delay in drawing up the invitation to tender for the Business Start Programme (BSP). Invest NI followed standard procedures in developing and securing approval to deliver a new BSP.

In late 2010, following a review of the former Enterprise Development Programme and consultation with Councils, Invest NI developed a proposal for a new Programme.

An independent economic appraisal of the proposal was initiated in January 2011 following a procurement process to appoint a consultant. A draft economic appraisal was received by Invest NI in March 2011. In line with procedures this was reviewed and challenged by both Invest NI and DETI economists before being finalised in early May 2011. Invest NI then progressed the case through the appropriate internal approval processes and secured final approval to proceed in June 2011.

The invitation to tender for the new BSP was then finalised and initiated with the final approvals in place.

DETI: Civil Servants from the Foyle Constituency who Work in Greater Belfast

Mr McCartney asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the total number of civil servants in her Department who live in the Foyle constituency and travel to work in the Greater Belfast area; and the total cost to her Department of subsidising the travel.

(AQW 6516/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI has no staff who live in the Foyle constituency.

Wind Farms: Profits

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the profits made by wind farm developers, compared to those of other energy providers, and the reasons for any anomaly in profits; and what powers she has to address any anomaly.

(AQW 6543/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department does not monitor the profits of energy companies. That role falls to the Utility Regulator and the regulated companies are required to submit accounts, from which profit figures can be extracted, to the Utility Regulator on an annual basis.

It is also the case, that as part of the regular price control process, the Utility Regulator needs to ensure that the companies are able to generate a sufficient level of profit to secure necessary future investment in Northern Ireland's energy infrastructure in order to maintain security of supply and meet renewable energy targets.

Specifically in relation to wind generators, they are incentivised via the issue of Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs). A Banding Review of ROC levels has been completed and a consultation on proposed ROC levels for on shore wind generators for the period 2013 – 2017 has recommended a reduction from 1 ROC per megawatt hour to 0.9 ROC/MWh to reflect changes in technology costs.

Broadband Enabling Technology

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) what types of businesses qualify for broadband enabling technology through the Broadband Fund; (ii) whether agricultural holdings qualify; and (iii) how many properties in each district council area receive broadband using broadband enabling technology.

(AQW 6582/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Broadband Enabling Technology is not supported by the Broadband Fund, but rather, it is one of three technologies currently used by BT to provide services under the Next Generation Broadband Contract. The other technologies are bonded Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line technology (ADSL) and Very-high-bit-rate Digital Subscriber Line (VDSL2) technology. Broadband Enabling Technology is usually deployed to qualifying consumers where digital subscriber line technologies (whether ADSL or VDSL2) cannot, or are extremely unlikely to, provide a minimum service of 2 Megabits per second.

It is available to all types of businesses including agricultural businesses where services can be provided.

The contract aims to deliver services to at least 85% of businesses in Northern Ireland so it is the case that some businesses will not be able to avail of these technologies and will have to explore other options. That is why I announced on 6 January 2012, a contract with Onwave Ltd for the provision of satellite broadband services offering download speeds of between 6 Mbps and 10 Mbps. These services are available across all areas of Northern Ireland.

There are around 100 locations across Northern Ireland where Broadband Enabling Technology has been deployed to date. Data is not collected for each district council area.

Child Internet Safety

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the strategic development within her Department on child internet safety.

(AQW 6584/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no responsibility for, or involvement with, any strategic development on child internet safety.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how they are using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to create new sustainable and innovative job opportunities, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6623/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department contributes to the delivery of three of the four Thematic Priorities identified in "Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12". Specific activities undertaken over the period, aimed at supporting NI economic development and creating new sustainable and innovative job opportunities, include:

- Encouraging companies and research bodies to engage more fully with the 7th Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities. This has involved supporting the SME sector, Universities and other research bodies to prepare applications and find partners. In the period 31 October 2010 to 31 October 2011, Northern Ireland based researchers (in private companies, academia and other) secured €11.54m from this source,
- Engaging directly with EU counterparts through membership of networks such as the "European Regions Research and Innovation Network" (ERRIN) which facilitates knowledge exchange, joint action and project partnerships between its members with the aim of strengthening their research and innovation capacities.
- Participating in and hosting EU workshops to exchange best practice and identify learning/funding opportunities for Northern Ireland in areas such as Smart Specialisation and Horizon 2020.
- Imminent appointment of additional staff resource based in Brussels, to engage directly with the EU institutions on this agenda and identify new funding opportunities for NI.

DETI continues to manage drawdown of the €306 million European Regional Development funds available to NI through the Sustainable Competitiveness Programme, 2007-2013.

Small Businesses: Internet Use

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what further actions her Department can take to encourage small businesses to use the internet to advertise and sell their services.

(AQW 6661/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There are a number of initiatives my department provides to support Northern Ireland businesses wishing to sell products or services via the Internet.

Logon-ni is a programme sponsored by my Department, providing free and impartial advice to SMEs throughout Northern Ireland on the benefits of broadband. Logon-ni has already assisted 4,133 SMEs. Within the many ICT solutions offered, Logon-ni encourages companies to consider using the internet as part of their marketing campaigns, helping businesses keep in touch with existing clients, gain new clients and significantly strengthen their online presence.

Invest Northern Ireland has a network of ICT advisors based across Northern Ireland helping businesses make best use of ICT to be more productive or access new online markets. This includes help for businesses with an export focus wishing to market or sell their services online. These advisors can offer 1:1 advice to businesses and regularly organise seminars on a range of ICT topics. There is also a wealth of online guidance available on the nibusinessinfo.co.uk website.

The Local Economic Development (LED) measure of the EU Sustainable Competitiveness Programme is available to councils to support activities that will address locally identified needs with a view to improving the local economy. Invest NI works closely with Councils to help identify complementary projects and programmes and has agreed to provide up to 25% of total project costs where the anticipated outcomes align with Invest NI priorities. A number of Councils have or are in the process of developing initiatives focused on developing the capability of businesses in the area of ICT and e-commerce.

Investment Opportunities in the Far East

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what business and investment opportunities her Department is exploring in the Far East, and in particular, China.

(AQW 6662/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The economic and political environment in the Asia Pacific region is evolving rapidly and China's economy in particular has continued to grow despite global economic conditions. As a result, the region presents Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and significant Trade opportunities to Northern Ireland. Invest NI continually reevaluates its strategic focus in order to take advantage of any emerging opportunities.

Invest NI currently has representation in China, Taiwan and Japan. These offices focus on assisting Northern Ireland companies on market entry and export growth, generating inward investment opportunities and developing university linkages.

Over the past eight years, Invest NI has taken 22 missions with a total of 562 company participants to this region. As a result of this strategy, Northern Ireland manufacturing sales and exports to the Asia region in 2011 were valued at £439.5m. Two trade missions to China are planned for 2012/13, with an emphasis on returning to existing regions, but with a focus on developing links with some of the Chinese growth cities such as Chongqing.

FDI levels from the Asia Pacific region into Northern Ireland have been historically low. However, research indicates that this will increase in the coming years, particularly in Northern Ireland's key knowledge based sectors. Invest NI has established a dedicated FDI representative in Shanghai, China and will be focusing on developing FDI opportunities in the country.

Invest NI, in conjunction with UK Trade & Investment, RBS and Ulster Bank held a Doing Business in Asia event in February 2011 which was attended by 120 companies. The event brought together market specialists for 8 markets in Asia. The event is being held again in February 2012 focusing on India, China, Singapore and Malaysia.

It has also developed good working relationships with the Diplomatic Posts in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing and is a member of the China Britain Business Council (CBBC).

In addition, Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster both have close links to similar institutions in China and are working in partnership on research projects and exchanges between staff and students.

Invest NI's strategy means that it is well placed to take advantage of the significant opportunity from Asia Pacific and China in particular, with such relationships and exchanges contributing significantly to transforming Northern Ireland into a technology-led and innovation driven economy, and one focused on global business.

Poverty: Reduction

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what policies her Department has introduced specifically to reduce levels of poverty; and what policies she plans to introduce to reduce levels of poverty.

(AQW 6673/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The draft Northern Ireland Economic Strategy sets out how the Executive plans to grow a prosperous local economy by 2030. Higher levels of employment and prosperity will be key to reducing poverty levels but delivery of the objectives of the Economic Strategy will be the responsibility of the Executive, not just my Department.

Recognising the importance of job creation in tackling poverty, as part of the PfG and NI Economic Strategy my Department has committed to promote 25,000 new jobs by March 2015.

DETI have also introduced a number of interventions which are specifically aimed at helping those in poverty.

In order to improve the availability of affordable credit, my Department has been liaising with HM Treasury and the Financial Services Authority on the introduction of legislation to allow NI credit unions to expand the range of services which they can currently offer. These changes will be implemented from 31 March 2012. It is also planned to introduce further legislation in the Assembly during the current mandate which will mirror changes introduced in GB in January 2012.

In addition, DETI has taken a number of steps to tackle the issue of fuel poverty including the opening of the gas and electricity market to competition; the creation of a Single Electricity Market and the mutualisation of energy assets. A number of actions have also been undertaken to improve domestic energy efficiency which is one of the main contributors to fuel poverty

My Department also provides a debt advice service which aims to help those with immediate debt problems meet the challenge put upon them by their circumstances and encourages them to regain control of their financial obligations. Furthermore, the Debt Relief Scheme came into operation on 30 June 2011. The Scheme has bridged the gap in legislative provision to address the needs of people in debt on low income, by providing debt relief for financially excluded, vulnerable people.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made with the key objective to optimise European programmes and policies for economic development, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6682/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department contributes to the delivery of three of the four Thematic Priorities identified in "Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12". Specific activities undertaken over the period, aimed at supporting NI economic development and creating new sustainable and innovative job opportunities, include:

- Encouraging companies and research bodies to engage more fully with the 7th Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities. This has involved supporting the SME sector, Universities and other research bodies to prepare applications and find partners. In the period 31 October 2010 to 31 October 2011, Northern Ireland based researchers (in private companies, academia and other) secured €11.54m from this source,
- Engaging directly with EU counterparts through membership of networks such as the "European Regions Research and Innovation Network" (ERRIN) which facilitates knowledge exchange, joint action and project partnerships between its members with the aim of strengthening their research and innovation capacities.
- Participating in and hosting EU workshops to exchange best practice and identify learning/funding opportunities for Northern Ireland in areas such as Smart Specialisation and Horizon 2020.
- Imminent appointment of additional staff resource based in Brussels, to engage directly with the EU institutions on this agenda and identify new funding opportunities for NI.

DETI continues to manage drawdown of the €306 million European Regional Development funds available to NI through the Sustainable Competitiveness Programme, 2007-2013.

Go for It Programme

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the current legal challenge by Enterprise NI against InvestNI's tendering process for the Go For It programme, to detail (i) the service that is being provided in the absence of the Go For It programme; (ii) the number of mentoring hours provided during the period of the legal challenge to date; (iii) the number of business plans produced; (iv) the number of new business start-ups; and (v) how these figures compare to the same period last year.

(AQW 6708/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) Invest NI is not delivering a Business Start Programme but has put in place appropriate arrangements to respond to enquiries and to ensure that those individuals with an interest in establishing their own business are able to access relevant advice and guidance during the period of delay.

As part of Invest NI's core service, through the Regional Office network, staff can provide one to one advice, business clinics and business plan support. Invest NI is also proactively engaging with other stakeholders providing services in this area including DEL and Princes Trust NI and where appropriate is signposting individuals to these organisations for support.

- (ii) Invest NI is not providing mentoring hours.
- (iii) Invest NI is not in a position to provide figures for the number of business plans produced by start up businesses across Northern Ireland. Invest NI will review this area within the next two months.
- (iv) The number of business starts can only be established as part of a review of those producing business plans. This would also have been the case in the former Enterprise Development Programme (EDP). It is too early for such an exercise to be undertaken.
- (v) Not applicable given answers to (iii) and (iv).

Unemployment: Claimant Count

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she is taking to reduce the current claimant count. **(AQW 6728/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: The draft Northern Ireland Economic Strategy (NIES) identifies a number of measures, across all Executive Departments, which will create jobs and increase employment.

Specific actions which my Department will deliver include:

- The promotion of 6,300 jobs in locally owned companies (with 50% paying above the Private Sector Median);
- The promotion of 6,500 new jobs in new start-up businesses;

- The promotion of 6,300 jobs with 4,000 to be created by March 2014 under the Jobs Fund; and
- The promotion of 5,900 jobs from inward investors (with 75% paying salaries above the Private Sector Median)

As part of its Boosting Business initiative, Invest NI provides a range of advice, guidance and support that will help local companies survive the impact of the economic downturn and thereby maintain or increase levels of employment.

Titanic Signature Project

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the contract entered into in relation to the Titanic Signature Project; (ii) whether there are any social clauses in the contract; and (iii) whether apprenticeships were created as a result of the social clauses; and if so, to detail the number and location of the apprenticeships.

(AQW 6747/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Titanic Signature Building is a £97million project, with funding having been provided by Belfast City Council, Belfast Harbour Commissioners, Titanic Quarter Ltd and NITB.

The Central Procurement Directorate's (CPD) sustainability clauses, which cover social, economic and environmental issues, have been incorporated into the contract. They cover:

- Training and skills development - through apprenticeships;
- Employment – including planning and measures to target the long-term unemployed;
- Promotion of equality in the workplace;
- Sustainability - with a requirement to achieve a BREEAM Excellent rating; and,
- Encouraging the establishment of local partners.

There is also further specific clauses that the contractor agrees to recruit one apprentice, either directly or through the supply chain for each £2million of project value.

To date the Department for Employment and Learning has validated 25 Apprentices and are assessing a further 8. The location of validated Apprentices has shown that they have come from a variety of locations such as; Belfast; Newtownards; Newcastle; Newtownabbey; Newry; Antrim and Cookstown.

The validation evidence does confirm that Apprenticeships have been sustained during this difficult downturn period as a direct result of the Titanic Signature Building social clause contract although there is no evidence that new apprentice opportunities have been created.

Food Production Sector: Jobs and Growth

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps have been taken to promote jobs and growth in the food production sector.

(AQW 6754/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The steps that have been taken to promote jobs and growth in the food production sector include continued investment by my Department through Invest NI; the introduction of the jobs fund and the longer term strategic development of the sector through the Food Strategy Board.

In terms of investment in the last financial year 2010/2011 over £8million was offered to food production companies leveraging total planned investment of £62 million. In the current financial year to date over £3 million has been offered leveraging a further £29 million investment.

Through the Jobs Fund Invest NI to date has provided employment support to four food production businesses which have already created 26 new jobs against a target of 31. There are also a further twelve projects across Northern Ireland at various stages of development which collectively have the potential to create a further 250 new jobs. Invest NI has also made a presentation on the Jobs Fund to a wide range of key stakeholders, local councils and industry bodies including the Food Industry Advisory Panel and the UK Dairy Council. Invest NI is continuing to work closely with the food production sector to promote the Jobs Fund and to identify further new employment based projects.

My Department is currently working closely with DARD to establish a new Food Strategy Board. One of its key objectives is to update the current strategy and develop a longer term vision for the sector. This will feature building on the current growth of the sector and the promotion of new jobs.

Energy Liberalisation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to the transposition of the Third Energy Liberalisation Package, (i) what is the current position on approval of the chosen model; and (ii) what contingencies are in place should the regulator or the European Commission decline approval.

(AQW 6789/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Gas and Electricity (Internal Markets) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 place an obligation on relevant gas and electricity transmission licensees to be certified by the Utility Regulator as complying with the unbundling requirements. The

Regulations contain provision for a number of models, all of which satisfy the requirements of the Third Energy Package. The Utility Regulator is currently discharging its obligations in line with the process for certification contained in the legislation.

Invest NI: Hotels

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the applications made to InvestNI for funding for hotels, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6799/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In the period from 1st April 2003 to 23rd January 2012 Invest NI has received 63 applications for capital grant support for hotel projects as detailed below:

Belfast East	0	Mid Ulster	1
Belfast North	1	Newry & Armagh	2
Belfast South	0	North Antrim	6
Belfast West	2	North Down	3
East Antrim	2	South Antrim	1
East Londonderry	10	South Down	2
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	6	Strangford	2
Foyle	11	Upper Bann	4
Lagan Valley	7	West Tyrone	3

It should be noted that over the period more than one application may have been received for the same or a similar project. A project which was previously withdrawn or rejected may be the subject of a new application.

Ulster Bank: Jobs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what contact she has made with the Ulster Bank in relation to the announcement that 350 jobs are to be cut.

(AQW 6806/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A stable and competitive banking sector that meets the needs of businesses and individuals is vital for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. While I have no statutory control of the banking sector, we have met with the main banks in Northern Ireland, most recently in December 2011, to emphasise the importance of supporting business development and growth. I also spoke with a representative of the Ulster Bank on the evening the redundancy announcement was made.

Both the Finance Minister and I will continue to liaise with the UK and Irish governments and the local banking sector where appropriate to ensure that any impact on Northern Ireland's banks is minimised, and that we continue to have a competitive banking sector.

Energy Provision

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what communication her Department has had with the EU Commission, over the past year, on present and future energy provision, competition and prices in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7009/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has engaged with the EU Commission on a number of energy policy and legislative issues over the past year to develop greater energy market integration and competitiveness.

Oil Exploration: Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the oil exploration in Carrickfergus.

(AQW 7086/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Licensee, Infrastrata plc, commissioned a seismic survey over the licence area which was completed in November 2011. When the seismic data processing has been completed the data will be interpreted, and integrated with existing geological and geophysical data, in order to identify any potential exploration drilling targets. The company website contains further useful information on the exploration programme, available at the following address:

http://www.infrastrata.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=184&Itemid=101

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether Tamboran has finished its desktop study on hydraulic fracturing in Co Fermanagh, and is seeking to proceed with the drilling process in a shorter timeframe than had been previously outlined.

(AQW 7343/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Tamboran Resources Pty Ltd issued a press release on 1st February 2012 announcing that it had completed the “first part of its analysis to determine the feasibility of shale gas exploration in Northern Ireland” and that it planned to publish the full analysis by the end of this year.

This analysis is only one part of the work programme, for years 1 – 3 of the licence, that the company needs to complete before it can submit an application for permission to drill an exploration well. Details of the work programme are available in the PL2/10 licence document, which can be downloaded from the DETI website at www.deti.gov.uk/deti-energy-index/minerals-and-petroleum/petroleum_licensing_2.htm. The additional work will include a 12 month baseline environmental assessment with studies on groundwater, air quality, noise levels and seismic activity. When the company has completed these studies it will publish the findings in early 2013 and then outline its intentions as to how it will proceed to the next stage which would involve applying for permission to drill.

The timescale outlined above is consistent with my statement in the Assembly debate of 6th December 2011 that “it is unlikely that an application will come to the Department for at least another 12 to 18 months”.

Department of the Environment

Car Wash Regulations

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of the Environment (i) for his assessment of the adequacy of the regulations around car wash facilities; (ii) whether his Department has any plans to review the regulations; and (iii) what action his Department has taken to explore developments in other jurisdictions in relation to car wash regulations.

(AQW 3822/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Car wash facilities fall within the definition of development assigned by Article 11(1) of the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991 and therefore require planning permission from the Department.

In relation to car washes making a discharge to a storm sewer or directly to a waterway, Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Water Management Unit protects the water environment primarily through the administration, monitoring and enforcement of discharge consents, in accordance with the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999.

Both the Planning Order and the Water Order empower the Department to take enforcement action should a car wash development fail to comply with the requirements of either. The statutory framework outlined seems adequate to control planning and the operation of car wash developments.

In relation to the regulation of car wash developments, I have asked officials to advise of the law and practice in other jurisdictions and shall review the matter.

NIEA has worked with the Environment Agency in England and Wales, and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to produce Pollution Prevention Guideline 13 (PPG 13) ‘Vehicle washing and cleaning’. PPG 13 details the statutory requirements for vehicle wash operators and highlights best practice measures to prevent such developments causing pollution in the water environment. PPG 13 can be viewed and downloaded from the following web address:

<http://publications.environment-agency.gov.uk/PDF/PMH00307BMDX-E-E.pdf>

West Belfast: Spend by the Department of the Environment

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment to detail his Department's, and its arm's-length bodies', spend in the West Belfast constituency in each of the last three years; and the proposed spend for each year until 2015.

(AQW 5263/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department pays grants to third parties as well as payments to suppliers of goods and services located within the West Belfast constituency. Records of spend are not kept at constituency level and therefore a manual analysis of all individual payments would have to be undertaken which may not result in the necessary information being identified to answer this question.

However, to identify examples of grants and goods/services within the West Belfast constituency, an analysis based on postcodes rather than the constituency boundary, has been conducted. Whilst this may broadly capture grants to third parties and payments to suppliers within the constituency, it does not reflect the actual expenditure that is likely to be spent in the constituency. There may be suppliers located in the West Belfast constituency who have been paid for services/supplies which are provided or delivered outside the constituency. Likewise there is likely to be third parties and suppliers who receive funding outside the West Belfast constituency but deliver services within the constituency. In light of this a postcode analysis is likely to produce inaccurate data.

Despite this, a manual exercise has been conducted on some of the larger payments to help identify examples of grants and payments to suppliers of goods and services delivered within the West Belfast constituency from 2008-09 to 2011-12. For information, these are set out in the table below:

Grants/funding	Purpose	£			
		2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Belfast Hills Partnership	Grants for conservation of Belfast Hills	81,384	89,560	70,130	40,000
Colin Glen Trust	Provision of funding to support Colin Glen Park	175,000	157,901	171,832	175,000
St Colemans' Parish Church	Listed building grant			20,410	
Clonard Monastery	Listed building grant	65,230		81,785	50,000
Goods & Services					
Belfast Media Group	Advertising Services		58,703	69,915	63,000
Island Cleaning Services	Provision of cleaning services	337,994	307,035	242,823	180,000

DOE: Information Service

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the current (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in his Department's Information Service.

(AQW 5351/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The number of staff employed in the Department's Press Office is 7, of which 5 are EIS staff and 2 administrative staff with total salary costs of £260,000.

There are other functions which technically come under the heading of DOE Communications, but they don't interact with the media. These can be summarised as follows:

- 7 staff in e communications whose work includes DOE Internet, Intranet, and NI Direct Franchises
- 6 staff in marketing and design whose work includes advertising, exhibitions, conferences, design and print and numerous events for the public to enjoy our built and natural heritage including, for example, European Heritage Open Days
- 2 staff in education and interpretation whose work includes developing eco schools and living history information
- 1 member of staff on rethink waste, a dedicated strategy to reduce waste and improve recycling rates
- 2 administration staff

Hospitality: Spend

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment what has been the total spend on hospitality by his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6360/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The table below provides the expenditure on hospitality by the Department for the years 2006/07 to 2010/11.

Business Area	2006/07 £	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £	2010/11 £
Department (excluding agencies)	29,420	44,732	40,166	42,287	15,497
Northern Ireland Environment Agency	23,419	29,529	41,218	31,635	10,652
Planning Service	15,002	30,739	27,616	19,078	6,454
Driver and Vehicle Agency	19,011	8,238	10,996	9,009	2,353
Total	86,852	113,238	119,996	102,009	34,956

The significant reduction in hospitality expenditure, of almost 66% between 2009/10 and 2010/11, is in response to the difficult financial position the Department has continued to face, mainly due to the dramatic and significant fall in planning application income. My Department has critically reviewed, and continues to explore, all opportunities for minimising spend whilst protecting the delivery of frontline services.

I have put in place procedures, where I receive on a quarterly basis, updates on spend such as hospitality, conferences, accommodation, etc., to ensure these costs are kept to a minimum. This has allowed me to reallocate resources to support frontline services and provide essential grant funding to non government organisations.

Planning System

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to improve public confidence in the planning system, following a Friends of the Earth survey which showed that four out of five respondents described the current system as poor or very poor.

(AQW 6526/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I believe in the radical reform of planning across a range of levels to update its approach in ways that have not been addressed in recent times.

Survey evidence on the planning service can be diverse revealing good levels of satisfaction in the contents of the FOE survey, which assessed the opinion of people who work with the service. Nonetheless, there are good opportunities for improvement.

I am working on a number of fronts to reform and remodel the planning system so that it supports the future economic and social development needs of Northern Ireland in a way which results in improved confidence from all users and protects the enormous assets of our built and natural heritage.

The reform to the planning system contained within the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 will result in a modernised system with quicker local development plans, faster decisions on planning applications, faster and fairer appeals and tougher and simpler enforcement. It will also enhance the rights and opportunities of all those who wish to become involved in the planning process when planning powers transfer to local government. In advance of the transfer of powers to councils I am bringing forward a Bill that will accelerate the implementation of a number of those reforms, to be administered by the Department. These will include the development of a Statement of Community Involvement setting out opportunities for interested parties to become involved in development management and other planning control issues and a requirement that developers engage in pre-application community involvement in advance of submitting an application for major developments. Higher penalties for a number of offences are also included.

In parallel, the Department is bringing forward a number of administrative reforms which will speed up the processing of applications (including major applications) such as an extension to the streamlined planning application scheme with local councils, measures to ensure quicker responses from consultees and on a voluntary basis pre-application community consultation on key developments.

In addition, the Department is undertaking a revision of planning policy which will result in more strategic, simpler and shorter policy and a new complaints procedure has been introduced designed to make the process of complaining easier and more user-friendly for members of the public.

As an example of leaving no stone unturned, I have a series of interventions involving representatives of the renewable industry (including anaerobic digestion) to identify how the planning service can be improved; there is an operational review of PPS21; a group looking at planning, business and the economy, etc. I believe this is a gear change from previous times and should result in a planning service better fit for purpose.

Planning: Councils

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to improve the transparency and accountability of the planning system during the transfer of powers to district councils.

(AQW 6527/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am working on a number of fronts to reform and remodel the planning system including measures which will improve the transparency and accountability of the system.

The reforms contained within the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 will enhance the rights and opportunities of all those who wish to become involved in the planning process when planning powers transfer to local government. In advance of the transfer of powers to councils I am bringing forward a Bill in the Assembly that will accelerate the implementation of a number of those reforms, to be administered by the Department. These will include the development of a Statement of Community Involvement, setting out opportunities for interested parties to become involved in development management and other planning control issues, and a requirement on developers to engage in pre-application community involvement in advance of submitting an application for major developments.

The local government reform programme, will see the transfer of planning functions to councils and place the majority of planning decisions in the hands of locally elected and locally accountable politicians. It will also introduce new governance arrangements for councils and a new ethical standards regime for councillors. The proposed governance arrangements will provide a system of checks and balances to protect the interests of minorities in the council area. The ethical standards regime will include the introduction of a mandatory Code of Conduct for councillors with supporting mechanisms for investigation, adjudication and appeals. The Code will include a section on planning matters.

Following the transfer of functions the Department will have an oversight role to ensure that the district councils are properly discharging their planning functions. They will include powers to intervene in the local development plan process, or to call-in

applications for the Department's determination. The Department will also retain powers to take enforcement action and to confirm council orders such as revocation or discontinuance orders. The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 also introduces new audit powers for the Department to conduct an assessment of a council's performance. The assessment may cover a council's performance of its planning functions in general or of a particular function.

The new Planning Portal contributes to the transparency of the planning system as it allows the public and other interested parties to view all planning applications that are under consideration by the Department online. The portal has improved the quality of information held in relation to these applications and introduced a consistent auditable approach for the processing of applications.

All of these combined measures will improve transparency and accountability of the Planning System.

Planning: Enforcement

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to speed up the enforcement process when building work is started before planning permission is granted.

(AQW 6609/11-15)

Mr Attwood: It is clearly unsatisfactory that anyone should carry out development requiring planning permission, without first submitting an application and paying the appropriate fee. There are occasions where the few behave as if they can act with licence and go around the planning system. That will not be tolerated in my tenure as Minister.

The Department has a general discretion to take enforcement action when it regards it as expedient to do so, having regard to the provisions of the development plan and any other material consideration. It is however, important to note that enforcement action may be held in abeyance while a planning application or appeal is being determined depending on the degree of harm and nature and scale of the breach.

In order to strengthen and simplify the enforcement process, I have brought forward a number of key reforms from The Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. These reforms include an increase in fines for offences relating to listed buildings and trees and the introduction of a standardised 5 year time limit for taking enforcement action against breaches of planning control allowing for a more efficient system and greater clarity in dealing with breaches of planning control.

The Act includes additional powers in relation to Fixed Penalty Notices and multiple fees for retrospective planning applications which, when enacted, will strengthen enforcement even more.

In addition, following the publication of the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJI) follow-up review of inspection recommendations, officials have been instructed to take forward a number of interventions and initiatives to further enhance the delivery of enforcement activities across the full range of the Department's functions, which include for example,

- A statement of intent/common aim will be incorporated into the Departmental Business Plans to reflect the priority give by the Department to Enforcement;
- An Enforcement Best Practice Group which will meet quarterly to reinforce the priority of enforcement within the Department and to discuss and promote best practice will be established;
- Quarterly enforcement statistics will be prepared for my consideration;
- A compliance and enforcement annual report outlining the work of all business areas will be produced;
- Further guidance will be produced in relation to the documentation of the Department's rationale for a decision when it is considered not expedient to take Enforcement Action.
- The Department will continue to ensure that targeted training for enforcement staff is identified delivered and reviewed in order to further enhance skills, on an agency basis.

I believe that enforcement – particularly for serious environmental and planning issues including crimes – needs to be to be escalated. I am assessing how to do this and have sent out a strong message to my staff that more robust enforcement is an essential element of a balanced planning system.

Taximeters

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the use of taxi meters; and whether there are any changes planned.

(AQW 6620/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Currently only taxis licensed as Belfast Public Hire (BPH) are required to be fitted with taxi meters and work to a regulated taxi fare. There are no requirements for Restricted Public Hire (RPH) or Private Hire (PH) taxis to be fitted with taxi meters as there is no fare regulation for these classes of taxi. However, I am aware that many RPH and PH taxis, particularly in Belfast, use taxi meters to calculate the fares charged.

The Taxi Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 gives the Department the powers to introduce a Northern Ireland wide regulated taxi fare and, as part of this, to require all taxis to have taxi meters fitted.

The Department is currently consulting on proposals for new regulations to introduce this requirement. The consultation closes on 17 February 2012 and once the responses have been collated and assessed I will make my decisions as to how and when to bring forward changes to the current taximeter requirements.

Motorcycle Test

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of the Environment, if a person has received a date for the final part of their motorcycle test prior to the introduction of the new regulations on 1 February 2012, and the test is cancelled, for a reason outside the applicant's control, and the new date is after 1 February 2012, whether the person will be able to complete the test under the old regulations.

(AQW 6699/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In February 2011 the Department introduced legislation which requires all learner moped and motorcycle riders to complete a compulsory basic training (CBT) course before being permitted to ride unaccompanied on public roads. The legislation also requires learner riders to produce a valid CBT certificate to the examiner before the start of the practical off-road and on-road moped or motorcycle test.

The legislation took effect on 21 February 2011 for all new moped and motorcycle riders. Those riders who had provisional moped or motorcycle entitlement which pre-dated the introduction of the legislation were given an additional 12 months to pass their moped or motorcycle test, or to complete CBT. This additional 12 month period is drawing to a close, and riders who have not passed their on-road test by 20 February 2012 will have to complete CBT.

The legislation does not permit any further flexibility beyond the 12 months already offered, therefore a person who has not passed all parts of the moped or motorcycle test by 20 February 2012, will have to comply with the CBT requirement thereafter, if they are to continue to ride unaccompanied on the road.

Where a candidate has booked an on-road motorcycle test for a date before 20 February 2012, and that test is cancelled by the Agency, every effort will be made to offer an alternative date before 20 February 2012; the Agency intends to reserve some test slots to cover this eventuality.

Anticipating an increase in demand for motorcycle tests towards the end of the extra 12 month period, DVA has put in place measures to accommodate additional testing requirements where possible. Statistics show that the Agency has already delivered 25% more off-road and 40% more on-road motorcycle tests between April and December 2011 than during the same period in 2010.

DVA has striven to ensure that all learner motorcyclists have been made fully aware of the new legislation through:

- letters sent in November 2010 to registered keepers of motorcycles with a cylinder capacity of 125cc and below;
- letters sent in January 2012 to candidates who have attempted part of their practical motorcycle test, but who have not yet passed all parts;
- press releases issued in November 2010 and February 2011;
- CBT leaflets, which have been included with all provisional licences issued since 21 February 2011;
- editorials in Irish Road Racer magazine;
- leaflets distributed during 2010-2011 at provincial motorcycle shows;
- leaflets distributed to Education and Library Boards, theory test centres, motor tax offices and motorcycle accessory shops;
- social media channels; and
- The NI Direct website, which provides information relating to CBT training and how to book a test once a CBT certificate has been obtained.

Department of Finance and Personnel

DFP: Re-employment of Staff

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, for each of the last three years, to detail (i) the number of former employees of his Department who have, since leaving their positions, been re-employed on a part-time or consultancy basis by his Department; (ii) the applicable amounts of remuneration in each case; and (iii) the agency within the Department by which they were re-employed.

(AQW 6026/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The number of former employees of DFP who have, since leaving their positions, been re-employed on a part-time or consultancy basis by the Department is 5. The applicable amounts of remuneration in each case and the agencies within the Department by which they were re-employed are provided in the following table.

Staff Member	Remuneration			Business Area / Agency
	2009	2010	2011	
1	£11,400	£7,435	£9,100	DFP Core
2	£3,125	£0	£0	DFP Core

Staff Member	Remuneration			Business Area / Agency
	2009	2010	2011	
3	£20,985	£24,316	£25,934	LPS
4	£1,886	£0	£0	NISRA
5	£2,400	£2,400	£0	NISRA

Mortgage Arrears

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people currently in mortgage arrears; and the value of the arrears, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6159/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel does not hold information on debt and mortgage arrears.

Debt Arrears

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of people currently in debt arrears; and the value of the arrears, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6161/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel does not hold information on debt and mortgage arrears.

Employment

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of people; (ii) the percentage of the population who are in work; and (iii) the percentage of the total working population, and the number of people, who are (a) self-employed; (b) employed on a full-time basis; and (c) employed on a part-time basis, broken down by district council area.

(AQW 6581/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Estimates of the numbers in employment by district council area are sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS), Local Area Database, with the most recent data available for January – December 2010.

Please note that LFS estimates at District Council Area level are based on relatively small sample sizes and are subject to a higher degree of sampling variability. They should, therefore, be treated with caution.

The requested breakdown of employment by District Council Area is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Breakdown of employment by District Council Area

LGD	Total population ¹	In work ^{2,3}							
		Total in work	% of total population in work	Total self-employed	% of working population self-employed	Total employed full-time	% of working population employed full-time	Total employed part-time	% of working population employed part-time
Antrim	52,000	26,000	49.9%	4,000	13.9%	18,000	70.3%	8,000	29.7%
Ards	78,000	32,000	41.3%	6,000	20.2%	24,000	73.8%	8,000	26.2%
Armagh	58,000	27,000	46.8%	4,000	14.6%	21,000	78.3%	6,000	21.7%
Ballymena	63,000	24,000	37.9%	3,000	14.2%	18,000	74.4%	6,000	25.6%
Ballymoney	31,000	14,000	45.1%	2,000	13.6%	10,000	76.2%	3,000	23.8%
Banbridge	48,000	26,000	53.5%	4,000	14.2%	18,000	69.2%	8,000	30.8%
Belfast	266,000	113,000	42.3%	13,000	11.3%	86,000	76.3%	27,000	23.7%
Carrickfergus	40,000	21,000	52.4%	2,000	9.6%	15,000	71.4%	6,000	28.6%
Castlereagh	66,000	31,000	46.5%	3,000	9.1%	24,000	76.6%	7,000	23.4%
Coleraine	56,000	23,000	40.6%	5,000	20.0%	18,000	78.9%	5,000	21.1%
Cookstown	36,000	17,000	46.7%	4,000	23.5%	15,000	87.1%	2,000	12.9%

LGD	Total population ¹	In work ^{2,3}							
		Total in work	% of total population in work	Total self-employed	% of working population self-employed	Total employed full-time	% of working population employed full-time	Total employed part-time	% of working population employed part-time
Craigavon	93,000	43,000	46.3%	7,000	15.5%	35,000	80.9%	8,000	19.1%
Derry	107,000	41,000	38.2%	5,000	13.1%	30,000	73.4%	11,000	26.6%
Down	69,000	31,000	44.8%	7,000	21.2%	24,000	77.5%	7,000	22.5%
Dungannon	57,000	24,000	41.4%	5,000	20.6%	20,000	82.7%	4,000	17.3%
Fermanagh	62,000	28,000	45.0%	7,000	24.3%	24,000	87.6%	3,000	12.4%
Larne	31,000	14,000	44.3%	4,000	26.7%	11,000	76.2%	3,000	23.8%
Limavady	33,000	14,000	41.8%	2,000	13.8%	12,000	85.1%	2,000	14.9%
Lisburn	115,000	51,000	44.3%	6,000	11.7%	37,000	73.3%	13,000	26.7%
Magherafelt	44,000	20,000	45.9%	4,000	21.8%	16,000	79.6%	4,000	20.4%
Moyle	17,000	8,000	48.2%	3,000	38.7%	7,000	87.3%	1,000	12.7%
Newry and Mourne	99,000	39,000	39.9%	10,000	24.5%	31,000	79.2%	8,000	20.8%
Newtown-abbey	83,000	34,000	41.3%	4,000	11.1%	25,000	74.1%	9,000	25.9%
North Down	79,000	37,000	46.7%	6,000	15.3%	28,000	76.0%	9,000	24.0%
Omagh	51,000	21,000	40.6%	5,000	26.1%	17,000	79.3%	4,000	20.7%
Strabane	40,000	13,000	32.4%	1,000	9.9%	10,000	78.0%	3,000	22.0%
Northern Ireland	1,776,000	771,000	43.4%	124,000	16.1%	591,000	77.0%	176,000	23.0%

Notes:

- 1 Population is sourced from 2010 Labour Force Survey (LFS), Local Area Database.
- 2 All data based on 'in work' are derived from the 2010 LFS, Local Area Database.
- 3 For the purpose of this request, all LFS data are derived from those who are in employment. Usually, NISRA would refer to those aged 16-64 as the working age population when deriving such data from the LFS.

Youth Unemployment

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the £1 billion announced by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg in Westminster to address youth unemployment under the Youth Contract has a Barnett consequential; and if so, whether he can confirm the exact amount.

(AQW 6585/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Work and Pensions received a Resource DEL allocation of £942.7 million in respect of the Youth Contract. This was offset by an assumed Resource DEL saving of £65 million, resulting in a net addition of £877.7 million over the three years from 2012-13 to 2014-15.

Northern Ireland received a Barnett consequential on both the allocation and savings, resulting in a net addition of £26.5 million to the Northern Ireland Block over the three year period.

Barnett consequentials are unhypothecated and, as such, it is for the Executive to determine how any such funding is to be used within Northern Ireland.

Public Procurement: Minor Works

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what advice his Department has given to Departments, and their arm's-length bodies, on the guidelines for public sector procurement of minor works, taking account of the deteriorating economic conditions.

(AQW 6711/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) has been working closely with other Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) to reduce the burden of the procurement process on local contractors.

For minor works contracts valued below £30,000, CoPEs have agreed that Constructionline, the UK's register of construction related contractors and consultants pre-qualified to work by public sector clients, may be used to generate the list of firms to be invited to tender. This enables the direct selection of contractors without the need for them to complete a Pre-Qualification Questionnaire, thereby reducing the administrative burden on those interested in tendering.

CPD has also been in discussion with the construction industry on a simplified process for all under threshold contracts, valued at less than £ 4.3 million. Discussions are at an advanced stage and I expect to see simplified procedures established for these contracts in the near future.

Public Procurement: Minor Works

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with his Executive colleagues to ensure that small architecture, engineering and surveying companies, with a track record in public works, continue to have a reasonable chance of winning tenders for minor works through public procurement.

(AQW 6712/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have not discussed this specific issue with my Executive colleagues. However, my officials in the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) have been working closely with other Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) to reduce the burden of the procurement process on local consultants. For example, CoPEs are committed to reduce the costs to firms submitting a Pre-Qualification Questionnaire (PQQ) by ensuring that PQQs are consistent, proportionate to the size and complexity of the project, and structured to make it easy for firms with the required capacity and capability to complete them.

For construction consultancy services valued below £5,000, which may be particularly suitable for small practices, CPD and the other CoPEs have agreed that Constructionline, the UK's register of construction related contractors and consultants pre-qualified to work for public sector clients, may be used to generate the list of practices to be invited to tender. This obviates the need for them to complete a PQQ, reducing the administrative burden on all practices and increasing the likelihood of small practices being shortlisted.

To further assist small practices, CPD has proposed that the value of contracts that can be tendered using Constructionline is increased to £30,000.

CPD has also established a small working group, including representatives from the Professional College of the Construction Industry Group for Northern Ireland, to simplify the procurement of all construction service contracts. Discussions with the group are at an advanced stage on under EU threshold contracts, valued at less than £ 113,000.

Public Procurement: Minor Works

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline (i) the minimum turnover requirements for companies competing through public procurement for tenders for minor works; and (ii) how the minimum requirements have been adjusted since 2007/8 to take account of changes to economic conditions.

(AQW 6713/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There are no minimum turnover requirements for minor works contracts. The financial standing of firms seeking to tender for Government construction contracts in Northern Ireland is assessed by Constructionline, the UK's register of construction related contractors and consultants pre-qualified to work for public sector clients. The methodology used by Constructionline is set by the Department for Business Innovation & Skills (BIS) in London and is based on a number of factors, including turnover and asset value.

Constructionline calculates what is known as a notation or category value for each contractor, which is the maximum contract value (in terms of annual spend) that the contractor should be considered for. So for a minor works contract of £X value, all companies with a Constructionline notation or category value of £X or greater will be considered to have met the minimum financial requirements.

Constructionline reviews its notations on receipt of contractors' annual accounts or if it is alerted to changes in a firm's circumstances. This may result in an adjustment to the category value and therefore the value of contract for which the firm may tender. However there is no specific adjustment to take account of general economic conditions.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many businesses might benefit from the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme in the (i) Coleraine; (ii) Limavady; (iii) Portrush; (iv) Portstewart; (v) Garvagh; and (vi) Kilrea areas.

(AQW 6714/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of non-domestic properties in the listed areas that might benefit from the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme is not available as data is collated at District Council and Ward level only.

The table attached indicates the number of properties in each Ward within the District Council areas of Coleraine and Limavady that are currently benefiting from the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme as at 15th January 2012 and an estimate of the

additional number which are likely to benefit under the enhanced Small Business Rate Relief Scheme (which will be introduced on 1st April 2012, subject to Assembly approval).

Number of Properties currently receiving Small Business Rate Relief and the estimated number of additional properties likely to be entitled under the Expanded Small Business Rate Relief scheme

Ward/District Council Name	Properties Currently Entitled under Existing SBRR Scheme	Estimated Additional Properties under Expanded SBRR Scheme
Agivey	35	10
Atlantic	10	*
Ballysally	9	*
Castlerock	36	10
Central	196	152
Churchland	24	*
Crossglebe	15	11
Dundooan	81	31
Dunluce	42	*
Garvagh	50	24
Hopefield	8	*
Kilrea	67	32
Knocklynn	13	*
Macosquin	27	7
Mount Sandel	50	30
Portstewart	55	33
Ringsend	24	15
Royal Portrush	94	45
Strand	*	*
The Cuts	*	7
The Highlands	13	6
University	5	*
Upper Glenshane	9	*
Waterside	36	22
Coleraine Total	906	458
Aghanloo	56	26
Ballykelly	25	12
Coolessan	7	*
Dungiven	68	33
Enagh	*	*
Feeny	15	9
Forest	17	*
Glack	9	*
Gresteel	30	11

Ward/District Council Name	Properties Currently Entitled under Existing SBRR Scheme	Estimated Additional Properties under Expanded SBRR Scheme
Greystone	*	*
Magilligan	38	12
Rathbrady	*	11
Roeside	108	73
Limavady Total	377	214

* 5 properties or less

Unemployment

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the baseline figure for unemployment; and from where this information was obtained.

(AQW 6733/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Official estimates of unemployment for Northern Ireland are sourced from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) which is conducted by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The LFS uses internationally accepted definitions of labour market status in line with EU regulations.

The most recent LFS figures for the period September - November 2011 estimated the Northern Ireland seasonally adjusted unemployment rate at 6.8% (59,000 persons). Please note, that there is an associated degree of sampling variation around such survey based estimates.

For information, Claimant Count figures sourced from administrative records of those persons claiming Job Seekers Allowance and National Insurance Credits are also published each month by NISRA. There were

an estimated 60,700 persons (seasonally adjusted) claiming such unemployment related benefit in December 2011.

The LFS estimate is used as the lead measure of unemployment as it is consistent with international definitions.

Unoccupied Dwellings: South Belfast

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of unoccupied dwellings in each ward in the South Belfast constituency.

(AQW 6822/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of unoccupied dwellings is not available at Constituency level as data is collated at District Council and Ward level only. The latest figures available, as at 15th January 2012, indicate that the number of unoccupied dwellings within Belfast City and Castlereagh Borough Councils were 7,511 and 893 respectively. The tables attached indicate the number of unoccupied dwellings for each ward area within the two Councils.

Unoccupied Dwellings in Belfast City Council as at 15th January 2012

	Domestic
Andersonstown	54
Ardoyne	56
Ballyhackamore	156
Ballymacarrett	121
Ballynafeigh	337
Ballysillan	77
Beechmount	181
Bellevue	146
Belmont	88
Blackstaff	173
Bloomfield	147
Botanic	644

	Domestic
Castleview	90
Cavehill	68
Cherryvalley	114
Chichester Park	120
Cliftonville	55
Clonard	92
Crumlin	117
Duncairn	594
Falls	212
Falls Park	68
Finaghy	49
Fortwilliam	112
Glen Road	64
Glencairn	55
Glencolin	60
Highfield	57
Island	372
Knock	63
Ladybrook	71
Legoniel	134
Malone	205
Musgrave	65
New Lodge	44
Orangefield	106
Ravenhill	117
Rosetta	195
Shaftesbury	321
Shankill	74
Stormont	132
Stranmillis	191
Sydenham	110
The Mount	153
Upper Malone	78
Upper Springfield	20
Waterworks	202
Whiterock	33
Windsor	443
Woodstock	164

	Domestic
Woodvale	111
Total	7,511

Unoccupied Dwellings in Castlereagh Borough Council as at 15th January 2012

	Domestic
Ballyhanwood	43
Beechill	41
Cairnshill	47
Carrowreagh	70
Carryduff East	42
Carryduff West	40
Cregagh	26
Downshire	28
Dundonald	63
Enler	23
Galwally	25
Gilnahirk	40
Grahams Bridge	39
Hillfoot	28
Knockbracken	22
Lisnasharragh	25
Lower Braniel	34
Minnowburn	30
Moneyreagh	70
Newtownbreda	69
Tullycarnet	30
Upper Braniel	27
Wynchurch	31
Total	893

Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) any financial recovery by Departments, following the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998, as extended by the Late Payment of Commercial Debts Regulations 2002; and (ii) the payments made by Departments by reason of claims under the legislation.

(AQW 6872/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel made no financial recoveries or payments under the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998, as extended by the Late Payment of Commercial Debts Regulations 2002, in the last financial year, which ran from 1 April 2010 to 31 March 2011.

Details of financial payments under the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998, as extended by the Late Payment of Commercial Debts Regulations 2002, are published in the Annual Report to the departmental Resource Accounts.

This response is provided for the Department of Finance and Personnel only and the Member should contact individual departments for their information.

Unoccupied Dwellings: Foyle

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of vacant residential properties in each ward, in the Foyle constituency.

(AQW 6882/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Information on the number of vacant residential properties is not available at Constituency level as data is collated at District Council and Ward level only. The table overleaf indicates the number of vacant residential properties for each ward within Derry City Council as at 22nd January 2012.

Vacant Residential Properties in Derry City Council as at 22nd January 2012

Ward	Number of Properties
Altnagelvin	45
Ballynashallog	38
Banagier	66
Beechwood	22
Brandywell	11
Carn Hill	11
Caw	22
Claudy	46
Clondermot	23
Creggan Central	26
Creggan South	14
Crevagh	36
Culmore	38
Ebrington	83
Eglinton	83
Enagh	81
Foyle Springs	17
Hollymount	65
Kilfennan	33
Lisnagelvin	25
New Buildings	27
Pennyburn	33
Rosemount	109
Shantallow East	17
Shantallow West	117
Springtown	12
Strand	186
The Diamond	92
Victoria	86
Westland	36
Total	1,500

Unoccupied Dwellings

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of vacant residential properties; (ii) any targets his Department has in relation to the number of vacant residential properties; and (iii) the measures his Department is taking to ensure that these dwellings are occupied.

(AQW 6886/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As at 22nd January 2012 there were 40,889 vacant residential properties in Northern Ireland.

My Department does not have any targets in relation to the number of vacant residential properties. This is a matter for individual property owners.

While the market for house sales is not as buoyant as I would wish, the rental market is increasingly buoyant. My Department has recently implemented rating of empty homes which should encourage more property owners to make better use of these properties and increase the supply of affordable housing.

Cycle to Work Scheme

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the implementation of the Cycle To Work scheme across the Civil Service.

(AQW 6950/11-15)

Mr Wilson: We are making good progress and would hope to implement the Cycle to Work scheme in the Civil Service in late Spring.

Rating of Empty Homes Scheme

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many applications for rate relief exemptions have been received since the introduction of the Rating of Empty Homes Scheme in the (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballymena; and (iii) Moyle council areas.

(AQW 6997/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Rating of empty homes was introduced on 1st October 2011, the date that the Rates (Unoccupied Hereditaments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 came into effect. From this date to 26th January 2012, applications for rate relief exemptions from Rating of Empty Homes in the Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle Council areas are:

- (i) Ballymoney 14
- (ii) Ballymena 30
- (iii) Moyle 26

Sports and Recreation Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the criteria used to determine an organisation's eligibility for an amateur status qualification under the Sports and Recreation Rate Relief Scheme.

(AQW 7022/11-15)

Mr Wilson: An organisation would be considered to be amateur for the purpose of deciding eligibility for sport and recreation rate relief, if it is a non profit making organisation and does not pay its members to engage in recreation for reward. Payment is permitted in cases where a person is employed to coach members of an organisation who are preparing to engage in recreation otherwise than for reward.

Sports and Recreation Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the criteria used to determine an organisation's eligibility for Sports and Recreation Rate Relief.

(AQW 7023/11-15)

Mr Wilson: An organisation's eligibility for Sport and Recreation relief is determined under Article 31 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977. This states that the organisation must be used for the purposes of a prescribed recreation, must be non-profit making and must not employ persons to engage in recreation for reward except for the instruction of persons who are preparing to engage in recreation otherwise than for reward.

The list of prescribed recreations is set out in the Schedule to the Rates (Recreational Hereditaments) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 (S.R. 2007 No. 72). This can be found at

(http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2007/72/pdfs/nisr_20070072_en.pdf).

An organisation which meets the criteria set out in Article 31 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 must engage in a sport which appears on this list of prescribed recreations in order to avail of 80 % rate relief on any premises from which it operates.

Public Prosecution Service: Funding

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the level of funding allocated to the Public Prosecution Service in the January Monitoring Round to meet the pressures arising from a High Court case.

(AQW 7032/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The tables accompanying my statement to the Assembly on 17 January 2012 confirmed an allocation of £2.6 million to the Public Prosecution Service to meet the pressures arising from a High Court case.

The issue relates to a breach of contract case taken against the NIO and the Department of Finance and Personnel by 53 lawyers employed by the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In December 2011, the parties agreed to settle. The terms of the settlement remain to be finalised. 22 of the lawyers are employed by the Public Prosecution Service and the allocation of resources is to enable it to meet its liabilities arising from the settlement and other related employment costs.

Civil Servants: Retired

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the number of civil servants who retired at Pay Band 3 in each of the last five years; and (ii) the average pension received.

(AQW 7122/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of civil servants who retired at Pay Band 3 in each of the last five years and the average pension received cannot be provided by Civil Service Pensions as Pay Band 3 retirees cannot be specifically identified due to the overlap of Pay Bands 1, 2, and 3.

DFP: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 7135/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Rate Relief: Community Amateur Sports Clubs

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his Department's responsibilities in relation to rates relief for Community Amateur Sports Clubs; and what action he intends to take to examine these rates.

(AQW 7144/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As you will recall, the issue of a review of rates relief for Community Amateur Sports Clubs was the subject of a No Named Day motion in November of last year. During this debate I indicated that I would be happy to examine the level of relief afforded to amateur sports clubs but that such a review should form part of a more extensive review of the needs of that sector, including the full range of options for providing support.

It is worth noting, however, that Community Amateur Sports Clubs are but one type of amateur sports club. It is an official designation conferred by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and although some clubs in Northern Ireland are registered to take advantage of tax concessions, most clubs do not avail of this because of the restrictions it places on them. The same is the case for clubs that are set up as charities. The picture, therefore, is a complex one.

Whilst my Department has responsibility for rates and any associated sport and recreational relief I take the view that a root and branch review of the whole issue should be led by DCAL as the Department with responsibility for leisure, and therefore best placed to assess which type of clubs are most in need of support. The review should include the issue of exclusive clubs versus more open clubs, treatment of clubs with bar and restaurant facilities and last but not least consideration of alternative ways of providing support outside the rating system.

To this end I have written to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister, Caral Ni Chuilin, MLA, and her officials are currently looking at this issue. You may wish to write to her, or her Department, to enquire about progress.

Business Services Transformation Programme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the projected savings, and the areas in which the savings will be made, as identified by his Department during its consideration and subsequent approval of the business case for the implementation of the Business Services Transformation Programme.

(AQW 7148/11-15)

Mr Wilson: DHSSPS submitted the Business Services Transformation Programme outline business case to DFP in September 2009. The programme was granted approval in February 2010. The business case identifies revenue savings over ten years of approximately £155 million as a result of changes to staffing and procurement arrangements and through reduced absenteeism. The Health Minister can update you on progress if required.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Trade Unions: Funding

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of funding his Department allocated to each trade union in the (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11 financial years.

(AQW 6468/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Whilst funding was not directly allocated to Trade Unions by my Department or its Arms Length Bodies, the estimated annual cost to my Department and its Arms Length Bodies resulting from the involvement of staff in accredited trade union activities for 2010/11 is set out in the table below.

2010/11	Total
NIPSA	£321,600
Unison	£809,652
UNITE	£113,187
RCN	£366,761
FDA	£4,000
GMB	£1,186
Total	£1,616,386

In addition the Beeches Management Centre incurred £77,149 in servicing communications with Trade Unions in the HSC.

Information for 2000/01 and 2005/06 is only available at disproportionate cost.

Ambulance Service: Satellite Navigation

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) which satellite navigation system is used by the Ambulance Service; (ii) how often the system is updated to take account of new housing developments; and (iii) what back-up, to the system, is used by ambulance staff.

(AQW 6484/11-15)

Mr Poots: It should be noted that satellite navigation systems are used by NIAS to supplement the information provided by a 999 caller and the local knowledge of crews of the area in which they operate.

- (i) NIAS uses an integrated satellite navigation and mobile data transfer terminal called a Siemens VDO MS5200 Pro Sat Nav.
- (ii) NIAS is in discussions with the supplier to agree the cost for updating the satellite navigation system, the current map date used by NIAS is dated 2008.
- (iii) In the event of the failure of the satellite navigation in the ambulance response vehicle, back-up communications enable ambulance control staff with access to mapping data to provide instructions and directions to the personnel in the ambulance.

Neonatal Services: Enniskillen

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what neo-natal services will be available at the new hospital in Enniskillen.

(AQW 6616/11-15)

Mr Poots: The existing service at the Neonatal Unit in the Erne Hospital will transfer to the new acute hospital for the South West and will be located beside the Maternity Unit. Currently fully trained neonatal nurses and midwives support a team of paediatric consultants who provide 24-hour on-call cover for this unit and this service will continue in the new hospital.

Premature Births and Neonatal Beds

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last three years, to detail the number of (i) premature births; and (ii) neo-natal beds, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 6617/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of premature births in each of the last three years by Health and Social Care Trust:

HSC Trust	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Belfast	539	520	590

HSC Trust	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Northern	295	267	250
South Eastern	233	270	247
Southern	*	*	256
Western	364	284	323

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

* Southern HSC Trust have stated that they are unable to provide information for 2008/09 and 2009/10 as the NIMATS system has only been in place in Craigavon Area Hospital for deliveries from April 2010.

The average number of neo-natal beds available in each of the last three years by Health and Social Care Trust:

HSC Trust	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Belfast	27	31	31
Northern	16	16	16
South Eastern	*	13	13
Southern	21	21	21
Western	24	24	24

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

* South Eastern HSC Trust have stated that information is not available for 2008/09.

Information in the answer has been supplied by each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts and as such has not been validated by the Department.

Local Commissioning Groups

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the five Local Commissioning Groups since their introduction.

(AQW 6665/11-15)

Mr Poots: The five Local Commissioning Groups continue to engage with service users, carers, the community and voluntary sectors and the wider public, to assist them in the development of their local priorities to meet local needs. As local committees of the Health and Social Care Board, the LCGs are well placed to lead the commissioning agenda in their respective areas.

Local Commissioning Groups will have an important role to play in driving forward change and innovation, and in particular responding to the proposals set out in the Review of Health and Social Care Services in Northern Ireland "Transforming Your Care" through the development of population plans for their local areas, involving their respective Health and Social Care Trusts.

Causeway Hospital: Renal Unit

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 320/11-15, for an update on the provision of a renal unit at the Causeway Hospital, Coleraine.

(AQW 6667/11-15)

Mr Poots: The commissioning of Health and Social Care Services to meet the needs of the population of Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), working in close partnership with the Public Health Agency.

The Board has advised that work is continuing, to consider regional demand for all forms of dialysis and its implications for future planning. This approach will take into account the improved survival rates that occur when patients receive live kidney transplants. This includes consideration of the need for the development of additional capacity where this is an appropriate response to patient needs.

Bed Blockers

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the financial pressures that bed blockers place on his budget; and what preventative measures his Department is putting in place to address this issue.

(AQW 6763/11-15)

Mr Poots: Delayed discharges are defined as any care managed patient or patient awaiting a care management assessment remaining in hospital after the time they are deemed medically fit for discharge. It is estimated that in 2011 delayed discharges cost the health service in the region of £10 million.

My Department continues to work with the HSC to develop and expand the range of care services available in the community, such as promoting “re-ablement” programmes and encouraging people to manage their own care through Direct Payments. The Regional Access Criteria for Domiciliary Care were introduced to provide for greater transparency and harmonisation in the process of identifying and prioritising need.

Locum Doctors

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the total (i) number; and (ii) cost of locum doctors used by the Health Service in each of the last five years, broken down by (a) Health and Social Care Trust area; and (b) hospital.

(AQW 6773/11-15)

Mr Poots: (i) The total number of locum doctors used by the Health Service in Northern Ireland can only be provided at disproportionate cost as this is not currently captured by Trust internal information systems and would require a time consuming manual exercise.

(ii) (a) Details of the cost of locum doctors in each of the last five years, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, is set out in the table below.

HSC Trust	*2011-12 £m	2010-11 £m	2009-10 £m	2008-09 £m	2007-08 £m
Belfast HSC Trust	7.6	7.4	8.1	7.4	6.5
Northern HSC Trust	3.7	6.0	8.1	7.6	4.7
South Eastern HSC Trust	2.4	2.3	2.7	3.1	2.2
Western HSC Trust	5.7	9.0	7.0	5.2	4.7
Southern HSC Trust	2.5	4.4	4.9	4.7	2.9
Total	21.9	29.1	30.8	28.0	21.0

* Part year data available from 01 April 2011 – 31 December 2011.

(ii) (b) Details of the cost of locum doctors, in each of the last five years, broken down by hospital is set out in the table below. The South Eastern Trust has been unable to provide 2007-08 figures by hospital.

Hospital	2011/12 to 30 Dec 2011 Total Locums £m	2010/11 Total Locums £m	2009/10 Total Locums £m	2008/09 Total Locums £m	2007/08 Total Locums £m
Belfast HSC Trust					
Royal Victoria	3.3	3.2	3.1	3.7	3.5
Belfast City	1.9	1.6	2.0	0.8	0.6
Greenpark	1.2	1.5	1.7	1.7	1.6
Community	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.1
Mater	1.0	0.9	1.0	1.0	0.7
BHSCT Total	7.6	7.4	8.1	7.4	6.5
Northern HSC Trust					
Antrim	1.7	2.5	3.8	4.1	2.5
Braid Valley	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0
Causeway	1.6	2.5	2.5	1.3	0.9
Holywell	0.3	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.2
Mid Ulster	0.2	0.5	1.2	0.8	0.8
Moyle	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.1

Hospital	2011/12 to 30 Dec 2011 Total Locums £m	2010/11 Total Locums £m	2009/10 Total Locums £m	2008/09 Total Locums £m	2007/08 Total Locums £m
Whiteabbey	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.7	0.3
NHSCT Total	3.7	6.0	8.1	7.6	4.7
South Eastern HSC Trust					
Ulster	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.5	
Lagan Valley	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.6	
Downe	0.6	0.6	0.8	1.0	
SEHSCT Total	2.4	2.3	2.7	3.1	2.2
Western HSC Trust					
Altnagelvin	2.3	3.5	2.3	1.7	1.2
Erne Hospital	2.0	3.8	3.2	1.9	2.1
Tyrone County Hospital	0.8	0.3	0.1	0.7	0.7
Lakeview Hospital	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2
Gransha/ T & F Hospital	0.3	0.8	0.4	0.3	0.3
Other; Community Services	0.2	0.5	0.9	0.5	0.2
WHSCT Total	5.7	9.0	7.0	5.2	4.7
Southern HSC Trust					
Craigavon Area	1.3	1.9	2.3	2.3	1.9
Daisy Hill	0.8	2.1	1.8	1.6	0.5
St Luke's	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0
Community Medical/Other	0.4	0.4	0.6	0.8	0.5
SHSCT Total	2.5	4.4	4.9	4.7	2.9
Total	21.9	29.1	30.8	28.0	21.0

Acute Beds

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many acute beds are provided under the present configuration of major acute provision, broken down by hospital.

(AQW 6790/11-15)

Mr Poots: The average number of beds available under the acute services programme of care during 2010/11 is shown in the table below.

Hospital	Average Available Beds
Altnagelvin Area	396.6
Antrim	399.1
Ards	12.0
Banbridge	0.0
Bangor	20.0
Belfast City	434.7
Braid Valley	4.8
Causeway	176.0

Hospital	Average Available Beds
Craigavon Area	360.0
Daisy Hill	160.0
Dalriada	32.4
Downe	50.6
Erne	149.3
Forster Green	22.6
Lagan Valley	76.8
Lurgan	17.0
Mater Infirmorum	205.6
Mid Ulster	75.5
Moyle	18.0
Musgrave Park	160.4
NI Cancer Centre	85.6
RBHSC	97.3
Robinson Memorial	25.0
Royal Maternity	45.1
Royal Victoria	595.0
South Tyrone	0.0
Thompson House	35.0
Tyrone County	32.6
Ulster	395.2
Whiteabbey	31.6

Source: KH03a Departmental Return

Medical Research: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the level of funding provided by his Department for medical research at each university, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6793/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below summarises the level of funding provided by my Department for medical research at each university, in each of the last three years.

	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	Total
QUB	3,770,108	2,812,955	2,606,868	9,189,931
UU	1,117,388	805,317	1,050,264	2,972,969
Total	4,887,496	3,618,272	3,657,132	12,162,900

Care Packages

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people assessed for (i) nursing care; (ii) residential care; and (iii) domiciliary care are currently awaiting a funding package to address their needs, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 6854/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that this question refers to the number of people who are currently waiting in either a community or hospital setting for a nursing, residential or domiciliary care package, where the main reason for the delay is a lack of funding; although, it is not possible to break this information down by the type of care package.

With this in mind, there were no persons waiting in a community setting for a nursing, residential or domiciliary care package due to a lack of funding on 31 December 2011.

With regards to those waiting in a hospital setting, information is not available on the number of people currently waiting for a nursing, residential or domiciliary care package, and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, information is available on the number of patients discharged from an acute hospital setting during December 2011, who waited longer than the agreed maximum waiting time for a nursing, residential or domiciliary care package due to a lack of funding. This information is detailed by HSC Trust in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Number of patients
Belfast	0
Northern	2
South Eastern	0
Southern	0
Western	8
Northern Ireland	10

Source: Admissions & Discharges Universe

Organophosphate Poisoning

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with organophosphate poisoning in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 6856/11-15)

Mr Poots: During the ten year period from 1st April 2001 to 31st March 2011, there were a total of seven admissions to hospital where a diagnosis of organophosphate poisoning was recorded. It should be noted that this may be unrepresentative of the true number of people that have had organophosphate poisoning due to the generic nature of the symptoms of this condition.

Healthy Eating

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to promote healthy eating.

(AQW 6864/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has led the development of a Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022: A Fitter Future for All which in December 2011 was agreed by the Executive for launch. The Framework includes short, medium and long term outcomes specific to food and nutrition which aim to address the issue of overweight and obesity throughout the life course of the population. I anticipate that the delivery of these outcomes will have a beneficial impact on the population and encourage and promote a healthier balanced diet.

In addition, my Department participates in the UK-wide Healthy Start Scheme which supports low-income, nutritionally vulnerable pregnant women and young families through the provision of vouchers which can be spent on products including milk, fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables. The Scheme provides information on a range of issues including advice on healthy eating.

The Public Health Agency recognises the importance of good nutrition at all ages and its role in promoting good health and preventing conditions such as; obesity, type 2 diabetes and heart disease. It is currently undertaking a range of actions to promote healthy eating including programmes such as Cook It and RAFAEL to help develop skills, knowledge and access to healthier foods. The Public Health Agency will also lead on the implementation of the Obesity Prevention Framework, following on from existing work they have undertaken for the previous Fit Futures Implementation Plan.

Breast Implants: Removal

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the removal of breast implants, what criteria his Department has set to allow removal under the Health Service.

(AQW 6880/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Chief Medical Officer has written to General Practitioners and hospital doctors (HSS(MD)/2/2012), on 13 January, outlining the advice for women with implants who may present to them with concerns. As part of the consultation with their

doctor, patients are being asked to complete a pro forma which will be forwarded to the HSCB. This will assist in determining the likely demand for follow up services.

The HSCB are developing a range of scenarios to accommodate women who, following consultation with their doctor, may benefit from further follow up.

Nursing and Residential Care Homes

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of patients currently in (i) nursing homes; and (ii) residential care homes, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 6930/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of patients receiving nursing home care packages and residential care packages at 31 December 2011 in each Health and Social Care Trust is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Care Packages in Effect at 31 December 2011

HSC Trust	Nursing Home Care	Residential Care	Total
Belfast	1,716	1,098	2,814
Northern	1,997	961	2,958
South Eastern	1,486	872	2,358
Southern	1,629	517	2,146
Western	1,319	689	2,008
Northern Ireland	8,147	4,137	12,284

Source: Community Information CC7 Return

Fire and Rescue Service: Recruitment

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 6127/11-15, to detail the religious background of the appointees in each of the five geographic areas.

(AQW 6938/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is shown in the table below.

NIFRS Command Areas	Protestant	Catholic	Other
Northern	3	2	
Southern	9	7	2
Eastern	1	2	1
Western	3	7	

Fire and Rescue Service: Recruitment

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 6128/11-15, in relation to the Practical Aptitude Test, to detail the religious background of those candidates who (i) attended; (ii) failed; (iii) appealed; (iv) were re-tested; and (v) were successful.

(AQW 6940/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is shown in the table below.

Test Stage / Result	Protestant	Catholic	Other	Total
Attended	315	285	64	664
Failed	171	161	40	372
Appealed	32	31	4	67
Appealed/Re-Tested	19	22	3	44
Successful	16	18	3	37

Subsequent to AQW 6128/11-15, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has advised of a change in the number of candidates who attended and who failed due to a candidate's being counted twice.

Abortion Services: Illegal Advertising

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what steps are being taken against the illegal advertising of abortion services in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6946/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is my Department's responsibility to provide for the health and social care needs of the people of Northern Ireland.

Responsibility for the enforcement of the criminal law lies with the Department of Justice.

Waiting Lists: Foyle Nursing Home

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the waiting list for a place at a nursing home in the Foyle constituency.

(AQW 6955/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available centrally within the DHSSPS, and in reply to a request for these figures, the Western Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust advised my Department that within Foyle (parliamentary) constituency as at the 25th January 2012, 7 clients were waiting for a place at a nursing home and 9 nursing home beds were vacant at this date.

The Western HSC Trust further indicated that of the 7 clients awaiting a nursing home bed, 6 were waiting for one week and 1 was waiting for three weeks. Five of the 7 clients had been assessed as requiring a dementia nursing home placement and the remaining 2 clients were waiting on a general nursing home placement of their choice.

The Western HSC Trust are working proactively with all 7 clients and their families/carers to agree their first choice of nursing home.

Nursing Home Beds: Foyle

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many nursing home beds are available in the Foyle constituency.

(AQW 6956/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available centrally within the DHSSPS, and in reply to a request for these figures, the Western Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust advised my Department that within Foyle (parliamentary) constituency as at the 25th January 2012, 7 clients were waiting for a place at a nursing home and 9 nursing home beds were vacant at this date.

The Western HSC Trust further indicated that of the 7 clients awaiting a nursing home bed, 6 were waiting for one week and 1 was waiting for three weeks. Five of the 7 clients had been assessed as requiring a dementia nursing home placement and the remaining 2 clients were waiting on a general nursing home placement of their choice.

The Western HSC Trust are working proactively with all 7 clients and their families/carers to agree their first choice of nursing home.

Community Pharmacy: Funding

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the outcome of the judicial review on community pharmacy funding, when withdrawn funding will be reinstated.

(AQW 6973/11-15)

Mr Poots: Mr Justice Treacy made his judgement on the Judicial Review, brought by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland against the changes to pharmacy remuneration made by the Department and the HSC Board on 21 December 2011. However, the full written judgement was not issued until 10 January 2012 and the date for a Final Order has just been set for Thursday 7 February. The outcome of the remedies hearing will help to inform discussions with CPNI and will have a significant impact on the way forward.

I have agreed to meet CPNI representatives to discuss the way forward but the original date of 30 January has had to be rescheduled, after the Final Order.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made on the key objective to raise the profile of Northern Ireland's capacity for clinical trials through participation in emerging EU infrastructure networks, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7011/11-15)

Mr Poots: Across the EU clinical research infrastructure has developed at different rates in different countries, with the UK, including Northern Ireland, being at the forefront. Our Northern Ireland Clinical Research Network (NICRN) and Northern Ireland Cancer Clinical Trials Network (NICTN) are excellent examples and to-date almost 20,000 patients with a wide range of illnesses

have been facilitated to access potentially beneficial new treatments. Some £2M annually is provided through the HSC R&D Fund to maintain these networks. The networks enable clinical researchers to compete for funding - whether from Government (including the EU), research councils, charities or industry to undertake trials of potential new treatments.

The principal EU-funded clinical trials infrastructure activity is ECRIN – European Clinical Research Infrastructure Network – which is co-ordinated from France. ECRIN aims to make Europe a single area for clinical studies, taking advantage of its population size. Discussions have taken place between DHSSPS and the ECRIN Co-ordinator about closer collaboration with NICRN on transnational European clinical trials. ECRIN has applied for inclusion under the European Research Infrastructures Consortium initiative (ERIC) to enable its future development. The outcome from the application is awaited.

Other disease-specific networks also operate across Europe. An early success was for one of Northern Ireland's strongest research areas, in Respiratory Disease. In June 2011 the group competed successfully for membership of the European Cystic Fibrosis Society Clinical Trials Network, achieving the highest possible score against the selection criteria. Participation in this network enables Belfast-based clinical researchers to be involved in the strategic development of this important European initiative and to benefit from funding provided for training and development. To-date the Belfast group has attracted £110k in funding for three separate European clinical trials in cystic fibrosis and lung cancer.

Meanwhile, Northern Ireland based clinical researchers continue to develop applications for funding – such applications typically taking several years to come to fruition. DHSSPS is committed to maintaining support for our local networks without which clinical trials funding cannot be attracted to the province.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in his Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7019/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is one full-time equivalent staff engaged in trade union duties in my Department. The information in relation to arm's length bodies is not held centrally and could only be obtained at a disproportionate cost.

Waiting Lists: Nursing Homes in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are on the waiting list for a place at a nursing home in the North Down constituency.

(AQW 7025/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available centrally within the DHSSPS, and in reply to a request for these figures, the South Eastern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust advised my Department that within North Down (parliamentary) constituency as at 27th January 2012, 3 clients were waiting for a place at a nursing home.

The South Eastern HSC Trust further indicated that all 3 clients were receiving a domiciliary care package at this date. Of the 3 clients, 1 was waiting for an Elderly Mentally Infirm (EMI) nursing home place without a third party top-up and 2 were waiting for an EMI nursing home place in a specific home of choice. No client was waiting for funding for a nursing home place.

Shared Services

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 6412/11-15, to detail the projected savings to be made, broken down by (i) the new I.T. system; and (ii) the overall shared services model.

(AQW 7042/11-15)

Mr Poots: The HSC Business Services Transformation Programme business case, approved by DFP in February 2010, did not distinguish between savings from systems implementation and savings from reconfigured shared services. That position, reflecting the closely interdependent nature of the two elements of the Programme, remains.

Occupational Therapy Assessments

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the average waiting time for an occupational therapy assessment; (ii) how long it takes to complete an assessment, following an initial consultation; (iii) how many people are awaiting an assessment; and (iv) what procedures are in place to speed up the process for priority cases.

(AQW 7119/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available centrally within the DHSSPS and was requested directly from the Health & Social Care Board (HSCB). The Board has replied to each part of your question as outlined below.

- (i) Waiting times from referral to treatment by an occupational therapist is available by aggregate time bands only. As of 6th January 2012, the median waiting time from referral to treatment was six to nine weeks.
- (ii) An assessment of need commences at the first consultation and the time required to complete these varies dependent on a range of factors including, the patient's health, complexity and proposed outcomes; for example, aids, appliance,

adaptations to housing, wheelchairs and terminal care. Figures relating to timescales for completed assessments are not available.

- (iii) At 6th January 2012, 6,320 patients were awaiting occupational therapy in Northern Ireland. Of these, 1,777 (28%) were waiting more than nine weeks. This information is detailed by HSC Trust in Table 1 below.

(iv) **Table 1**

HSC Trust	Waiting time from referral to treatment for Occupational Therapy (by weeks waiting) ¹					Total
	0-3 weeks	>3 to 6 weeks	>6 to 9 weeks	> 9 to 13 weeks	>13 weeks	
Belfast	294	451	427	421	73	1,666
Northern	434	442	258	42	0	1,176
South Eastern	277	289	252	253	210	1,281
Southern	215	282	186	133	196	1,012
Western	191	276	269	208	241	1,185
Northern Ireland	1,411	1,740	1,392	1,057	720	6,320

Source: Health and Social Care Board

1 Position at 06/01/12.

Figures provided by the HSC Board have not been validated by DHSSPS.

- (v) Delivery plans have been agreed with Trusts to undertake additional activity to reduce waiting times for all AHP services treatment by March 2012, and Trusts are expected to achieve a nine week maximum waiting time for occupational therapy services by end of March.

All Trusts triage and prioritise new referrals to ensure that those with greatest clinical need are seen as quickly as possible. All referrals are processed in chronological order within both routine and priority categories.

DHSSPS: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 7136/11-15)

Mr Poots: I submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 15th December 2011.

Health Jobs: South Down

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many (i) Health Service jobs; and (ii) Civil Service jobs within his Department, have been lost in each of the last ten years in the South Down constituency, broken down by (i) department; and (ii) area.

(AQW 7137/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Details of job losses in the Health Service are not available in the format requested. Job losses in the health economy in the last four years have been a direct result of the RPA reforms. Under these reforms 1,700 administrative posts were removed from the health economy across Northern Ireland. The RPA reforms were designed primarily to ensure that administrative structures and procedures are fit for purpose and that resources are maximised for frontline services. Developments in frontline services are dependent upon the reinvestment of £49 million RPA savings.
- (ii) There are no DHSSPS civil service staff employed in the South Down Constituency.

Doctors and Nurses: Professional Misconduct

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many doctors and nurses have been struck off in each of the last ten years because of professional misconduct.

(AQW 7138/11-15)

Mr Poots: The regulation of healthcare professionals in the UK is delivered through regulatory bodies. The General Medical Council (GMC) is the regulatory body for doctors and the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) regulates nurses and midwives.

The number of doctors and nurses and midwives in Northern Ireland struck off for professional misconduct in each of the last ten years is shown in the table overleaf.

Year	Doctors	Nurses and Midwives
2001	Numbers not available	Numbers not available
2002	Numbers not available	3
2003	Numbers not available	2
2004	1	1
2005	1	2
2006	1	1
2007	1	8
2008	0	8
2009	5	2
2010	2	6

Business Services Transformation Programme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Equality Impact Assessment that was carried out on the Business Services Transformation Programme.
(AQW 7149/11-15)

Mr Poots: It would not be appropriate for me to make an assessment at this juncture, as the consultation on the Business Services Transformation Programme proposals and EQIA is not yet complete.

South West Acute Hospital, Enniskillen

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the range of services that will be provided in the new hospital in Enniskillen; and how this compares to the services currently provided at the Erne Hospital, Enniskillen.
(AQW 7156/11-15)

Mr Poots: The new South West Acute Hospital will provide the range of services currently delivered from the Erne Hospital. These are Accident and Emergency, Medical and Surgical Assessment, GP out of hours, Critical Care, Maternity and Neonatal, children's ward and outpatients, children's centre, surgical ward and theatres, day surgery, elective surgery, gynaecology, diagnostics, inpatients, outpatients, clinical investigations, women's health, mental health liaison, Allied Health Professionals, social services, ambulatory unit, pharmacy, pathology and support services.

Some services have recently been introduced to the Erne Hospital in preparation for transition to the new acute hospital. These are the Medical and Surgical Assessment unit, MRI services, renal dialysis, heart failure/Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary disease and diabetic chronic disease management services

Graves Disease

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been diagnosed with Graves Disease in each of the last three years.
(AQW 7170/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of admissions to hospital with a primary diagnosis of Graves Disease, in each of the last years is shown in the table below.

Financial Year	Number of Admissions
2008/09	19
2009/10	17
2010/11	15

Source:- Hospital Inpatients System (HIS)

Deaths and discharges are used as an approximation of admissions. It should be noted that these figures do not represent individuals as a person may be admitted to hospital more than once in a year or across a number of years.

Medical or Dental Graduate Entry Courses

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why students studying medical or dental graduate entry courses in England, or elsewhere, are not entitled to a Health Service bursary to assist them with their tuition fees and living costs.

(AQW 7209/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department provides financial support to Northern Ireland domiciled undergraduate medical and dental students entering year five of study.

Northern Ireland domiciled graduates undertaking further third level study are not eligible for a maintenance grant or tuition fee support. However, they can apply to their local Education & Library Board for a maintenance loan and supplementary grants where applicable.

Not awarding additional financial support to graduates is based on the principle that limited resources should be targeted at undergraduate level to assist eligible students to achieve a primary degree. Any change to this policy would have significant cost implications and in the current financial climate could not be justified.

Prisoners: Birth in Custody

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many female prisoners have given birth whilst either on remand or while serving a sentence in each of the last five years; and what provision is made for these women and their babies in the prison system.

(AQW 7231/11-15)

Mr Poots: Two female prisoners gave birth whilst in custody in 2008. Both babies were delivered in hospital as planned.

During a pregnancy, female prisoners will have access to midwifery services and are able to attend outpatient appointments. In the later stages of pregnancy, domiciliary visits are facilitated. Once the baby is born, the NI Prison Service provides appropriate facilities for mother and child. Both mother and child will be visited by midwifery and health visitor services, as necessary.

Hospitals: Cleaning

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the monthly and annual process for the cleaning of hospitals within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 7273/11-15)

Mr Poots: The key component of environmental cleanliness is a risk-based analysis of functional areas (rooms, buildings and usage) and elements (surfaces, fixtures, equipment or fittings). Functional areas are then defined as Low Risk, Moderate Risk, High Risk or Very High Risk. Cleaning frequencies are then determined for environment, equipment, buildings and fixtures. Typically, frequencies are expressed as daily or weekly as a minimum requirement but may be cleaned additionally as needed. A series of daily checks, walk-arounds, departmental audits and managerial audits are also carried out based on guidance in the DHSSPS Cleanliness Matters Strategy and the Regional Hospital Hygiene & Cleanliness Standards and Audit Tool.

Mephedrone

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, for each of the last five years, to detail the number of (i) deaths as a result of mephedrone consumption; and (ii) hospital admissions as a result of a patient having taken mephedrone.

(AQW 7334/11-15)

Mr Poots: Over the five year period between 2006 and 2010, there has been one death registered in Northern Ireland due to drug poisoning where mephedrone was mentioned on the death certificate in 2010. Data for 2011 will not be available until April 2012.

This information has been provided by the General Register Office for Northern Ireland and has not been validated by the Department.

Information is not available on the number of hospital admissions as a result of a patient having taken mephedrone.

Department of Justice

Rape and Sexual Assault: Convictions

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people were convicted of rape or sexual assault in each of the last ten years and served a prison sentence; and how many of these people refused to participate in counselling or programmes during their sentence, designed to address their behaviour or to raise awareness of the impact of their actions on their victims, and were subsequently released.

(AQW 6441/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): Northern Ireland Prison Service data of this nature is only available for the last six years. Records show that a total of 640 people were convicted and served a prison sentence for rape or sexual offences during the period 1 January 2006 – 31 December 2011.

Prisoners given a custodial sentence recorded as Rape (Common Law) or Rape (Child), and other sexual offences are detailed in the table below:

Total Numbers 2006 - 2011

Calendar Year	Total number of persons convicted for a sexual offence
2006	87
2007	99
2008	109
2009	109
2010	113
2011	123

NIPS records show that out of the 640 offenders, seven, who accepted responsibility for their actions but refused to participate in the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme (SOTP) were subsequently released. However, this figure does not include those deemed to be in 'complete denial' of their offence as participants must accept some responsibility for their offence(s) before they can undertake and benefit from the programme.

The new public protection sentences available to the courts under the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 places a greater onus on offenders to address their offending behaviour prior to release. The Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland consider the release of those offenders given an Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS), Indeterminate Custodial Sentence (ICS) or a life sentence. In the case of an ICS or a life sentence, the Parole Commissioners must be satisfied that it is no longer necessary for the protection of the public from serious harm that the person remain in prison.

Robert Black: Legal Costs

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the legal aid costs associated with Robert Black's trial in Armagh, including those of David Spens QC; and (ii) the expenses claimed, including accomodation and transport, by solicitors and counsel during the run-up and duration of this trial.

(AQW 6507/11-15)

Mr Ford: To date payments of £232.29 (inc VAT) have been issued in respect of advice given under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.

Payments of £1,107.18 (inc VAT) have been issued in respect of proceedings in the Magistrates' Court.

As there was a change of counsel in this case, a transfer has taken place from the initial senior counsel and fees due to the first senior counsel have been paid. The total amount paid in respect of this first counsel was £39,841.20 (inc VAT). In addition the solicitor has received an interim payment of £307,308.00 (inc VAT)

Bills from the legal representatives who completed the trial, including Mr Spens QC, have not yet been assessed by the Taxing Master. Information in respect of these fees, or any accommodation or travel costs, is therefore unavailable at this time.

DOJ: Civil Servants from the Foyle Constituency who Work in Greater Belfast

Mr McCartney asked Minister of Justice to detail the total number of civil servants in his Department who live in the Foyle constituency and travel to work in the Greater Belfast area; and the total cost to his Department of subsidising the travel.

(AQW 6517/11-15)

Mr Ford: The total number of civil servants in the Department of Justice who live in the Foyle constituency and travel to work in the Greater Belfast area is five. During the period January – 30 November 2011 the total cost for subsidising their travel in my Department was £1,747.22.

Alderwood Centre for Sex Offenders

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) for his assessment of the courses that are held at the Alderwood Centre for sex offenders; (ii) how many people took part in these courses in each of the last three years; (iii) how many people completed the course; and how many course participants have since been convicted of (a) an offence of a sexual nature; and (b) any other offence.

(AQW 6579/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) The core programme for sexual offenders at the Alderwood Centre is the Ministry of Justice accredited Community Sex Offender Groupwork Programme (CSOGP). The programme is delivered by accredited Probation Officers. Other programmes delivered for sexual offenders within the Alderwood Centre include internet programmes, a programme for those with learning difficulties and an intervention for young adults who sexually offend.

There is empirical evidence to support the success of the CSOGP in achieving lower reconviction rates. Evaluation of the CSOGP, incorporating Northern Ireland statistics, found that in a 3 year period treated offenders were up to 3 times less likely to be reconvicted of a sexual offence than a matched control group. The CSOGP was also found to be effective in reducing the likelihood of future violent offences demonstrating the programme achieves its aims in promoting pro-social behaviour and addressing the anti-social lifestyle of some offenders.

- (ii) During the period 2009-2011, 256 individuals took part in a Community Sex Offender Groupwork Programme (CSOGP) as detailed in the table below

Year	Completed	Non Completion	Ongoing	Total Participants over 2009-11
2009	39	9	0	48
2010	72	22	0	94
2011	44	15	55	114
	155	46	55	256

- (iii) A total of 210 have successfully completed or remain on the programme. While data on the effectiveness of the course was contributed to the national study, which confirmed that treated offenders were significantly less likely to be reconvicted than those who did not undergo the course, details of reconviction rates of individuals who have completed the course are not currently available.

Death by Careless Driving

Mr Allister asked Minister of Justice, since the introduction of the offence of 'causing death by careless driving', how many people have been processed through the courts on such a charge; and how many (i) pleaded guilty; (ii) were convicted; and (iii) were acquitted.

(AQW 6590/11-15)

Mr Ford: Causing Death by Careless Driving was introduced in Northern Ireland under Article 11A, Road Traffic Act 1988, by virtue of Article 52 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order, 2008. It only applies to offences committed after 16th July 2008.

For the three calendar years since this offence was created:

In 2009, 1 individual was convicted of this offence and received a sentence of 18 months' imprisonment, suspended for three years.

In 2010, 1 individual was convicted of this offence and received a sentence of 240 hours Community Service.

In 2011, 3 individuals were convicted of this offence. Two were disqualified from driving for one year and the third received a sentence of 20 months' imprisonment.

This offence is only one aspect of the law relating to serious driving offences. For example, in 2008, 14 persons were convicted of Causing Death or GBI by Dangerous Driving and received custodial sentences ranging from 8 years to 4 months. During the same period, one person was convicted of Causing Death or GBI by Driving Carelessly with excess alcohol (4 months imprisonment).

Death by Careless Driving

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice how many people convicted by a jury of 'causing death by careless driving' have received an immediate custodial sentence; and how many people who have pleaded guilty to this offence have received an immediate custodial sentence.

(AQW 6591/11-15)

Mr Ford: Causing Death by Careless Driving was introduced in Northern Ireland under Article 11A, Road Traffic Act 1988, by virtue of Article 52 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order, 2008. It only applies to offences committed after 16th July 2008.

For the three calendar years since this offence was created:

In 2009, 1 individual was convicted of this offence and received a sentence of 18 months' imprisonment, suspended for three years.

In 2010, 1 individual was convicted of this offence and received a sentence of 240 hours Community Service.

In 2011, 3 individuals were convicted of this offence. Two were disqualified from driving for one year and the third received a sentence of 20 months' imprisonment.

This offence is only one aspect of the law relating to serious driving offences. For example, in 2008, 14 persons were convicted of Causing Death or GBI by Dangerous Driving and received custodial sentences ranging from 8 years to 4 months. During the same period, one person was convicted of Causing Death or GBI by Driving Carelessly with excess alcohol (4 months imprisonment).

Animal Cruelty: Convictions

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many convictions for animal cruelty have been secured in each of the last five years. (AQW 6599/11-15)

Mr Ford: Animal cruelty offences span a number of statutes. During the period in question offences were prosecuted under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985.

The table below gives the number of convictions for the calendar years 2004 to 2008 (the latest year for which figures are currently available).

Number of convictions for animal cruelty, 2004-2008

Year	Number of convictions
2004	19
2005	24
2006	17
2007	21
2008	17

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Data for 2004-2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2008 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to tackle anti-social behaviour further. (AQW 6663/11-15)

Mr Ford: In Northern Ireland we have adopted a multi-agency partnership to tackle anti-social behaviour which uses a graduated approach of prevention, intervention and enforcement to tackle anti-social behaviour. This approach has contributed to a reduction of over 20% in the incidences of anti-social behaviour across Northern Ireland since 2008 and a reduction of over 37% in the North Down constituency.

My plans to further tackle anti-social behaviour will build on the success of this approach with a greater focus on prevention and early intervention by working in partnership.

In the coming months these plans will include the introduction of a new executive strategy 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities' which will set out the strategic direction for reducing crime, anti-social behaviour and fear of crime in Northern Ireland over the next five years.

The new strategy will emphasise the importance of collaborative working and securing the commitment of key stakeholders including other Government Departments in addressing wider social issues which are a factor in crime and anti-social behaviour.

The launch of the new Policing and Community Safety Partnerships will have a pivotal role in the operational delivery of the new Community Safety Strategy, in the development of partnership working at a local level and in supporting communities to identify solutions to issues of local concern.

Finally, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland has commenced an inspection on how the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland addresses anti-social behaviour with a view to publishing a final report in spring 2012. I await the outcome of this inspection and will consider any recommendations arising from it.

Prisoners: Leave Over Christmas

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many of the prisoners who were granted Christmas leave are serving sentences for violent crime; and were their victims informed of their temporary release. (AQW 6678/11-15)

Mr Ford: Seventy three prisoners who are serving sentences for violent crimes comprising of offences against the person, sexual offences and robbery, were granted leave over the Christmas period.

Fifty six of these prisoners were released under the Christmas Home Leave Scheme. The other 17 were granted leave as part of their participation on a pre-release programme.

In each case where victims or family members of victims are registered with the Prisoner Release Victim Information (Northern Ireland) Scheme 2003 (PRVIS) and, where they have opted to receive details of temporary release, each registered person was advised in advance that the prisoner had been granted a period of leave over Christmas 2011.

AccessNI Checks

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to detail the average length of time taken to process an AccessNI check in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6692/11-15)

Mr Ford: AccessNI began processing disclosures on 1st April 2008. Records were not kept for average turnaround times during 2008/09.

AccessNI's published target times are:

- Enhanced Disclosures – To deliver 90% of correctly completed applications within 4 weeks of receipt;
- Standard Disclosures - To deliver 90% of correctly completed applications within 2 weeks of receipt; and
- Basic Disclosures - To deliver 90% of correctly completed applications within 2 weeks of receipt.

Average days to deliver were:

	1 April 2009- 31 March 2010	1 April 2010 - 31 March 2011	1 April 2011 – 31 December 2011
Basic	7.3	5.4	6.2
Enhanced	15.5	13.9	20.2
Standard	7.6	6	6.6

AccessNI publishes estimated average turnaround times for all types of disclosures each week on the Department of Justice website.

Garda Síochana: Summonses

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice whether the Garda Síochana has the legal right to deliver summonses to citizens of the Irish Republic on behalf of the PSNI.

(AQW 6701/11-15)

Mr Ford: Summonses issued under the law of Northern Ireland can be recognised by other countries. The Crime (International Co-operation) Act 2003 provides the basis in law for the service of Northern Ireland summonses outside the UK. In the Republic of Ireland, the Criminal Justice (Mutual Assistance) Act 2008 provides for the legitimate service of such summonses. Northern Ireland summonses are issued by the Public Prosecution Service by post in the first instance and followed up if there is no response via the UK Central Authority who may forward it on to the Irish authorities. It is a matter for the Irish authorities as to whether or not service is then effected by the Garda Síochana.

Crime and Re-offending: Prevention

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice what percentage of his Department's budget is directed towards the prevention of crime and re-offending.

(AQW 6702/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department's mission is "Building a fair, just and safer community".

A key aspect of this is the prevention of crime and re-offending. This is delivered through a number of areas of the Department including, for example, the Safer Communities Directorate, Police Service of NI, Probation Board for NI, NI Prison Service and Youth Justice Agency.

Therefore, while it is clear that much of the Department's spending is set against these priorities, because of the difficulties of definition and the nature of the budget heads used, it would not be meaningful to apportion the Department's budget against the headings described.

Community Groups: Crime Prevention

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department provides a forum for community groups who have plans and ideas around crime prevention; and if not, to whom should they present their proposals.

(AQW 6703/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no specific forum for community groups to present their plans and ideas on crime prevention to the Department.

My Department does, however, fund Community Safety Partnerships in each of the 26 council areas across Northern Ireland. Each Partnership is responsible for carrying out an audit in their local area, including liaison with local community groups, to identify community safety issues. The Partnership is also responsible for developing an Action Plan to address these issues and help reduce, and prevent crime.

Community Safety Partnerships are normally comprised of local political representatives, statutory partners, and a variety of community and voluntary representatives as deemed appropriate by the local partnership. Examples include Women's Aid, local churches, and Drugs and Alcohol groups. A substantial number of Action Plan projects are delivered on behalf of the Partnership through local community and voluntary groups. In many areas Partnerships also work closely with Anti-Social Behaviour Fora and Neighbourhood Watch Schemes. It is hoped that the PCSPs, which will be established in April, will build on this good work, and ensure that the views of the community continue to be represented.

It is also worth highlighting my Department is currently developing a Community Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland, 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities'. The development of this Strategy is being informed by the comprehensive consultation which took place between January and March of last year, during which 125 formal written responses were received, and 48 consultation meetings hosted with local groups, in addition to 12 public engagement events, which attracted over 300 attendees.

Legal Aid: Brian Shivers and Colin Duffy

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an up to date breakdown of the legal aid provided for (a) Brian Shivers; and (b) Colin Duffy; (ii) how many solicitors companies and counsel were instructed; and (iii) for an estimate of the final figures. **(AQW 6765/11-15)**

Mr Ford: A breakdown of the criminal legal aid fees paid to date is provided in the table below. However, there are a number of bills outstanding at this stage and the overall bill will be significantly higher.

Fees Paid to Date

	PACE Fees*	Solicitor Fees	Junior Counsel Fees	Senior Counsel Fees
Shivers	£1682.89 (inc VAT of £254.51)	£21,245.69 (including disbursements and VAT of £3,340.95)	£108.60 (including VAT) NB: One payment was made to Counsel who was not VAT registered	Not yet determined
Duffy	£3,802.81 (inc VAT of £468.73)	£13,079.18 (including VAT of £2,154.86 and disbursements)	£1,411.62 (including VAT of £235.27)	£2,482.27 (including VAT of £413.71)

* These are fees paid for advice given at the police station under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act.

Brian Shivers was granted a legal aid certificate to cover representation by solicitor, junior counsel and senior counsel at the Crown Court. The same firm of solicitors represented the defendant throughout the trial. One junior counsel represented the defendant at the Magistrates' Court. A different junior counsel attended for an application only at the Crown Court. For the main Crown Court proceedings one senior and one junior counsel represented Mr Shivers (the junior counsel was a different representative from the junior counsel who attended for the application at the Crown Court and the junior who represented the defendant at the Magistrates' Court). During the course of the trial the defence team was replaced by, and the case was completed by, different senior and junior counsel. Not all claims have yet been determined.

Colin Duffy was granted a legal aid certificate to cover representation by solicitor, junior counsel and senior counsel at the Crown Court. Subsequently he transferred his instructions from the initial firm to a different firm of solicitors. At the Magistrates' Court the initial legal aid certificate was granted to cover one junior counsel. However, a second certificate was subsequently issued to cover junior and senior counsel. At this stage a different junior counsel was engaged. The junior counsel and senior counsel who were engaged at the conclusion of the Magistrates' Court proceedings continued to represent the defendant throughout the Crown Court trial.

It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of the total cost of this case at this stage as a number of claims for payment remain outstanding.

National Offender Management Scheme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department makes any direct financial contribution to the National Offender Management Scheme, and, if so, to provide details. **(AQW 6769/11-15)**

Mr Ford: I refer the member to the reply I gave in AQW5520/11 on 21 December 2011.

Maghaberry Prison: Special Supervision Unit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice what is the annual cost of running the Special Supervision Unit at Maghaberry Prison. (AQW 6771/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Special Supervision Unit has been renamed the Care and Supervision Unit at Maghaberry Prison. The annual running cost of the Unit is £1,070,976.

Mental Capacity Bill

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Justice, at what stage is the introduction of the Mental Capacity Bill; and when it will go out for public consultation.

(AQW 6816/11-15)

Mr Ford: My officials are currently in discussion with those in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the potential for joint legislation on mental capacity. I would hope shortly to be in a position to advise Members on the plans and timetable.

Mental Capacity Bill

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Justice why it is necessary for his Department to bring forward a Mental Capacity Bill, in addition to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety's Mental Health Bill.

(AQW 6820/11-15)

Mr Ford: My officials are currently in discussion with those in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety about the potential for joint legislation on mental capacity. I would hope shortly to be in a position to advise Members on the plans and timetable.

Bench Warrants: Murder

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many Bench Warrants, including European Arrest Warrants, are outstanding for people wanted for murder; and how many of these warrants were issued (i) between one and five years ago; (ii) between five and ten years ago; (iii) between ten and fifteen years ago; (iv) between fifteen and twenty years ago; and (v) more than twenty years ago. (AQW 6826/11-15)

Mr Ford: As of 25 January 2012, there is currently one outstanding Arrest Warrant (Magistrates' Court) for a defendant charged with murder, issued between one and five years ago.

There are no outstanding European Arrest Warrants relating to a charge of murder.

Case Number 11/142258

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to case number 11/142258 which was moved from Londonderry Magistrates Court to Magherafelt Magistrates Court, (i) why, given the nature of the charges, there are no bail conditions attached; (ii) whether it is routine for no bail conditions to be attached to charges of this nature, and if so, would he consider amending legislation to ensure that bail is set; and (iii) why the hearing was transferred from Londonderry to Magherafelt. (AQW 6827/11-15)

Mr Ford: The proceedings in respect of case number 11/142258 were initiated by way of a summons issued by the Public Prosecution Service and there was therefore no requirement for the defendant to enter into bail. It is a matter for the Police or the Director of Public Prosecutions to decide whether criminal proceedings are initiated by a charge sheet or a summons.

The Member may be aware that the Northern Ireland Law Commission is currently undertaking a review of the law on bail in criminal proceedings which may create new legislation. I expect to receive the Commission's legislative proposals in the Spring.

The decision to transfer the proceedings to Magherafelt is a judicial matter and not something upon which I can comment.

Disqualified Drivers

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 5841/11-15, how many disqualified drivers have applied to have their disqualification removed in each of the last three years; and how many were successful. (AQW 6829/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below provides the number and outcome of dealt with applications to restore a driving licence for each of the last three full years for which final data is available.

Applications to Restore a Driving Licence

Year	Outcome						Total
	Granted	Refused	Disqualification Reduced	Dismissed	Withdrawn	No Order Made	
2008	44	5	1	0	4	0	54
2009	53	16	0	5	11	0	85
2010	56	19	0	3	5	4	87
Total	153	40	1	8	20	4	226

Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre Site, Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what work has been carried out at the former Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre site in Millisle in the last twelve months; and for what reasons.

(AQW 6840/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has been giving consideration to contingency arrangements to deal with the rise in the prison population.

As part of the examination of Lisnevin a small amount of internal clearance work took place to facilitate an inspection of the buildings.

Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre Site, Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department has any plans to house women prisoners from Hydebank Young Offender Centre at the former Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre in Millisle.

(AQW 6841/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are currently no such plans.

Criminal Justice: Ethnicity Monitoring

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Justice whether he will introduce ethnicity monitoring of the criminal justice system, which mirrors Section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 for England and Wales, in order to safeguard against the discrimination of individuals on the basis of their ethnicity.

(AQW 6877/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department works with the PSNI and other partners at regional level and locally through Community Safety Partnerships to address hate crime and encourage reporting.

The new Community Safety Strategy will include a commitment to tackling hate crime in partnership, and a key element will be around building confidence in the justice agencies and encouraging reporting of hate crimes.

Section 95 of the Criminal Justice Act 1991 (the 1991 Act) gives the Secretary of State the ability to publish information to support improved performance of the criminal justice system in a number of areas. This includes "facilitating" the avoidance of any discrimination against anyone on the grounds of their race or gender. It does not create any system for monitoring ethnicity in the criminal justice system. As administrative mechanisms already exist which allow for the sharing of relevant operational information across the justice system in Northern Ireland, I have no plans to replicate Section 95 of the 1991 Act.

Fuel Smuggling

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what legislation he plans to introduce to tackle fuel smuggling.

(AQW 6895/11-15)

Mr Ford: The principal offence connected with fuel fraud is evasion of duty which is an excepted matter that falls to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC). The most relevant provision is contained in section 170 of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 (1979 c2). HMRC have confirmed that there are no plans to amend this provision or to seek additional legislation at present, but the matter is kept under review.

I am considering adding the offence in section 170 to those which may be referred to the Court of Appeal, with the leave of the Court, by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) under Part IV of the Criminal Justice Act (1988 c.33), where it appears to the DPP that the sentencing of a person in a proceeding in the Crown Court has been unduly lenient.

I would also note the decision by the Lord Chief Justice, following consultation, to include "duty evasion and smuggling" as an area where sentencing guidance will be developed as part of his Programme of Action on Sentencing.

County Court: Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many appeals to the County Court, from the Small Claims Court, have been subject to (i) a full fee of £175; (ii) a reduced fee; and (iii) no fee, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6903/11-15)

Mr Ford: Details of the number of appeals from the Small Claims Court to the County Court were not centrally recorded prior to January 2008. Consequently full year figures are only available from 2008 onwards. Since September 2007 the fee to lodge an appeal in a small claims case has been £150, prior to this date the fee was £175.

The table below sets out the number of small claims appeals and the respective fees paid for each of the past four years.

Year	Number of small claims appeals lodged	Number of appeals lodged where full fee paid	Number of appeals lodged where reduced fee paid	Number of appeals lodged where no fee paid
2008	4	3	0	1
2009	6	5	0	1
2010	3	3	0	0
2011	4	1	0	3
Total	17	12	0	5

16 of the 17 appeals lodged were in Form 130 of the County Court Rules (Northern Ireland) 1981, the case papers in the remaining case are unavailable.

Courthouses: Closure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to outline the reasons why the five courthouses proposed for closure were selected, given that at least one courthouse with a lower usage than these five will remain open.

(AQW 6905/11-15)

Mr Ford: The proposal to close Hearing Centres at five venues was based on several factors. These include courtroom utilisation, fitness for purpose of the building, the ability to transfer business to a suitable venue with minimal disruption, the availability of suitable public transport between court venues and the travel time between court venues.

County Court: Appeals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many appeals from the Small Claims Court to the County Court, in each of the last five years, were initiated after receipt of (i) form 130 of the County Court rules; and (ii) a request in a letter.

(AQW 6909/11-15)

Mr Ford: Details of the number of appeals from the Small Claims Court to the County Court were not centrally recorded prior to January 2008. Consequently full year figures are only available from 2008 onwards. Since September 2007 the fee to lodge an appeal in a small claims case has been £150, prior to this date the fee was £175.

The table below sets out the number of small claims appeals and the respective fees paid for each of the past four years.

Year	Number of small claims appeals lodged	Number of appeals lodged where full fee paid	Number of appeals lodged where reduced fee paid	Number of appeals lodged where no fee paid
2008	4	3	0	1
2009	6	5	0	1
2010	3	3	0	0
2011	4	1	0	3
Total	17	12	0	5

16 of the 17 appeals lodged were in Form 130 of the County Court Rules (Northern Ireland) 1981, the case papers in the remaining case are unavailable.

Northern Ireland Policing Board: Chairperson

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the remuneration package of the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, including details of salary and other payments, with the exception of mileage claims.

(AQW 6911/11-15)

Mr Ford: The remuneration package for the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Policing Board is £58,606 per annum. The Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Policing Board has informed me that all special Responsibility Allowances previously payable ceased upon the reconstitution of the Policing Board on 24 May 2011.

Northern Ireland Policing Board: Vice-Chairperson

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the remuneration package of the Vice-Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, including details of salary and other payments, with the exception of mileage claims.

(AQW 6912/11-15)

Mr Ford: The remuneration package of the Vice-Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Policing Board is £43,954 per annum. The Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Policing Board has informed me that all special Responsibility Allowances previously payable ceased upon the reconstitution of the Policing Board on 24 May 2011.

Northern Ireland Policing Board: Independent Members

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the basic allowance and other payments, with the exception of mileage, which are paid to independent members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

(AQW 6913/11-15)

Mr Ford: The remuneration package for the Independent Members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board is £19,437 per annum. The Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Policing Board has informed me that all special Responsibility Allowances previously payable ceased upon the reconstitution of the Policing Board on 24 May 2011.

Northern Ireland Policing Board: Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and Independent Members

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice how the current remuneration packages for the Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson and independent members of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, compares with the Police Authorities in (i) Surrey; (ii) Lancashire; (iii) Cheshire; (iv) Gwent; and (v) Strathclyde.

(AQW 6916/11-15)

Mr Ford: I would not draw a comparison with Police Authorities in Great Britain, given that the Policing Architecture here is different in many respects. Nor is there a single model of Police Authorities in GB and I am not accountable to the Assembly for arrangements in other jurisdictions.

Police Part-time Reserve: Gratuity Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost of the Police Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme broken down by (i) payments to members; and (ii) administration costs; and whether any balance was transferred to the Policing Fund.

(AQW 6917/11-15)

Mr Ford: The cost of the Police Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme to date, broken down to show payments to members and administration costs, is detailed in the table below:

	£
Payments to members (net)	12,448,784.34
Administration costs	213,621.93
HMRC (tax and national insurance)	6,893,826.09
Total payments to date	19,556,232.36

The treatment of the balance has not yet been determined.

Police Part-time Reserve: Gratuity Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice whether he will publish the results of the inquiry into the security breach that occurred when the details of the payments due under the Police Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme were delivered.

(AQW 6921/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Justice Committee was notified on 1 November 2011 that I had received the report on the investigation, which I commissioned on the 22 August 2011, into the Part Time Reserve (PTR) Gratuity Scheme data breach.

The investigation examined the circumstances which led to the breach and reviewed the information security and access arrangements at the Northern Ireland Police Fund.

The Report concludes that plain, non window envelopes, should have been used and a PO Box style return address included. In addition, it finds that while it is evident from the investigation of both the circumstances and overall security arrangements and procedures of the Northern Ireland Police Fund that it has robust arrangements in place this lapse has had significant implications. Principal amongst these is that it has caused a number of former members of the PTR to have heightened concern about their security.

The Report's recommendations are essentially about proper handling procedures. The recommendations include: a review of the use of window envelopes across the Department, its Agencies and Arms Length Bodies; the circulation of advice on the use of such envelopes; and that the general guidance on handling protectively marked material should be reviewed and re-circulated.

Brian Shivers: Early Release

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Justice, following the conviction of Brian Shivers and the public declaration that he may have a terminal illness, whether he can give any assurance that there will be no early release if such a request were to be made.

(AQW 6947/11-15)

Mr Ford: No such request has been made in relation to Brian Shivers, and I am unable to give any assurance in relation to how any such request would be responded to.

Article 7 of the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 provides that the Department of Justice may at any time release a life prisoner on licence if it is satisfied that exceptional grounds exist which justify the prisoner's release on compassionate grounds. The Department must consult with the Parole Commissioners before releasing a prisoner on such grounds unless the circumstances of the case render it impracticable.

Criminal Justice System

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what agencies and organisations constitute the criminal justice system; and to whom and how they are accountable.

(AQW 6962/11-15)

Mr Ford: There is no formal definition of what constitutes the criminal justice system. The table below lists those criminal justice organisations, (with the exception of the Attorney General's Office as the principal legal advisor to the Executive), that are currently represented on the Criminal Justice Board.

Organisation	Accountable to
Department of Justice (DOJ)	The Minister of Justice and to the Assembly. As Accounting Officer for the DOJ, the Permanent Secretary is accountable to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly.
NI Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS)	As an Agency within a Directorate of the Department of Justice, the NICTS is accountable to the Minister of Justice and the Assembly. The NICTS Accounting Officer is accountable to the Permanent Secretary for the DOJ and through him to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly.
NI Prison Service (NIPS)	As an Executive Agency of the Department of Justice, the Director of NIPS is accountable to the Minister of Justice and to the Assembly. As Accounting Officer for NIPS, the Director General is accountable to the Permanent Secretary for the DOJ and through him to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly. The Director General reports to the Secretary of State on national security-related matters.
Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI)	As a Non-Departmental Public Body sponsored by the Department of Justice, the PBNI is accountable to the Minister of Justice and to the Assembly. As Accounting Officer the Director of PBNI is accountable to the Permanent Secretary of the DOJ and through him to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly.
Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)	The Chief Constable is accountable to the Policing Board for the delivery of the functions of the Police Service, as outlined in the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000. As Accounting Officer for the PSNI, the Chief Constable is accountable to the Permanent Secretary of the DOJ for the manner in which he discharges his responsibilities as Accounting Officer and, through him to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly. The Chief Constable reports to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in respect of the delivery of national security-related objectives, in line with the St Andrews Agreement.

Organisation	Accountable to
Public Prosecution Service NI (PPSNI)	The PPSNI is a Non-Ministerial Government Department. By virtue of section 42 of the Justice (NI) Act 2002, the functions of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) shall be exercised by him independently of any other person. The DPP is appointed by the Attorney General and has a consultative relationship with him and a consultative relationship with the Advocate General in relation to reserved matters. The DPP is Accounting Officer to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly; accountability to the Assembly covers finance and administrative matters.
Youth Justice Agency (YJA)	As an Executive Agency of the Department of Justice, the YJA is accountable to the Minister of Justice and to the Assembly. As Accounting Officer, the Chief Executive of YJA is accountable to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Justice and through him to the Public Accounts Committee of the Assembly.

Arson: Convictions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice how many convictions for arson were secured in (i) Belfast; and (ii) the rest of Northern Ireland in the last two years; and whether he has any plans to review the sentencing guidelines for arson.

(AQW 6976/11-15)

Mr Ford: Arson offences may be prosecuted under Section 1 of the Vagrancy Act 1898, Article 3(1) and (3) of the Criminal Damage (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 and Article 60(1) of the Magistrates Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981. The table below gives the number of convictions for arson for the calendar years 2007 to 2008 (the latest year for which figures are currently available). The table states the convictions in the Belfast Court division and the other court divisions.

Number of convictions for arson, 2007-2008

Year	Belfast	Outside Belfast	Total
2007	17	47	64
2008	7	54	61

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

The maximum sentence available for the offence of arson under Article 3 of the Criminal Damage (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 is life imprisonment on conviction on indictment. This offence was also considered in the review of the sentencing framework legislated for in the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 which introduced public protection sentences. Its inclusion in Schedules 1 and 2 of the Order as a specified violent offence means it can attract an indeterminate or extended public protection sentence. I have no current plans to amend this legislation.

Sentencing decisions, within the legislative framework, are a matter for the judiciary, taking account of all the factors pertaining in individual cases. Last year, the Lord Chief Justice, following public consultation, announced a Programme of Action on Sentencing, detailing areas where fresh sentencing guidance for the judiciary would be developed. Arson is not included in the list of initial areas for attention, though there is a commitment to consult every two years on issues of public concern for possible inclusion in subsequent Programmes.

Bench Warrants: Sexual Offenders

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many Bench Warrants, including European Arrest Warrants, are outstanding for people wanted for sexual offences; and how many of these were issued (i) between one and five years ago; (ii) between five and ten years ago; (iii) between ten and fifteen years ago; (iv) between fifteen and twenty years ago; and (v) more than twenty years ago.

(AQW 6979/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the number of outstanding Bench Warrants (Crown Court) and Arrest Warrants (Magistrates' Court and Youth Court) issued in relation to defendants charged with one or more sexual offences as of 25 January 2012.

Warrant Issued	Number Outstanding ¹
Under 1 year	14
1 to 5 years	20
5 to 10 years	17
10 to 15 years	5
15 to 20 years	0

Warrant Issued	Number Outstanding¹
Over 20 years	2
Total	58

1 Represents 55 defendants

There is currently one European Arrest Warrant outstanding for a defendant charged with a sexual offence which issued less than one year ago.

Kilcooley Education and Enforcement Programme: Substance Awareness For Everyone Initiative

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to role out the Kilcooley Education and Enforcement Programme Substance Awareness For Everyone initiative to other areas of North Down.

(AQW 7052/11-15)

Mr Ford: I refer the member to AQW/6946/10 and my response of 7 June 2010. I confirm that my Department's position remains unchanged.

Barry Johnston

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether, upon his release from custody, Barry Johnston was classed as rehabilitated and fit to reside in the community by the Prison Service, the Parole Board and the other relevant agencies.

(AQW 7057/11-15)

Mr Ford: As Mr Johnston was originally sentenced prior to the introduction of the Criminal Justice Order (NI) 2008 his case was not subject to consideration of risk by the Parole Commissioners. As he had reached the end of his sentence, there was no control over his release date regardless of issues of rehabilitation and fitness to reside in the community.

The 2008 Order made available indeterminate and extended custodial sentences where certain offenders present a significant risk of serious harm.

The executive summary of the PPANI Strategic Management Board response to the serious case review in respect of Barry Johnston is available on the PPANI website. The summary provides information in relation to the assessment, carried out by the agencies, of the risk posed by the offender. This multi-agency assessment and development of a risk management plan would have taken into account information from the Prison Service in relation to engagement with rehabilitative programmes.

DOJ: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 7102/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Department for Regional Development

Portadown Railway Station: Upgrade

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the plans to upgrade Portadown Railway Station.

(AQW 6282/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): The approvals process for a project to upgrade Portadown Railway Station is now complete. Translink will now be able to proceed with the project and arrange for work on site to commence as soon as possible.

When completed the scheme will provide step-free, and thus Disability Discrimination Act compliant, access to the station from the main pedestrian entrance at Obin Street as well as providing step-free access to the island platform.

In addition, a new entrance atrium will be constructed at Obin Street which will include lift access and a new footbridge, also with lift access, connecting the island platform back to the main station. The existing subway will be closed. The outside of the station and the passenger facilities will also receive a major facelift which will change the whole image of the station.

Road Signage: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans there are to replace missing or damaged road signage in North Down in 2012.

(AQW 6475/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it identifies any damaged or missing road signs in North Down during its regular cyclical safety inspections. Any defects identified are programmed for replacement.

Roads Service acknowledges there is currently a backlog of work in this area, however, additional resources have been targeted to address the issue.

A6: Dualling

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development when the dualling of the A6 road from Derry to the M22 motorway will be completed.

(AQW 6499/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware of the issues surrounding the funding of the A5 and A8 schemes, which, undoubtedly, will have a significant impact on my Department's budget allocation. When funding is confirmed, I will review the spending priorities across my Department, including the impact on the Strategic Roads Programme. This will include the progression of schemes, such as dualling of the A6. In addition, spending beyond the current budget period will be determined by the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, which is currently published for consultation.

In the meantime, development work on the A6 proposals will press ahead, with draft statutory orders having been published, along with an Environmental Statement, in December 2011, for the Londonderry to Dungiven section of the road. Public Exhibitions associated with these statutory orders were held across several venues during the latter half of January 2012 and it is likely that a public inquiry will be necessary.

You may also be aware that the Notice of Intention to Proceed and the Direction Order were published in March 2011 for dualling the remaining single carriageway between Randalstown and Castledawson. A local public inquiry is scheduled to be held in February 2012, for amendments to the Bells Hill Road and Annaghmore Road Junctions, as part of the progression of this scheme.

The timing of construction of these projects will be dependent on the outcome of the Public Inquiries and the availability of funding, taking account of other priorities.

Portrush Railway Station: Preparations for Irish Open

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister for Regional Development what provision is being made to prepare the rail station in Portrush for the anticipated visitor numbers for the Irish Open Golf Competition.

(AQW 6512/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In recognition of the importance to Northern Ireland of this major event and in response to local demands, Translink has established an in-house working group to oversee the organisation's plans to support the Irish Open at Portrush. Members of the group will include staff who have had considerable experience in providing transportation for recent, successful major events. Translink will be reviewing its bus and train services in order to cater for the large number of people expected to be attending the event.

As part of its preparations for this prestigious event, Translink is considering how facilities at Portrush Station might be improved. As well as carrying out a general tidy-up, power washing and repainting exercise, Translink is planning to refurbish the existing platform canopy and a capital project is already in hand.

Car Parks: Revenue

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development how much revenue was collected in car parks, on days when parking charges were not applicable, in each of the last four years.

(AQW 6536/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that revenue from Roads Service's charged car parks is not collected or reconciled on a daily basis and therefore the information requested is not readily available. Outside of charged hours, payment may be made to a Pay and Display machine in a Roads Service car park in order to purchase a Pay and Display ticket which will take effect from the time charging recommences.

Speed Limits: 20mph Zones

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to increase the number of 20mph zones, or if he has any plans to legislate for a reduction in the speed limit for urban restricted streets.

(AQW 6546/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that its speed management policy encourages the further roll out of 20 mph zones and 20 mph speed limits in residential areas and in urban locations, where there is a high number of vulnerable road users present.

The Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy to 2020 contains Action Measures that replicate Roads Service policy. It also contains a commitment to pilot four schemes that will provide 20 mph limits without additional self enforcing engineering measures,

such as road humps. However, fulfilment of these commitments will be subject to sufficient funding being made available, and agreement by the PSNI to enforcement.

I can advise the Member that when assessing a road for the potential to introduce a 20 mph speed limit, many factors are considered, including the mean speed, collision history, streetscape, community support, function and demographics. Given the differing characteristics of specific roads in terms their suitability for the application of a reduced speed limit, I have concluded that there would be no advantage in legislating for a blanket speed reduction in urban streets.

Buses: North Antrim

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development how the additional £3 million allocated in the January 2012 Monitoring Round for replacement buses will benefit North Antrim; and how many new buses will be allocated to the constituency. **(AQW 6626/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: The additional £3m that has been allocated the January 2012 Monitoring Round for replacement buses will mean that my Department will be providing in total over £12m towards the purchase of 79 new buses. The new additions to the bus fleet will be allocated across the network to replace older vehicles. However Translink advises that it is not possible, at this stage, to provide exact details of where the new buses will be deployed.

Road Schemes: North Antrim

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Regional Development how the additional £3 million and £4 million for carriageway and footway refurbishment and roads structural maintenance respectively will benefit North Antrim; and to detail the schemes in North Antrim that will now proceed this year that would not have proceeded otherwise.

(AQW 6627/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that additional funding of £1,265,000 will be used to complete the following schemes in North Antrim:-

Ballymena Area (within North Antrim)

- B93 Dunminning Road - carriageway resurfacing - £110,000; and
- B94 Knockan Road - carriageway resurfacing - £100,000.

Ballymena Total - £210,000

Ballymoney Area

- A26 Frosses Road - carriageway resurfacing - £275,000;
- B62 Ballybogey Road - carriageway resurfacing - £300,000;
- B16 Kilraughts Road - carriageway resurfacing - £45,000;
- small-scale carriageway overlays/resurfacing - various locations- £80,000; and
- footway resurfacing - various locations - £50,000.

Ballymoney Total - £750,000

Moyle Area

- A2 Loughareema Road, Cushendun, - carriageway resurfacing - £160,000;
- small-scale carriageway resurfacing - £75,000; and
- footway resurfacing - various locations - £70,000.

Moyle Total - £305,000

Traffic Congestion: Hollywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to address traffic congestion in Hollywood town centre. **(AQW 6664/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service routinely considers issues that are raised or requests received from members of the public or their representatives. Officials are presently considering a request to amend the existing traffic signal arrangement at the junction of High Street with Church Road, as well as reviewing on-street parking/waiting restrictions at several locations within Hollywood town centre.

Parking: Penalty Charge Notices

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the revenue raised by his Department through the payment of penalty charge notices in each of the last five years; (ii) the total amount paid by his Department to the company charged with enforcing parking restrictions in each of the last five years; and (iii) the difference between the two figures for each year.

(AQW 6669/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Decriminalised Parking Enforcement was introduced in Northern Ireland at end-October 2006. Details of the revenue from payment of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs), the amount paid to the service provider for enforcing parking restrictions and the difference between the two figures for each of the last five financial years is provided in the table below:

	2006/07 (£M)	2007/08 (£M)	2008/09 (£M)	2009/10 (£M)	2010/11 (£M)
Payments to Service Provider	2.4	7.0	8.5	8.9	9.3
PCN Income	2.0	6.0	5.2	4.8	4.5
Difference	0.4	1.0	3.3	4.1	4.8

Payments to the Service Provider are in relation to parking enforcement services and car-park management services. Revenue generated by the payment of PCNs is used, along with income from car-parking and other charges, to supplement the overall financing of Roads Service by Central Government.

A26 between Glarryford and Coleraine

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether the traffic accident rates on the A26 between Glarryford and Coleraine, in the last five years, will be taken into account when assessing the need for the dualling of this road.

(AQW 6690/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that all the accident data currently available from the PSNI, in relation to the A26 Glarryford to the A44 Drones Road junction, has been used in the scheme assessment for the project.

The Investment Delivery Plan (IDP) for Roads, published in 2008, identifies the dualling of both the A26 between Glarryford and the A44 Drones Road junction, and the dualling of the A26 between Coleraine and Ballymoney, during the Plan period 2008–2018.

In addition, spending beyond the current budget period will be determined by the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, which is currently published for consultation.

Buncrana Road, Derry: Dualling

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Regional Development when the dualling of the Buncrana Road in Derry will begin; and what is the estimated date of completion.

(AQW 6725/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that construction of the Buncrana Road improvement schemes, which are expected to take approximately 30 months to complete, is unlikely to start during the current budget period.

In addition, spending beyond the current budget period will be determined by the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, which is currently published for consultation.

Resurfacing: Holywood

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what road resurfacing plans his Department has for the Holywood area, in light of any reallocation of A5 funding.

(AQW 6760/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As you are aware, the Irish Government has recently indicated it is unable to part fund the A5 and A8 projects as originally envisaged and this will undoubtedly affect the funding available to my Department.

Difficult choices will have to be made over the next few years to deliver the best possible services and when funding is confirmed, I will review spending priorities across my Department, including the impact of Budget 2010, with a view to exploring opportunities to bring forward schemes, such as those within the Holywood area.

M1 Congestion

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the actions his Department plans to take to tackle congestion on the M1, between Junction 7 and the Westlink.

(AQW 6762/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is well aware of the congested traffic conditions on the M1 during the morning peak period, and particularly from junction 7 (Sprucefield) to the Westlink. This part of the motorway is constantly monitored by staff in the Traffic Information and Control Centre.

At present, drivers may avail of the option of using the Sprucefield Park and Ride site. This has the benefit of a much shorter journey time and also leads to a reduction in the number of vehicles which contribute to the congestion.

Roads Service has also commissioned consultants to undertake a Feasibility Study into how the motorway hard shoulders may be used to mitigate the effects of congestion, either by implementing a controlled motorway, which will open the hard shoulder

on occasions for all traffic to use, or alternatively, make more use of the hard shoulders to further benefit public transport. The consultants study is currently being considered, however, progression of any scheme would be dependent upon the availability of funding.

Car Parking: Clamping by Private Operators

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the use of clamping by private car park operators.

(AQW 6764/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service, through its parking enforcement contract with NSL, uses vehicle clamping and removals as an effective method of recovering debt relating to unpaid Penalty Charge Notices.

My Department has no authority or responsibility for any other vehicle clamping activities by private car-park operators or for any parking enforcement activity on private land.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development what progress has been made with the key objective to seek trans-European transport networks and INTERREG for inter-regional co-operation funding to enhance the road network and share best practice, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6782/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that on 10 January 2012, the European Commission launched the 'call' for proposals under the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) annual programme, making €200 million available to co-finance projects in the specific priority areas, for example:

- Priority 1: Promote the development of an integrated and multi-modal transport system;
- Priority 3: Accelerate/facilitate the implementation of TEN-T projects; and
- Priority 5: Support to the long term implementation of the TEN-T network, in particular development of corridors that shall enable a coordinated implementation of the network.

My Department intends to submit an application for funding for Road Schemes along the TEN-T Priority Axis, subject to meeting the relevant criteria.

Road Service officials further advise that the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) issued a 'call' on 3 January 2012, across all themes of the INTERREG IVA programme. Officials intend to make an application for funding towards a number of minor road improvement schemes along the border with the Republic of Ireland.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development how he is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to obtain support for a feasibility study for the Belfast to Dublin rail upgrade, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6783/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Officials in my Department are continually exploring the EU policies, networks and programmes in order to maximise the EU funding for public transport projects.

In relation to a possible upgrade of the Belfast to Dublin railway services, Translink advises that a Project Initiation Document is being finalised. Before submitting it to the Department Translink will seek the comments of Irish Rail. Upon receipt, officials will consider what EU funding opportunities are available to support the completion of a Feasibility Study for this project.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development how he is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to support the water industry's uptake of EU funding to improve resource efficiency, energy efficiency and the increased use of renewable energy and sustainability, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6785/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Executive's strategy 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12' has been developed in close cooperation with the European Commission President Barroso's Northern Ireland Task Force. The objective of supporting the water industry in improving its sustainability is underpinned by the priorities within DRD Social and Environmental Guidance for Water and Sewerage Services (2010-13). DRD also assists Northern Ireland Water (NIW) in identifying potential funding opportunities through EU programmes such as the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme for Research and Development (FP7) and the INTERREG IVA Programme.

I have been advised by NIW that it is currently working on two projects: the Agricultural Need for Sustainable Willow Effluent Recycling (ANSWER); and the Advanced Technologies for Water Resource Management (ATWARM) projects.

The ANSWER Project 002991, is funded by the European Regional Development Fund (INTERREG IVA Programme) and is being coordinated by the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI). The total project budget is £2,063,001. The NIW element is £424,334.

ATWARM is a Marie Curie Initial Training Network funded by the FP7 People Programme. The objective of the project is to enhance the career prospects of 16 young researchers by providing them with technical knowledge, multidisciplinary skills and business aptitudes that will contribute to the security of water quality and quantity for future generations within the EU. Through this initiative NIW has obtained a post-PhD Student to work in the area of carbon accounting and management for a three year period. The value of the grant is £159,057.

Belfast to Londonderry Railway Line

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the passenger numbers for the Belfast to Londonderry railway line in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6786/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Passenger numbers for the Belfast to Londonderry railway line in each of the last five years are as follows:

Year	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
000's	1,021	1,175	1,402	1,311	1,477

Grit and Salt Boxes: North Down and Ards

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many additional grit or salt boxes have been provided in the (i) North Down; and (ii) Ards Borough Council areas in this financial year to date.

(AQW 6791/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: During the current winter period to date, My Department's Roads Service has provided 17 additional salt bins in the North Down Borough Council area and 4 additional salt bins in the Ards Borough Council area.

Grit Boxes: North Down and Ards

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many additional grit boxes will be provided in the (i) North Down; and (ii) Ards Borough Council areas in each of the next three years.

(AQW 6792/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: When considering a request for a salt bin, my Department's Roads Service will carry out an objective evaluation which encompasses a criteria based scoring system and takes account of various factors including traffic volume, road gradient, geometry, alternative routes and other community related factors, such as schools and hospitals. This approach ensures that salt bins are strategically sited on lightly trafficked roads and at specific locations agreed to by residents.

There are no limits placed on the number of salt bins which may be provided. However, a salt bin will not normally be provided within 100 metres of an existing salt bin. As new salt bins are usually provided in response to requests from members of the public and subject to the availability of a suitable location, Roads Service is unable to predict the number of additional salt bins that will be provided in the next three years.

A26: Dualling

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development what the current projected cost is of dualling the A26 from Glarryford to Drones Road junction.

(AQW 6798/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the current projected cost of dualling the A26 between Glarryford and the A44 Drones Road is in the range of £50 - £70 Million.

DRD: Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 6813/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department submitted its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 15 December 2011.

Enterprise Train Service from Belfast to Dublin

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the passenger numbers for the Enterprise train service from Belfast to Dublin for each of the last five years.

(AQW 6838/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Passenger numbers for the Enterprise train service from Belfast to Dublin for each of the last five years are as follows:

Year	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
000's	862,000	883,000	834,000	706,000	747,000

Resurfacing: Ballysallagh Road, Craigtlet

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to resurface the Ballysallagh Road at Craigtlet.
(AQW 6842/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that carriageway resurfacing and drainage works are planned for B170 Ballysallagh Road, Bangor from the Ballybarnes Road to the junction with the A2 Belfast Road.

Work is currently at the planning stage, which includes developing appropriate temporary traffic management measures and consulting with the property owners affected by the scheme.

A5: Reallocation of Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development how much funding, which was originally allocated to the A5 road project, has been reallocated for use by the Roads Service in North Down.

(AQW 6843/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As you are aware, the Irish Government has deferred the provision of further funding for progression of the A5 and A8 schemes, and in this regard will now provide £25 million per annum in 2015 and 2016 towards the projects. At the North South Ministerial Council Plenary (NSMC) Meeting held on 18 November 2011, the relevant Departments were tasked with preparing a new funding and implementation plan for the A5 and A8 projects to be agreed at the next NSMC Transport meeting, with endorsement at the next NSMC Plenary meeting.

This process is still on-going and has not yet reached a conclusion and in that regard, I have held discussions with the Minister of Finance and expect to have further discussions with Ministerial colleagues, with a view to reaching a conclusion as swiftly as possible. As Roads Minister, I am keen to give clarity to the Construction industry.

My Department's allocation for the current financial year has, however, enabled me to make additional finance available to Roads Service for both capital and routine maintenance. This has allowed Roads Service to significantly increase its maintenance activities. For example, North Down has benefited from a two-fold increase in the maintenance budget from 2010/11, which has enabled additional resurfacing schemes to be brought forward.

DRD: Capital Budget

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's capital budget broken down by the amount allocated to (i) each objective; and (ii) each spending area up to, and including, the 2014-15 financial year.

(AQW 6869/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The following table details the Department's capital budget broken down by the amount allocated to (i) each objective; and (ii) each spending area up to, and including, the 2014-15 financial year.

2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Objective and Spending Area	£m	£m	£m
Objective A			
Roads *	155.9	235.5	385.4
Transport	107.5	47.7	13.4
EU Structural Funds	0.3	0.1	0.1
Total Objective A	263.8	283.3	398.9
Objective B			
Water and Sewerage	189.0	147.6	151.3

2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Objective and Spending Area	£m	£m	£m
Total Objective B	189.0	147.6	151.3
Total	452.8	430.9	613.2

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

Objective A: Supporting the economy by planning, developing and maintaining safe and sustainable transportation networks, promoting airport and harbour services, addressing regional imbalance in infrastructure and shaping the long-term future of the region.

Objective B: Contributing to the health and well being of the community and the protection of the environment by maintaining and developing the policy and regulatory environment which facilitates the provision of sustainable, high quality water and sewerage services.

*At the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary Meeting held on Friday 18 November 2011, it was noted that provision of further funding by the Irish Government, for progression of the A5 and A8 projects, is being deferred and that, in this regard, the Irish Government will provide £25 million per annum in 2015 and 2016 towards the project.

A new funding and implementation plan is now being prepared for the two projects, for agreement at the next NSMC Transport meeting, with endorsement at the next NSMC Plenary meeting. This process will, undoubtedly, affect the funding available to the Department for Regional Development and, therefore potentially, delivery of the Strategic Roads Programme.

When the funding is confirmed, I intend to review the spending priorities across my Department.

Resurfacing: Castlemara Drive, Carrickfergus

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Regional Development when the resurfacing of Castlemara Drive in Carrickfergus will be rescheduled.

(AQW 6951/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service is aware that Northern Ireland Water (NIW) is presently completing further minor repair work as part of a water main renewal scheme in Castlemara Drive. When NIW has completed its works, Roads Service will assess the condition of the carriageway and, if necessary, consider the inclusion of Castlemara Drive in a future resurfacing programme. This assessment will be carried out during the 2012/13 financial year.

Ballymoney Railway Station: Capital Works

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any further capital works that are planned for Ballymoney Railway Station.

(AQW 6975/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department is providing funding of £940,000 towards a project to construct a new footbridge at Ballymoney Railway Station. The project is being part funded by Sustrans who are providing funding of £425,000.

The project will deliver:

- 1 a new footbridge over the station, providing Disability Discrimination Act compliant access to the platforms as well as a cycleway/footpath providing a safe route across the railway.
- 2 the Closure of Fairhill pedestrian crossing near to the platform end (with 500 users per day).
- 3 an increase in parking spaces to a total of 60.

The project is scheduled to be completed by August 2012.

Magilligan to Greencastle Ferry Service

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 6239/11-15, when he will amend the legislation to allow his Department to part fund the Magilligan-Greencastle Ferry Service, in conjunction with the Irish Government.

(AQW 7058/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As I explained in my answer on 25 January 2012, my Department was not involved in setting up the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry service. This was a commercial initiative of the Councils in Limavady and Donegal. I have no plans to amend legislation so as to make my Department responsible for such a ferry service.

Cycle Paths

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all the dedicated cycle paths, which are separate from a road or pavement, that have been provided in the last five years; and the dedicated paths that will be provided over the next five years. **(AQW 7074/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Road Service has advised that it has not provided any dedicated cycle paths. However, it has provided cycle paths that are shared between pedestrians and cyclists, which include those on the National Cycle Network for Northern Ireland. Information on completed and proposed cycle path schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

I would further advise that a map showing the on-road and off-road sections of the National Cycle Network for Northern Ireland can be accessed at the following web address: <http://www.cycleni.com/national-cycle-network/>

With regard to the provision of cycle paths over the next five years, I can advise that the detailed budget for subsequent years has not yet been finalised and it is therefore not possible to provide details of future works programmes at this time.

It remains Roads Service's intention to continue to implement, in so far as resources permit, the cycling infrastructure as set out in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) and the Regional Transport Strategy, which will complement the existing National Cycle Network. However as I am sure you are aware, Capital budgets for the period 2011 - 2015 are under pressure and my Department is faced with the difficult task of maximising output from the limited resources available and as such it is not possible to continue to fund all functions to at same level as in previous years.

Regional Development Strategy: Larne

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development what further consideration has been given to the status of Larne within the Regional Development Strategy; and when Larne will be reaffirmed as a hub and gateway within the strategy. **(AQW 7371/11-15)**

Mr Kennedy: Larne is recognised as a Main Hub and Gateway in the extant Shaping Our Future Regional: Development Strategy published in 2001. A public consultation on the 10-year review of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) commenced on 6 January 2011 and ended on 31 March 2011. The responses to this consultation, including those received in respect of the status of Larne, have helped shape the way forward in the final revised RDS.

DRD is in the process of finalising the revised RDS having considered the overall response to the public consultation and comments from Executive colleagues. It is my intention to make an announcement on the publication of the revised RDS in the very near future.

Department for Social Development

Housing Executive: Waiting List

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 6060/11-15, in relation to social housing, to detail (i) the number of (a) properties; (b) vacant properties; and (c) derelict properties in each Housing Executive district office area; and (ii) the number of applicants currently on the housing waiting list as a percentage of the number of social housing properties in each Housing Executive district office area. **(AQW 6624/11-15)**

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not categorise vacant properties as derelict. Vacant properties are categorised as awaiting relet, undergoing repairs, decanting, pending sale/demolition and illegally occupied.

The table attached details the total number of properties, the total number vacant and the number of applicants on the waiting list as a percentage of the total number of Housing Executive properties by District office area.

NIHE District Office	Total Number of Properties	Number of *Vacant Properties	No of Applicants on W/ List as % of total number of NIHE properties in each District
East Belfast	3,470	128	52.4
North Belfast	6,300	281	38.1
Shankill	3,583	210	24.7

NIHE District Office	Total Number of Properties	Number of *Vacant Properties	No of Applicants on W/ List as % of total number of NIHE properties in each District
South Belfast	4,445	265	54.9
West Belfast	5,120	73	52.5
Belfast	22,918	957	44.7
Antrim	2,396	21	41.2
Ballycastle	827	11	39.3
Ballymena	2,776	130	54.4
Ballymoney	1,472	16	32.2
Carrickfergus	1,925	19	52.3
Coleraine	3,070	37	42.3
Larne	1,453	158	37.2
Newtownabbey 1	2,231	135	38.1
Newtownabbey 2	2,155	19	42.4
North East	18,305	546	43.2
Armagh	3,080	37	26.3
Banbridge	1,795	26	36.7
Dungannon	1,790	20	57.0
Fermanagh	2,020	17	43.0
Lurgan	2,663	116	44.6
Newry	1,947	28	95.4
Portadown	1,613	27	47.2
South	14,908	271	48.0
Bangor	2,695	76	69.7
Castlereagh	3,754	87	38.2
Downpatrick	2,396	20	55.7
Lisburn Antrim Street	4,373	51	46.8
Lisburn Dairyfarm	1,874	20	31.6
Newtownards	3,907	73	44.5
South East	18,999	327	47.5
Collon Terrace	2,394	16	42.2
Cookstown	1,049	5	39.6
Limavady	1,464	13	31.7
Magherafelt	1,299	13	39.6
Omagh	1,821	32	32.8
Strabane	2,207	21	29.5
Waterloo Place	2,259	17	45.2
Waterside	2,435	24	39.9

NIHE District Office	Total Number of Properties	Number of *Vacant Properties	No of Applicants on W/List as % of total number of NIHE properties in each District
West	14,928	141	37.8
Outside NI	Nil	Nil	N/A
Total	90,058	2,242	44.4

* Vacant properties are categorised as awaiting relet, undergoing repairs, decanting, pending sale/demolition and illegally occupied.

Antisocial Behaviour: Housing Executive

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many cases of anti-social behaviour were reported to the Housing Executive in the North Down area in each of the last two years.

(AQW 6674/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I would refer the Member to the answer I provided to him in AQW 6450/11-15 on 25 January 2012.

Housing Executive Properties: Suffolk Road, Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 1934/11-15, for an update on the upgrade of the flats in Suffolk Road, Belfast.

(AQW 6729/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The flats located on the Suffolk Road, Belfast are included in a window replacement scheme which is currently on site. They are also included in a heating replacement scheme which was originally programmed to start in November 2011. This scheme was delayed as Phoenix Gas had to lay additional mains and they were unable to start this work until early January 2012. The Housing Executive understands that this work has now been completed and Phoenix Gas has started working on laying individual connections to the properties.

The Housing Executive hope that the heating replacement scheme will commence in May 2012 but this will be dependent on Phoenix Gas completing their work and funding being available.

Housing Executive Properties: Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister for Social Development whether the Housing Executive has any plans to upgrade the flats at the end of Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast.

(AQW 6730/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive advised that they do not have any flats at the end of Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast. However, they originally had a major improvement scheme in the programme for the Doon Road maisonettes. This scheme did not go ahead due to a lack of available funding. The Housing Executive is currently considering several options to improve these maisonettes and they hope to make a decision by March this year.

Housing Executive Properties: Double Glazing

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what progress has been made in providing Housing Executive properties with double glazing, as outlined in the Programme for Government; (ii) which companies will carry out the work; and (iii) whether there is sufficient capacity and provision in the double glazing industry to complete the work.

(AQW 6749/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive is working to identify any properties which still require double glazing and once this information is available, as required in the draft Programme for Government, by March 2012 it will prepare a programme for the installation of glazing to all Housing Executive homes by the end of 2015.

The Housing Executive has had discussions with contractors, manufacturers and suppliers with respect to their capacity to support the proposed double glazing programme have been positive. It is not anticipated that capacity and provision will be problematic.

Community Centres

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development whether there are any grants available to enable communities to share costs with councils to create community centres.

(AQW 6766/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are no specific grants available from my Department or arms length bodies to enable communities to share costs with councils to create community centres. However, through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund and the Modernisation Fund Capital programme my Department has shared costs with councils, primarily in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas to develop and improve community centres and facilities.

Housing Benefit: National Cap

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many claimants are effected by the new national cap on Housing Benefit. (AQW 6794/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Welfare Reform Bill, which includes the proposed benefit cap, is still currently progressing through Westminster. Corresponding provisions for the introduction of a benefit cap in Northern Ireland may be included in a Northern Ireland Welfare Reform Bill which, subject to Executive approval, I intend to introduce to the Assembly later this year. Statisticians in both the Department for Social Development and the Department for Work and Pensions are currently modeling the implications of the different policy proposals contained within the Welfare Reform Bill; this will include the number of people who could be affected by any proposed benefit cap.

I should explain that the coalition Government is proposing to introduce a cap on the amount of benefit a claimant can receive of £26,000 per year after tax and national insurance or £35,000 per year before Tax and national insurance. This equates to £500 net a week. It is based on average earned income. The principle behind the introduction of a cap is that people on benefits should not receive more in social security benefits than is earned by those who are working and paying their taxes. It is also very important to recognise that those entitled to working tax credit, as well as households with someone receiving disability living allowance, are excluded from the benefit cap.

Work Capability Assessments: Number Completed

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have attended Work Capability Assessments, broken down by constituency. (AQW 6795/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since its introduction in October 2008 54,048 Work Capability Assessments have been completed. The breakdown of completed Work Capability Assessments by parliamentary constituency is not available due to limitations in the information systems.

Unoccupied Social Housing Properties: South Belfast

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of unoccupied social housing properties in each ward in the South Belfast constituency. (AQW 6823/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested for Housing Executive properties as they do not routinely collate information on a constituency basis. However, they have advised that they have 265 vacant properties in their South Belfast District Office area.

The table below details the number of Housing Association unoccupied social housing properties in each ward in the South Belfast constituency: -

Ward	Number of unoccupied social housing properties
Newtownbreda	2
Windsor	9
Ballynafeigh	28
Botanic	24
Shaftesbury	19
Stranmillis	2
Ravenhill	22
Woodstock	4

Work Capability Assessment: Personalised Summary Statement

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development when a customer should receive an ATOS Healthcare Personalised Summary Statement, following a Work Capability Assessment. (AQW 6835/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In November 2010, Professor Malcolm Harrington's Independent Review of the Work Capability Assessment recommended that a Personalised Summary Statement should be completed by the Health Care Professional and issued to customers following a face to face Work Capability Assessment.

However, in September 2011 Professor Harrington reviewed and changed this recommendation. It was decided not to issue the Personalised Summary Statement to customers although it was agreed that the Personalised Summary Statement would continue to be available to Decision Makers to help inform the decision making process.

Work Capability Assessment: Mental Function Champion

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development whether ATOS Healthcare provides a mental function champion to encourage best practice amongst Healthcare practitioners who carry out Work Capability Assessments on people with mental, intellectual or cognitive disabilities.

(AQW 6836/11-15)

Mr McCausland: ATOS Healthcare assumed responsibility for providing medical assessments on behalf of the Social Security Agency in June 2011. ATOS have in place a Mental Function Champion who provides ongoing support and advice and specific training on mental health to all ATOS Healthcare professionals who provide Work Capability Assessments to customers with mental, intellectual or cognitive disabilities.

Work Capability Assessment: Audio Recordings

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development whether there are any plans to audio record Work Capability Assessments that are carried out by ATOS Healthcare.

(AQW 6839/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are no plans at present to audio record Work Capability Assessments carried out by Atos Healthcare. The Department for Work and Pensions and Atos Healthcare recently piloted the audio recording of Work Capability Assessments. The results are currently being evaluated. The Social Security Agency will review the evidence from this pilot to inform future plans.

Work Capability Assessment: Training

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the length of the initial training provided by ATOS Healthcare to healthcare practitioners carrying out Work Capability Assessments; (ii) the examination process at the end of the training; (iii) the standard to be achieved in the examination; and (iv) who, in Northern Ireland, approves the appointment of the practitioners.

(AQW 6845/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Atos Healthcare is responsible for training healthcare professionals employed in the delivery of Medical Support Services and specific details are set out below.

- (i) Healthcare professionals carrying out Work Capability Assessments receive training that is tailored to their particular profession. The initial training for doctors is eight days and for nurses is twenty four days.
- (ii) Healthcare professionals are required to complete a paper based examination at the end of their classroom training.
- (iii) The standard to be achieved is a minimum pass mark of 85%.
- (iv) The Social Security Agency's Health Assessment Advisor is responsible for the approval of healthcare professionals employed in the delivery of the Medical Support Services. Final approval is only given following successful completion of training and the attainment of audit standards and at the point when Atos Healthcare wishes to formally appoint the individuals.

Work Capability Assessment: Study Materials

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Social Development to list the study materials included in the ATOS Healthcare Induction Programme for healthcare practitioners.

(AQW 6847/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The study material included in the Atos Healthcare Induction Programme for healthcare professionals is listed below:

- (i) **New Entrant Registered Medical Practitioner**
 - Registered Medical Practitioner New Entrant Revised Work Capability Assessment Limited Capability for Work/ Limited Capability for Work Related Activity Academy Welcome
 - Disability Analysis for New Entrants and Introduction to Employment and Support Allowance and Revised Work Capability Assessment
 - Revised Work Capability Assessment Handbook
 - Business Continuity Plan
 - Logic integrated Medical Assessment Application Ergonomics Pre-Course Reading
 - Revised Work Capability Assessment Handbook

- Logic integrated Medical Assessment Work Capability Assessment Review Exam Application Technical Guide

Additional course material:

- Evidence Based Medicine Cardio respiratory Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence Based Medicine Mental Health Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence Based Medicine Musculoskeletal Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence Based Medicine Neurological and Infections Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence based protocols for the disability analyst
- Employment and Support Allowance/Disability Living Allowance Learning Path Pack 2
- Mental Illness – Current Therapeutics and Management

(ii) New Entrant Registered Nurse

- Physical Examination precourse
- Revised Work Capability Assessment Handbook - ESA Amendment regs 2011 v 3 Final
- Introduction to Disability Analysis and Employment and Support Allowance for Registered Nurse New Entrants pre-course reading
- Registered Nurse New Entrant Employment and Support Allowance Limited Capability for Work/Limited Capability for Work Related Activity Physical Examination pre-course reading
- Business Continuity Plan
- Logic integrated Medical Assessment Application Ergonomics Pre-course reading
- Employment Support Allowance/Disability Living Allowance Learning Path Pack 2
- Logic integrated Medical Assessment Work Capability Assessment Review Exam Application Technical Guide

Additional course material:

- Evidence Based Medicine Cardio respiratory Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence Based Medicine Mental Health Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence Based Medicine Musculoskeletal Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence Based Medicine Neurological and Infections Key Points and Examination Techniques
- Evidence based protocols for the disability analyst
- Mental Illness – Current Therapeutics and Management

Housing Executive Properties: Unoccupied Dwellings

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development what action the Housing Executive is taking to recover vacant properties. **(AQW 6881/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: There are a number of ways the Housing Executive is acting to recover vacant properties. In order to drive the Empty Homes Strategy, I agreed to the establishment of a working group which includes the Housing Executive. The group was established in November 2011 and two pilot areas were selected: Fortwilliam Parade in North Belfast and the Newtownards Road in East Belfast. The aim of the pilot is to support homeowners in bringing properties back into use and evaluate the use of existing legislation and powers, such as vesting, loans and grants, to assist in the process. The work is ongoing and the Housing Executive is due to report on the effectiveness of interventions in early April.

The Housing Executive also has statutory powers to compulsorily purchase properties for redevelopment purposes and may seek to vest properties in areas identified for redevelopment, urban renewal or as part of agreed estate based strategies. Areas identified may include vacant properties but often include properties which are occupied.

In September 2010 the Housing Executive Board approved a limited stock transfer policy allowing, subject to a number of criteria, vacant Housing Executive dwellings located in regeneration areas and requiring rehabilitation works to be transferred to Housing Associations. To date there are 208 properties which have either been transferred or are in the process of being transferred to a nominated registered Housing Association.

Neighbourhood Renewal Projects: Portadown/Craigavon/Lurgan

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding his Department has allocated to Neighbourhood Renewal Projects in (i) Portadown; (ii) Craigavon; and (iii) Lurgan in each of the last three years. **(AQW 6885/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: The information is as follows:

NRA	Funding Allocated		
	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
Portadown	£422,036.60	£139,084.72	£527,252.89
Brownlow (Craigavon)	£1,214,377.52	£453,928.55	£1,011,992.54
Lurgan	£1,412,034.33	£829,059.90	£926,946.63

Housing: Service Personnel and Ex-service Personnel

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding allocated by his Department for housing for service personnel and ex-service personnel, excluding those rehoused as a result of terrorist threats or attack, in the (i) Portadown; (ii) Craigavon; (iii) Banbridge; and (iv) Lurgan areas in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6889/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested. The Housing Executive does not have a specific fund to assist in the housing of either service personnel or ex-service personnel. A housing application that is received from either service or ex-service personnel is assessed in accordance with the general rules of the Housing Selection Scheme and information on whether a housing applicant is either service or ex-service personnel is not captured.

Housing: Service Personnel and Ex-service Personnel

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding allocated by his Department for rehousing service personnel and ex-service personnel as a result of terrorist threats or attack in the (i) Portadown; (ii) Craigavon; (iii) Banbridge; and (iv) Lurgan areas in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6890/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested. The Housing Executive does not have a specific fund to assist in the re-housing of either service personnel or ex-service personnel. A housing application that is received from either service or ex-service personnel is assessed in accordance with the general rules of the Housing Selection Scheme and information on whether a housing applicant is either service or ex-service personnel is not captured.

Owner occupiers in Northern Ireland may be entitled to assistance under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings Scheme. During the period 1 November 2008 to 31 October 2011 the Housing Executive purchased 44 properties which were owned by Security Force Personnel as follows:-

01/11/2008 – 31/10/2009: 11 properties at a total cost of £2.692m

01/11/2009 – 31/10/2010: 19 properties at a total cost of £4.032m

01/11/2010 – 31/10/2011: 14 properties at a total cost of £2.898m

The Housing Executive does not however provide information on SPED by towns or constituency on the basis of the confidentiality of the scheme.

Bangor Town Centre Master Plan

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how he intends to implement the Bangor Town Centre Master Plan.

(AQW 6904/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Bangor Town Centre masterplan was launched in July 2011. It identified a range of projects that should be taken forward within the town centre over the next fifteen years. North Down Borough Council has established a Project Board comprising the main public and private sector stakeholders to oversee the delivery of the masterplan proposals. The first meeting of the new Project Board is planned for February 2012. DSD will be represented on the Project Board and my Department is committed to working in partnership with others to take forward the proposals identified in the Masterplan.

Autism: Jobseeker's Allowance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development, following case reviews, how many people with autism have been transferred to Jobseekers Allowance from Employment and Support Allowance; and of these, how many have indicated that they wish to appeal the decision.

(AQW 6910/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available. The Department does not hold the information that would allow us to determine how many customers with autism claiming Employment and Support Allowance have transferred to Jobseekers Allowance.

Housing Executive Properties: Natural Gas

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development (i) whether there are any plans to install natural gas in Housing Executive properties in the West Winds area, Newtownards; and if so, to detail the number of homes that will have natural gas installed; and (ii) the cost involved.

(AQW 6928/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive currently owns 501 dwellings in the Westwinds Estate. However, this will reduce to 477 when the flats at Lysander Park are demolished. 295 properties already had gas central heating installed in heating replacement schemes and nine properties had oil central heating installed before gas was available. The remaining 173 properties, mainly flats, are scheduled to have gas heating installed in 2012/13 at an estimated cost of £1m, subject to funding being available. Phoenix Gas has advised that they will be commencing a metering programme within the next few months.

Housing Executive Properties: Sold to Tenants

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive houses were sold to tenants in each of the last three financial years.

(AQW 6993/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The total number of Housing Executive properties sold to eligible tenants in the last three financial years is as follows:-

2008/09 – 54 properties

2009/10 – 272 properties

2010/11 – 249 properties

Housing Executive: Energy Brokering Scheme

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development what progress has been made on the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Energy Brokering Report-Feasibility Study.

(AQW 7006/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is evaluating the feasibility of an energy brokering scheme and it has been working on procurement documents in relation to this. However, there remain a number of legal, regulatory and practical issues that need to be examined before embarking on such a project. The Housing Executive is looking at a similar scheme already in place in Dundee to establish if it is practical to do a similar project here, or to implement a modified version that it is more appropriate for its tenants.

Housing Executive: Cheaper Energy for Tenants

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what progress has been made by the Housing Executive in securing cheaper energy for its tenants; and (ii) whether housing associations will be included in any bulk purchasing conducted by the Housing Executive.

(AQW 7007/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is actively evaluating the feasibility of an energy brokering scheme in relation to discounted electricity for its tenants. However, there remain a number of legal, regulatory and practical issues that need to be examined before embarking on such a project. The Housing Executive is looking at a similar scheme already in place in Dundee to establish it if practical to do a similar project here, or to implement a modified version that is more appropriate for its tenants. No decision has yet been made as to whether Housing Associations can take part in any scheme.

Housing: Repossession

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail how many properties previously owned by (i) the Housing Executive; and (ii) housing associations have been repossessed in each of the last four years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 7044/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as once the statutory periods for refunding discount or offering the property for re-sale to the Housing Executive or Housing Associations under the House Sales Scheme has expired, these bodies no longer have a legal interest registered on the title documents of the property and would not be notified by the lenders pursuing repossession that such action is taking place.

Housing: Repossession

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has considered re-buying previous Housing Executive or Housing Association owned properties that have been repossessed from private owners.

(AQW 7045/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My focus at this time remains on preventing the repossession in the first instance. Our mortgage debt advice service specifically aims to help those home owners whose debts threaten their ability to remain in their homes and I am pleased that even at this early stage, large numbers of people are benefitting from this service.

However, I am also aware of the blight that empty homes can cause in communities. If those empty homes, regardless of why they are empty, are in areas of housing need and can be brought back into meaningful use then we can support such acquisitions albeit by that stage it is already too late for the former home owner which is why I prefer to focus on prevention in the first instance.

Domestic Heating Oil: PAYG Pilot Scheme

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the pay as you go (PAYG) pilot scheme for domestic heating oil; (i) who owns the unused oil in domestic tanks equipped with the PAYG technology; and (ii) in the event of theft or other loss of the fuel, whether the supplier or consumer bears the risk.

(AQW 7049/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My department is working together with the Housing Executive, Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services to develop a pilot Pay as You Go option for people who rely on oil to heat their homes. For the period of the pilot, Carillion Energy Services will monitor oil levels in each householder's tank, buy oil when required and will own any unused oil. The householder will purchase the oil in blocks of credit, like they do with electricity and gas. Theft is a risk, and this will be minimised by tamper-proofing and alarms.

Housing Executive Properties: Unoccupied Dwellings

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what percentage of Housing Executive stock is currently empty.

(AQW 7087/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At the 31 December 2011 there were 2,242 vacant Housing Executive properties. This equates to 2.49% of their total stock. There are a number of reasons for a property being vacant such as awaiting relet, undergoing repairs, decanting purposes, pending sale/demolition and illegally occupied.

Construction Industry

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister for Social Development what action he has taken to support and underpin the construction industry; and what progress he has made on the establishment of a taskforce for the construction industry.

(AQW 7140/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Programme for Government committed my Department to delivering 8,000 new social and affordable homes in the next 4 years. This will be delivered with over £564m of grant from my Department that will be further complemented with private finance raised by Housing Associations in support of those targets. This direct financial support is significant given that for every £1 million invested in new house building, 12 jobs (7 direct and 5 indirect) are supported for a year.

The wider work of my Department in tackling Fuel Poverty and delivering high quality Public Realm and Environmental Improvement Schemes means we make a very significant contribution supporting the construction industry. However it is a responsibility that rests much wider than my own remit. For example, earlier this month I was one of 6 Executive Ministers who attended an All Party Working Group on the Construction Industry and alongside my Executive Colleagues we outlined the different contributions our respective Departments make in supporting the Industry. That meeting was useful in demonstrating not just our personal commitment, but the totality and cross cutting nature of our support and we agreed to meet again in that format in the coming months.

Fuel Allowance Initiative

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development, given the First Minister and deputy First Minister's announcement on the 8 December 2011 of a special payment of £75, through the Fuel Allowance Initiative, for people in receipt of Income Support, Employment Support Allowance and Job Seekers Allowance, to outline (i) when the payments will begin; and (ii) how potential recipients will be identified.

(AQW 7143/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My department was designated by OFMdfM to make a Fuel Allowance Payment to people in receipt of Pension Credit, Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance Income Based or Income Related Employment Support Allowance on one day in the qualifying week from 12 to 18 December 2011. The Social Security Agency is currently working with suppliers to correctly identify all eligible customers and ensure they are paid securely. The payments are being made by the Social Security Agency and will be paid in February 2012.

Business Improvement Districts

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the workings of the proposed Business Improvement Districts; (ii) when they will be operational; and (iii) what resources will be available to the districts.

(AQW 7178/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) will assist towards the drive to regenerate and improve city and town centres in Northern Ireland, by allowing businesses within a defined area to vote for collective investment (through a levy paid by each business) to improve the commercial environment within their area.
Proposals will be developed by local business-led partnerships, usually in co-operation with the local council. All businesses within a potential BID area will have the opportunity to vote on the proposals before the levy is imposed.
- (ii) The proposals have been subjected to a public consultation exercise and I plan to have the Primary legislation, which will set out the broad parameters for BIDs, in place by the end of this year. This will be followed by secondary legislation and guidance from the Department. However, prospective BID areas do not have to wait until legislation is in place before starting to make their plans
- (iii) The BID levy revenue is the core funding for the BID area. It will be a matter for each business-led partnership to determine the amount of levy to be applied to each business and the overall resources available to spend in the BID area.

Benefits: Monthly Payments

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for his assessment of the impact on claimants of the move from fortnightly to monthly benefit payments; and (ii) what discussions he has had with the Department of Work and Pensions on this issue. **(AQW 7210/11-15)**

Mr McCausland:

- (i) A key element of the new Universal Credit is the introduction of a single monthly payment, which should better reflect the receipt of a salary and help prepare people for the transition off benefit into work. The change in the frequency of payment should also help customers move from more costly weekly and fortnightly budgeting. I recognise that the introduction of monthly payments will be a significant change for some customers and they may require support to make the adjustment to budgeting over a longer period of time. My Department is committed to ensuring that suitable support systems are in place for the introduction of Universal Credit so that those customers who may experience difficulties with the transition will receive the help they need. Officials are currently actively engaged in considering the potential impact that the change in payment frequency will have in Northern Ireland and in identifying the support mechanisms that will be required.
- (ii) I have met with Lord Freud, the Department for Work and Pensions Minister for Welfare Reform, to discuss the Welfare Reform programme including the proposed introduction of Universal Credit. Officials from my Department are also represented on the Department for Work and Pensions Support and Exceptions Working Group. One of the issues being considered by this Group is the impact for customers of the change to monthly payment under Universal Credit. My officials are actively engaged with their Department for Work and Pensions counterparts as I seek to ensure the needs of vulnerable customers are taken into account.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Recording Equipment

Mr Wells asked the Assembly Commission why it is not possible to switch off recording equipment whilst private meetings are being held in rooms 29 and 30 of Parliament Buildings. **(AQW 6587/11-15)**

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): There is a range of recording equipment in Rooms 29 and 30, but it is only recording proceedings in the room when the "red button" on the committee table is pressed. If the red button is not pressed, the equipment is switched on but not recording proceedings. Apart from the red button, it is not advisable to switch off any other equipment in the room as it can cause damage to the system.

Portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission, in light the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, whether the Commission will require the return of the Assembly's portrait of Her Majesty so that it can be suitably displayed within Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 7197/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission was approached by a representative from Hillsborough Castle in 2006 requesting the loan of the Lydia de Burgh portrait of Her Majesty the Queen. I understand that the portrait initially hung in Her Majesty's private chambers and is currently on display in the Candlestick Hall. Given that Hillsborough Castle is the Queens' official residence in Northern Ireland and that the portrait was given on indefinite loan, the Commission has no plans to ask for it to be returned.

I do hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however should you require any supplementary information I would be very happy to assist with your enquiry.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 10 February 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Public Realm Works: Ebrington Barracks, Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the progress of the public realm works at Ebrington Barracks, Derry.

(AQW 6206/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The public realm works at Ebrington are substantially complete. A phased approach to the construction of the public realm has been taken.

Phase One was opened in June 2011 to coincide with the launch of the Peace Bridge that allowed access through the site via St Columbs Road/Browning Drive. Phase Two will provide public access from the Limavady Road via Cunningham Square leading to The Square at Ebrington Parade Ground which will be officially opened on 14 February 2012.

The final phase of work running from the Star Fort wall down to the Foyle River will be completed later in the year.

Social Tariffs

Mr Girvan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether a social tariff will be introduced as a priority within the Programme for Government.

(AQW 6539/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The draft programme for Government includes proposals to develop a range of initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty. The Department for Social Development will lead on this specific area but this topic will also be an aspect of the task we set for the Advisory Group on Financial Hardship that we propose to establish in February 2012.

In addition, to alleviate the pressure of fuel poverty especially amongst the elderly, those in most need and others in need as a result of medical conditions, special payments will be paid from the Social Protection Fund. We hope that this will offer some short-term assistance to those most in need. We expect payments to issue by February 2012. We have prioritised payments to the most vulnerable to ensure an important contribution to addressing the need whilst recognising the pressures on public finances

Taken together these plans will contribute both practically in the short term and strategically in the medium term to address this key issue. The issue of fuel poverty remains a high priority for the Executive as a whole.

However, we recognise that strategic actions are required. We will be examining the issue of social tariffs along with a range of other proposals.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made with the key objective to establish linkages with other thematic strategies, such as competitiveness and climate change, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6781/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Barroso Taskforce Working Group includes in its membership the lead officials from each of the four working groups pursuing the themes outlined in "Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12". This establishes and reinforces links between the four thematic strategies.

In addition, the Social Cohesion thematic strategy includes the lead from the Competition and Employment thematic strategy to encourage linkages between them.

A dedicated officer has been appointed to specifically focus on each of the four themes and will move to Brussels mid February. These Desk Officers will be working closely to achieve their thematic aims and will collaborate to identify opportunities that will contribute across all of the themes.

Children's Strategy

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the internal review of the structures supporting the Children's Strategy covered the role, purpose and functioning of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People, and if so, what were the conclusions of the review.

(AQW 6989/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Our consideration of the structures supporting the Children's Strategy includes the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. When this is complete, we will make proposals to the Executive.

Northern Ireland Racial Equality Strategy 2005-2010

Mr McDevitt asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the Northern Ireland Racial Equality Strategy 2005 – 2010 and the services provided for asylum seekers and refugees, (i) for their assessment of how joined-up the services are in practice; (ii) whether there are any areas in the implementation of the strategy which cause concern; (iii) what resources their Department has made available for this area of work, (iv) whether resources will be increased; and (v) what steps they are taking to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are getting the services they need.

(AQW 7027/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As part of the development of a new Strategy to replace "A Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2005-2010", a review of the existing mechanisms and structures was carried out to identify systemic and strategic strengths and weaknesses of the 2005-2010 Strategy.

This review, as well as the requirements identified by our Racial Equality Forum and Racial Equality Panel, will influence and inform delivery mechanisms, such as joined-up services, as well as the details and targets for the new Strategy.

These details and targets will impact on the resources available and we will ensure that proper governance mechanisms are put in place to achieve the successful delivery of the new Strategy.

Immigration, and consequently asylum and refugee issues, remains a reserved matter being administered by the UK Border Agency. However, we will continue to work with those authorities to ensure that immigration policy shows a regional flexibility that takes full account of the needs and concerns that we have.

We intend to continue our support for groups in the sector which have direct contact with asylum seekers and refugees.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in their Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7061/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:

- (i) During 2000/2001, no staff carried out trade union duties during facility time.
- (ii) During 2005/2006, a total of five days (full time equivalent 0.02) of trade union duties were carried out for NIPSA during facility time; there were no duties carried out for any other trade union.
- (iii) During 2010/2011, a total of five days (full time equivalent 0.02) of trade union duties were carried out for NIPSA during facility time; there were no duties carries out for any other trade union.

Construction Industry

Ms Ritchie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action they have taken to support and underpin the construction industry; and what progress they have made on the establishment of a taskforce for the construction industry.

(AQW 7141/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We recognise the difficult situation facing the construction industry and have worked to ensure that steps are being taken to help the sector within the resources available to the administration.

Through the Investment Strategy 2011-2021 (ISNI), the Executive is providing a £5 billion stimulus to the construction industry and related sectors of the economy over the next four year period. Investment will be targeted at those public works that are more labour intensive, such as roads maintenance, refurbishment, upgrades and extensions, as research shows that these typically support significantly more jobs as similar value works that require the purchase of land and specialist materials.

The ISNI was published for public consultation on 17 November 2011, and we would encourage the construction industry to participate in this. To ensure that small and medium size enterprises are able to bid for public works, the ISNI website, www.isni.gov.uk maintains a database of projects being delivered through the ISNI, which enables companies to identify opportunities to bid for contracts.

There are already close links with the construction industry through the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland. This is a strategically focused interface between representatives from the construction industry, the Central Procurement Directorate and Centres of Procurement Expertise.

The forum has taken forward a number of actions and initiatives to support and underpin the construction industry. These include agreement of proposals on the three strands of sustainability: economic; social; and environmental.

There are no plans to establish an alternative taskforce for the construction industry in addition to the current arrangements.

Good Relations: Funding

Mr Moutray asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the level of funding their Department has allocated to good relations which targeted, or involved, young people and youth workers in the Upper Bann area in each of the last three years (i) in total; and (ii) in each council area.

(AQW 7166/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM does not directly fund youth work as this is the responsibility of other departments. We do, however, provide funding towards good relations and summer intervention work which either target or involve young people and youth workers. Both Craigavon and Banbridge District Councils participate in our District Councils Good Relations Programme and they have provided the following funding for youth-focused work over the last three years:

	11/12*	10/11	09/10
Craigavon Borough Council	£3,000	£8,000	£4,000
Banbridge District Council	£9,100	£8,750	£9,400

* The figure stated for each district council area in 2011/12 is the total amount of expenditure that is anticipated at 31 March 2012.

Public Bike Hire Scheme for Belfast

Mrs Cochrane asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether the Public Bike Hire Scheme for Belfast continues to receive financial assistance from the Strategic Investment Board; and (ii) how much financial assistance it has allocated to the Scheme in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7271/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Public Bike Hire Scheme for Belfast does not continue to receive funding from the Strategic Investment Board (SIB). The project in which SIB was involved in association with Belfast City Council and the Department for Regional Development was completed in October 2011.

In the last three years the following amounts of funding were allocated by SIB to the project:-

	£	
2009/10	NIL	
2010/11	31,482 + VAT	£37,495
2011/12	4,370 + VAT	£5,243

European Liaison

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to list the grades of staff appointed by their Department to liaise, in any capacity, with the European institutions in Brussels and/or Strasbourg.

(AQW 7276/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are responsible for the Office of the NI Executive in Brussels (ONIEB) whose main purpose is to monitor relevant EU policy developments and to ensure that our interests are taken into account in the work of the EU Institutions. We employ 5 staff in ONIEB. The numbers and grades of staff are as follows:

- 1 Assistant Secretary
- 1 Principal (on loan from Department of Agriculture and Rural Development)
- 1 Deputy Principal
- 2 Administrative staff (locally recruited)

In addition, four 'Desk Officers' have recently been appointed to support the work of the Inter-Departmental Barroso Task Force. The posts will be located principally in Brussels in the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive. Those appointed will each be allocated to a specific policy area, namely, Innovation and Technology, Competitiveness and Employment, Climate and Energy and Social Cohesion.

The four officials are currently preparing to move to Brussels and are expected to take up their posts mid to end February 2012.

Good Relations: Funding

Mr Storey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the level of funding their Department has allocated to good relations which targeted or involved young people and youth workers in the North Antrim area, in each of the last three years (i) in total; and (ii) in each council area.

(AQW 7321/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM does not directly fund youth work as this is the responsibility of other departments. We do, however, provide funding towards good relations and summer intervention work that targets or involves young people and youth workers. Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle District Councils participate in our District Councils Good Relations Programme.

It is anticipated that over the period 2009-12 expenditure by these district councils on good relations projects targeting or involving young people and youth workers will amount to a total of £109,691. The expenditure, broken down annually and by council area, is as follows:

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12*
Ballymena	£16,861	£17,022	£16,163
Ballymoney	£11,150	£11,275	£11,100
Moyle	£11,500	£ 7,400	£ 7,220

* The figure stated for each district council area in 2011/12 is the total amount of expenditure that is anticipated at 31 March 2012.

Youth Work: Summer Intervention Funding

Mr Storey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the level of funding their Department has allocated to summer intervention work, aimed at youth work, in the North Antrim area in each of the last three years (i) in total; and (ii) in each council area.

(AQW 7322/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM does not directly fund youth work as this is the responsibility of other departments. We do, however, provide funding towards good relations and summer intervention work that targets or involves young people and youth workers. Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle District Councils participate in our District Councils Good Relations Programme.

Funding in relation to Summer Intervention in these district council areas falls within the good relations expenditure totalling £109,691, tabulated below. It is not possible to further disaggregate these figures.

	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12*
Ballymena	£16,861	£17,022	£16,163
Ballymoney	£11,150	£11,275	£11,100
Moyle	£11,500	£ 7,400	£ 7,220

* The figure stated for each district council area in 2011/12 is the total amount of expenditure that is anticipated at 31 March 2012.

10-year Strategy for Children and Young People

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 6367/11-15, why they have no plans to conduct the mid-term review of the 10-year Strategy for Children and Young People, when it states in their Department's Business Plan 2011/12 'By end June 2011 complete mid-term review of Strategy for Children and Young People'.

(AQW 7512/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: As indicated in our response to the previous question, the Department has no plans to carry out a mid-term review of the 10 Year Strategy for Children and Young People. The commitment included in the Department's Business Plan refers to the work OFMDFM is currently undertaking to review progress against the indicators in the Strategy. This work will underpin the formulation of a new Action Plan designed to implement the Strategy over the period 2012-2016.

EU Funding

Mr A Maginness asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress in achieving the target of increasing the drawdown of European funding by 20 percent.

(AQO 1215/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In December 2010, we joined with President Barroso in a commitment to renew the Barroso Task Force. We have delivered on that commitment.

The Executive agreed its 2011-12 European priorities on 16 June, just five weeks into the term of our new administration; and since then all Executive departments have been working towards their implementation, including the 20% target.

Up to the end of December, departments had drawn down £3m of EU non-structural funds against this target and applications for a further £33m worth of funding have been submitted.

Departments have made significant progress in building capacity and increasing their engagement in EU policies, funding programmes and networks of value to Northern Ireland.

Of course, there will be further progress to report – we are not yet at the end of this financial year.

We are confident we have made a good start on meeting the Executive's four-year target and that the groundwork we have undertaken will deliver even greater success over the next three years.

Centenaries

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what discussions their Department has had with the British and Irish Governments regarding the decade of centenaries.

(AQO 1218/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: This year marks the beginning of a decade of centenary anniversaries of seminal events and significant milestones in the shared history of the UK and Ireland. The 'decade of centenaries' will provide an opportunity for everyone to achieve a greater understanding of our shared past and how it shapes identities and relationships today.

It is important that these historic events are commemorated in a respectful manner and within the context of our efforts to build a peaceful, stable and shared future here.

In recognition of the international significance of the coming events and their potential economic and cultural benefits, we have raised the issue of commemorations with Executive colleagues as well as the UK and Irish governments.

The subject was discussed at our recent meeting with the Secretary of State, and Irish Tanaiste, where we agreed that our administrations would work closely throughout this period to develop and maintain consistent approaches for the mutual benefit of all our people.

We have also met with our Ministerial colleagues in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, to take stock of progress to date and to ensure that our efforts at Executive level remain in close alignment.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Common Agricultural Policy: Reform

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given her Department's role as a competent authority, for her assessment of how the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy will contribute to the implementation of measures in the wider countryside, as required by the Birds Directive, particularly Article 4(4), and the Habitat Directive, Annex 1.

(AQW 6849/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): As discussions on reform of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) are still at an early stage, it is not yet possible to fully assess how it will contribute to the implementation of measures in the wider countryside.

However, the European Commission proposals published on 12 October 2011 include an agri-environment programme as a compulsory measure of CAP. This may provide a mechanism for my Department to fund measures to protect and enhance Natura 2000 land, which is designated to help meet the aims of the Birds and Habitat Directives.

Further to this, and with regard to Article 4(4) of the Birds Directive, all farmers receiving EU funding through my Department must also observe the rules of Cross-Compliance, which aim to conserve natural habitats.

The Department of Environment (DOE) is the lead department in relation to the Birds and Habitats Directives. Under the Habitats Directive there is a requirement to have any plan or project assessed. Therefore, a proposed scheme resulting from CAP reform must be assessed to ensure compliance with the Habitats Directive. My Department will work closely with DOE as CAP reform progresses and on the design of specific agri-environment measures for the next Rural Development Programme.

Farmers: Top-up Payment

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she would support a top-up payment to farmers who farm in designated sites, to help compensate them for their extra work and management as a result of working in an environmentally sensitive manner.

(AQW 6850/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department offers support to farmers who manage designated sites through the delivery of agri-environment schemes. Farmers participating in these schemes receive funding for managing the land in an environmentally sensitive manner. The prioritisation criteria for entry to the new Countryside Management Scheme (NICMS) gives priority to applicants who farm in designated sites such as Areas of Special Scientific Interest and Natura 2000 sites.

The Department of Environment has the remit for designating special areas of land for protection.

Domestic Pets and Animals Killed by Hunting Dogs

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail, for each of the last three years, the number of reported cases of domestic pets and animals being killed by hunting dogs during fox and stag hunts; and the number of prosecutions which have resulted from these reports.

(AQW 6966/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department does not maintain records of reported cases of domestic pets and animals being killed by hunting dogs during fox and stag hunts.

My Department's responsibilities towards animals in the wild are very limited and do not include any controls over the hunting or taking of wild animals and birds, or powers of entry for their protection.

My Department does keep information relating to the control of dogs which is legislated for by the Dogs Order 1983, as amended. Implementation of the Order is the responsibility of Councils here who provide the Department with information relating to its enforcement.

The Dogs (Amendment) Act 2011 amended the 1983 Order to make it an offence to keep a dog that attacks and injures a domestic pet.

As part of the implementation of the Act, my officials are currently working with Councils to review the information they provide to my Department, including figures relating to new offences that Councils will be required to collect after 2 April 2012 when the Act is fully commenced.

Potato Industry: Support Measures

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her Department will introduce additional support measures for the potato industry.

(AQW 6982/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department continues to provide a wide range of support measures for the potato sector. CAFRE provides technical and business competence and bench marking programmes. Through the Seed Potato Certification scheme my Department also provides assistance to the export trade through on farm inspection of seed and ware potatoes and the issue of phytosanitary certificates.

As part of the Rural Development Programme, the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme provides capital support to potato processors, including those producers engaged in processing activities, and this scheme has re-opened for applications on 30th January.

In Conjunction with the Countryside Agri-Rural Partnership my Department manages the Supply Chain Development Programme (SCDP). This programme supports farmers and growers working together with others to improve the rewards from their supply chain. Funded through the Rural Development Programme the SCDP provides the services and expertise of a professional business facilitator together with funding for training, business tools, professional advice or services and also study tours linked to the development of the groups' needs. This programme is open to groups including those involved in the potato sector, who wish to work together with other supply chains partners to explore how they could improve the supply chain for their products

I am fully aware of the current over supply position and the lack of market opportunity to take up surpluses, such as was the case in 2010 to Russia, and fully appreciates the difficulties and problems for local growers that this may be causing. In the current economic climate, DARD, along with other Government Departments continues to face significant financial constraints. In these circumstances I have no plans to bring forward additional support measures to the potato sector.

Leitrim River: Feasibility Study

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made on the feasibility study on the Leitrim River.

(AQW 7021/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Maghera, Co Down Feasibility Study is on course to be completed by the end of March 2012. Once the findings have been examined, my DARD Rivers Agency officials will make it publicly available on the department's website and will issue a copy to you.

Lurgan Agricultural Show

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what level of funding her Department has provided to the Lurgan Agricultural Show in each of the last five years; and what plans she has to fund this year's 100th anniversary show.
(AQW 7029/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Between 1 January 2007 and 31 December 2011 my Department provided £1,400 in funding for the Lurgan Agricultural Show.

This is broken down as follows -

2011	2010	2009	2008	2007
£225	£250	£300	£300	£325

Letters inviting the organisers of local agricultural shows to apply for funding are issued annually, with funding allocated when all applications have been received and assessed. I hope that in this, its centenary year, Lurgan Show will benefit as it has in previous years, from DARD support.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in her Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.
(AQW 7089/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As part of the NICS Central Whitley arrangements, a small number of full-time equivalent staff are attached to NIPSA through the Seconded Officers Scheme. These individuals carry out trade union duties on behalf of NIPSA members in DARD.

The Department does not retain records for the 2000/01 financial year. In 2005/06 there were 4 DARD staff on full-time secondment to NIPSA and no full-time equivalent staff in its arm's length bodies. In 2010/11 there were 4 DARD staff on full-time secondment to NIPSA with a further 1 member of staff in its arm's length bodies on full-time secondment to NIPSA.

Forestry Service: Annual Costs

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for a breakdown of the annual operation costs associated with the (i) commercial undertakings; and (ii) leisure undertakings of the Forestry Service.
(AQW 7097/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The annual cost of managing Forest Service plantations is £8.8 million, which provides for the sustainable management of our forests and woodlands to meet the needs for wood production and economic activity, public access and environmental protection while at the same time safeguarding the resource for future generations.

The annual costs of providing access for leisure undertakings, including commercial camping and caravanning activities is £1.7 million. Of the £1.7 million, the cost of commercial leisure undertakings is £0.4 million.

These costs are broken down in the attached table.

2010/11 Expenditure	Direct Spend £k	Salaries & Wages £k	GAE/ T&S £k	Capital £k	Total £k
Forest Management	2,358	5,388	517	551	8,814
Leisure - Commercial	76	257	98	-	431
Leisure – Non-commercial	200	990	118	-	1,308

Forestry Service: Resource Accounts

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the rationale for amalgamating the accounts of the commercial division and the leisure division of the Forestry Service.
(AQW 7098/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Forest Service is directed by the Department of Finance and Personnel to prepare its Resource Accounts in line with the requirements of the Government Financial Reporting Manual (FRoM).

There is no requirement to provide a separate set of Resource Accounts for services for which we charge a fee, such as for leisure services. FReM says that executive agencies should provide in their financial statements an analysis of the services for which a fee is charged, with a statement that the information is provided for fees and charges purposes.

In addition, as Forest Service charges fees for recreation services, Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) guidance applies, which says that a Memorandum Trading Account (MTA) must be maintained for those services. The MTA is prepared annually and is available on request.

Forestry Service: Tourism Spend

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much, as a percentage of its annual budget, the Forestry Service has allocated specifically to tourism in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7099/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am aware that Forest Service managed woodlands already deliver significant recreational and tourism benefits and that the potential exists for further development particularly through working with other recreation and tourism providers.

This is in line with my wish to see forests used more widely for safe, responsible enjoyment while also contributing to tourism growth. The forest recreation strategy acknowledges that we will have to work with partners to realise the full potential of forests to deliver against wider objectives such as health, tourism, education and sport and my officials are working with other government agencies, local authorities and other recreational providers to ensure that opportunities are realised.

To assess tourism potential, my officials in Forest Service are also involved in a joint initiative with NI Tourist Board, carrying out a study to analyse the opportunities for forests in relation to tourism development.

Camping and caravanning activity in forests falls within a definition of tourism as an activity which involves an overnight stay, and is treated for budgetary and accounting purposes as Commercial Recreation.

The budget for Commercial Recreation in 2009/10 was 3% of the total Departmental Expenditure Limit (DEL) expenditure budget, excluding income, non-cash items and capital expenditure. The equivalent figure for 2010/11 was 4% and for 2011/12 also 4%.

Campsite Management and Administration

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she expects that the responsibility for campsite management and administration will remain centralised within her Department for the remainder of the current budgetary period.

(AQW 7100/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My officials in Forest Service have been working in partnership with the Strategic Investment Board, to explore market opportunities for investment and service delivery across the forest estate, including the provision of caravan and camping. A Business Case for testing commercial opportunities in renewable energy and leisure, including caravan and camping, has been completed and is currently going through the approvals process.

At this stage it is not possible to say whether responsibility for campsite management and administration will be retained within the Forest Service for the remainder of the budgetary period.

Chinese Lanterns

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) for her assessment of the damage caused to the agriculture sector as a result of Chinese lanterns; and (ii) how many animals have died, or been injured, due to the consumption of Chinese lanterns in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 7159/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has not received any reports of damage caused to the agriculture sector, or animals injured, as a result of the use of Chinese lanterns here.

In response to an Oral Assembly Question in November 2011, I stated that the farming community should be aware of the potential for Chinese lanterns to cause fire damage and injury to livestock and called on farmers to remain vigilant particularly at those times when such devices are commonly used, or during spells of dry weather.

Capital Assets: Disposal

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the capital assets that are to be disposed of in each of the next three years.

(AQW 7190/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that the Department is working closely with the Strategic Investment Board's (SIB) Asset Management Unit to develop a plan for capital asset disposals up to the end of 2015.

At this stage no firm commitments have been made to dispose of assets in the next three years.

Horses: Exports

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) how many horses have been exported to (a) Great Britain; (b) the Republic of Ireland; and (c) the rest of the EU in each of the last three years; and (ii) whether there is any data recorded about the purpose of these exports, particularly in relation to the consumption of horse meat.

(AQW 7194/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Department does not hold the information requested. The export of horses to Britain, the south and France is governed by the Tripartite Agreement. This agreement permits registered horses to move more freely between these Countries. Specifically, with the exception of horses for slaughter, these horses can move between these countries without the need for an Intra Trade Animal Health Certificate (ITAHC) or pre-notification of the move to the Department.

Exports of horses to other member States are required to be accompanied by an ITAHC and in these cases the exporter applies to the Department for this document. However details of exports accompanied by ITAHCs are not recorded locally but are held centrally on the EU TRACES database. Information on such exports can be obtained from that database however the information could not be provided within the timescale of this Assembly Question.

Dogs: Hunting

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what measures are in place to restrict hunting with dogs on private, third party land; and (ii) for her assessment of whether these measures offer adequate protection for landowners.

(AQW 7200/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Hunting is not regarded as an agricultural activity, it is not exclusively carried out on agricultural land and the fox is not regarded as an agricultural animal. There is no legislation in place to regulate or ban hunting in the north of Ireland. As you know, a Private Member's Bill to ban hunting with dogs was considered by the Assembly in 2010 and it fell at Second Stage. I am not aware that the Executive has any plans to regulate or introduce a ban on hunting. Under the Dogs Order 1983, dogs are exempt from the control provisions on certain roads and on land while they are being used in a pack of hounds.

My Department has responsibility for the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, Section 53 of which specifically exempts from its provisions the coursing or hunting of any animal, other than a protected animal. This provision does not legitimise hunting or coursing, but excludes these activities from the offences of cruelty contained within the Act.

EU Protected Food Names Scheme

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what strategy her Department has in place to attain an EU Protected Geographical Indication for more local food products.

(AQW 7202/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am sure you will join me in congratulating the Potato Stakeholder Forum's recent successful application to register New Season Comber Potatoes under the EU Protected Food Names Scheme.

To build on this success, alongside the recent successful Lough Neagh Eels application, my officials continue to provide advice and guidance to a number of interested parties regarding the potential for registration of new products.

My officials hope to plan some Protected Food Name promotional activity at this year's Balmoral Show, which would be an ideal opportunity to showcase recent PGI successes and to promote the scheme generally.

I have seen at first hand the positive work carried out to deliver Lough Neagh Eels and New Season Comber Potatoes PGI's and I am hopeful that Armagh Bramley Apples will shortly be following suit.

My Department plans to contact local District Councils to encourage them to promote this scheme within their districts and we shall also be writing to local food producer groups again to bring the scheme to their attention and to encourage them to consider if it would be beneficial to them.

In the wider context, you may be aware that my Department is working with DETI/InvestNI to establish an industry-led Food Strategy Board. Its role will be to develop an agri-food strategy to plan the growth of the sector up to 2020. I am sure in this context, the importance of nurturing the availability and development of local quality produce will also be considered.

Tree-planting: Funding

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) what measures and financial assistance she has put in place to encourage tree-planting; (ii) how she intends to promote tree-planting through liaison with the Woodland Trust; and (iii) how her Department is participating in the Jubilee Woods Project, particularly through schools' programmes.

(AQW 7214/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- i My Department provides support for tree planting through the Woodland Grant Scheme and the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme. The Woodland Grant Scheme provides support to plant new woodland at a rate of £2,400 per hectare for broadleaves and £1,600 per hectare for conifer. In addition, on agriculture land, the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme provides an annual payment for up to fifteen years to compensate for the loss of agriculture income. The payments for this scheme range from £60-£290 per hectare. Those people claiming Single Farm Payment (SFP) from 2008 can plant their land and continue to claim SFP, as well as their Woodland Grant Scheme and Farm Woodland Premium Scheme payments.
- ii I have had meetings recently with the Woodland Trust and other stakeholders to discuss ways of increasing the rate of planting. I have also announced, in the Assembly, that my Department's Forest Service will review support arrangements for planting in the context of CAP Reform and the Commission's proposals in the Rural Development Regulation. A group will be set up to assist with this and will comprise of a variety of woodland stakeholders, including Woodland Trust.
- iii Carrickfergus Borough Council, working with Woodland Trust, has successfully applied for funding under the Woodland Grant Scheme and Farm Woodland Premium Scheme to create a 25 hectare wood at Whitehead in Co Antrim.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she can offer an assurance that (i) permission for hydraulic fracturing on her Department's land will not be given; and (ii) her Department's land will not be sold to any company which has the intention of using the land for hydraulic fracturing.

(AQW 7215/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Any request to carry out hydraulic fracturing on DARD land, or to purchase DARD land for that purpose, would be considered taking account of concerns about the process of hydraulic fracturing and its implications for DARD policies. No request for access to or the purchase of DARD land for the process of hydraulic fracturing has been received.

My Department has no role in regulating the process of gas exploration or extraction, other than as a statutory consultee. However, I have strong reservations about the process of hydraulic fracturing and its potential impact on the environment on the island of Ireland.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what direct, or indirect, funding her Department provides for neglected or cruelly treated animals.

(AQW 7251/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Animal welfare in the north of Ireland is regulated under the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 and the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, as currently commenced.

My Department is responsible for enforcement in relation to livestock on agricultural land and will continue to work to prevent cases of cruelty and neglect concerning farmed animals. That enforcement activity is funded from within DARD's budget. From 2 April 2012, my Department will have new powers to seize farmed animals which are suffering or are likely to suffer, if their circumstances do not change. Currently only the PSNI has powers of seizure in relation to animal welfare incidents.

In addition, from 2 April 2012, Councils here will have responsibility for enforcement in respect of non-farmed animals under the new Welfare of Animals Act 2011. My Department is providing annual funding to assist Councils implement their new role, starting with £404k funding this year to meet Councils' requirement in the preparation period. Next year, £780k funding is available, which increases by £20k for each of the remaining 2 years in this budget period.

Feral Cats

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what control measures can be used to manage or curtail the number of feral cats in residential areas.

(AQW 7284/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has no powers to manage or curtail the number of feral cats. My Department has responsibility for the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 and the Welfare of Animals Act 2011, as currently commenced. Under this legislation it is an offence to cause an animal, including feral cats, any unnecessary suffering.

I understand that some District Council Environmental Health Officers do occasionally receive reports of feral cats in residential areas. Councils have no statutory duty regarding the control of feral cats and I have been informed that such reports are generally referred to the Cats Protection League.

Poultry Farmers: Compensation

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration her Department has given to compensating poultry farmers who have had to cease production, due to the high cost of compliance with the EU Directive on the Welfare of Laying Hens.

(AQW 7287/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I must stress that the EU Welfare of Laying Hens Directive was introduced to improve the welfare conditions for laying hens, as a result of concern over the use of battery cages. I am fully aware of the very significant cost of converting to new systems of egg production. I have no plans to compensate producers who have decided not to convert to new systems that meet the EU requirements; that would be unfair to all those producers who have invested heavily to make the necessary changes.

I very much appreciate the difficulties facing poultry producers generally at this time. I can assure you that my Department has looked widely at all the funding options available to support modernisation in the sector. As a result, funding was made available to poultry producers under the Farm Modernisation Programme (FMP) Tranche 2. The eligible items included plant, machinery and equipment and other items that could contribute to modernising production systems for poultry producers. The maximum rate of grant assistance under Tranche 2 was 40% up to a maximum payment of £4k per applicant. I am pleased that there were 60 successful applicants, who indicated that their main farming activity was 'Poultry', who were awarded £191k of financial support under Tranche 2 of the Farm Modernisation Programme.

My Department has also made funding in the region of £1 million available to the egg industry through the Processing and Marketing Grant Scheme and two local egg packers have benefited through this scheme.

Single Farm Payment Scheme

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQO 784/11-15, whether her Department has researched the option of issuing Single Farm Payments prior to all the checks being completed; and whether this option will be implemented.

(AQW 7292/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: There is no facility within current Commission Regulations for payments under the Single Farm Payment (SFP) Scheme to be made before all the relevant administrative checks, including on-the-spot inspections, have been carried out.

There are two scenarios in which SFP Payments may be made in two steps.

First, advance payments of 50% may be made between 16 October and 30 November of the scheme year concerned, with the balance paid on or after 1 December.

Second, an initial 'instalment' may be made at any time during the payment window (1 December to 30 June), with the balance following later within the same period.

In both cases all necessary controls (including all on-the-spot inspections) must be finalised before an advance or instalment can be made. This is so that payments can issue without the risk of making overpayments to the farmer. It is not within the scope of the EU Regulations to allow part payment of SFP where controls have not been completed or if any particular issue was holding up an application.

I am examining the scope for more timely payments in future, which depend on making substantial changes to our payment and inspection processes and systems.

PPE 'Cessation of Interceptor Mixed Stock Fisheries on North Atlantic Salmon not Achieving their Conservation Limits'

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 6137/11-15, when she expects this report to be released to (i) the Assembly Library; (ii) MLAs; and (iii) the general public.

(AQW 7296/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The primary purpose of Post Project Evaluations (PPE) is to examine the outturn of a project, programme or policy, and to ensure that the lessons learned are fed back into the decision-making process. PPEs are not, as a matter of routine, released to the Assembly Library, MLAs or the general public.

However, sponsor departments and the Loughs Agency are currently working on finalising the PPE, and it is anticipated that the PPE in question will be completed in the coming months. Once the report has been finalised the Loughs Agency, as authors of the report, will consider releasing the document upon request.

Annesley Arboretum, Castlewellan

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action will she take to restore the Annesley Arboretum, Buildings and Gardens in Castlewellan.

(AQW 7411/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since the Adjournment Debate in the Assembly on 17 January 2012, I have visited the Arboretum and Gardens at Castlewellan to see the situation for myself and to talk to potential partners who are interested in working with Forest Service to move the matter forward.

My officials in Forest Service are currently engaging with relevant stakeholders, funders and interested parties to scope a suitable restoration project and devise a long term plan to sustain the future of the Arboretum within the context of the Forest Park.

Horse and Greyhound Racing and Breeding

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much her Department has spent on (i) horse racing and breeding; and (ii) greyhound racing and breeding, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7434/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Currently, the two racecourses in the north receive financial support through DARD's administration of the Horse Racing Fund (HRF). All persons who intend to apply for a bookmaker's licence or a bookmaking office licence are required to make an annual contribution to the HRF, as determined by DARD. The HRF provides financial assistance for prize money, security and technical services and some capital items.

Funding released to the two racecourses, in the north, in each of the last three calendar years was:

	2009	2010	2011
Total	£512,328.26	£609,950.08	£644,861.71

My Department has had no role in respect of funding for horse breeding and therefore no monetary outlay. Greyhound racing and breeding does not come under the remit of DARD.

Rural Development Programme: North East Region

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how much each Council within the North East Region Rural Development cluster has received in grant aid in each of the last four years; and to detail each Council's list of funded projects.

(AQW 7470/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Axis 3 measures of the NI Rural Development Programme 2007-2013 is delivered on the ground by seven council clusters. The North East Region (NER) cluster is made up of Ballymena, Ballymoney, Coleraine, Larne and Moyle Councils.

Under Axis 3 of the NI Rural Development Programme Councils are eligible to apply for funding under measures 3.3 tourism, 3.4 basic services, 3.5 village renewal and 3.6 heritage.

To date each council in the NER area has been awarded grant under Axis 3 as follows;

Ballymena	Ballymoney	Coleraine	Larne	Moyle
£54,612	£5,000	£42,517	£188,785	£597,434

The table below details projects for which funding has been awarded in each council area;

Ballymena Borough Council

Project	Measure
Myths & Legends Podcasts	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Creating a Cleaner Greener Tourist Environment	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Glenravel Village Renewal Part 2	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development

Ballymoney Borough Council

Project	Measure
Dalriada Drives Feasibility Study	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities

Coleraine Borough Council

Project	Measure
Orientation & Interpretative Project, Castlerock	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Food Tourism Scoping	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Articlave Village Plan	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Macosquin Village Plan	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development

Larne Borough Council

Project	Measure
Creating A Clean, Green, Smart Tourist Environment	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Medieval Churches Project	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Construction of a Covered BBQ and Event Area within Carnfunnock Country Park	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Heritage led 'treasure trail' through Glenarm Village	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities

Moyle District Council

Project	Measure
GUNAGH PLAY AREA	Measure 3.4: basic services for the economy and rural population
Ballintoy Village Plan	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Cushendun Village Plan	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Mosside Village Plan	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Hamill Terrace, Bushmills	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Facilitation of Village Renewal and Development in the North east Rural Development Area	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Moyle District Council Public Realm Projects	Measure 3.3: encouragement of tourist activities
Waterfoot Village Improvement Scheme	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Cushendall Village Improvement Scheme	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development
Village Renewal Facilitation/Animation in the NER Area	Measure 3.5: village renewal and development

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Sport Matters: Capital Projects

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the progress of delivering the Sport Matters' capital projects at (i) Moneyslane Football Club, Banbridge; (ii) Wallace High School, Lisburn; and (iii) Dromore First Presbyterian Church. **(AQW 6949/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): My Department has been allocated £10.25m for the Sport Matters Community Capital Programme over the period 2011/15. Sport NI estimates that to fund all of the projects that met the quality threshold for the programme would require a total budget of £24.9m.

Bearing in mind the limited budget available for the programme, Sport NI had to prioritise projects. This was under the following categories:

- Projects significantly exceeding the pass mark scoring, demonstrating very significant facility need. These projects were therefore prioritised for funding against the available annual budget.
- Projects demonstrating significant facility need. Some of these projects may receive funding in the medium term if a large number of higher ranked projects drop out. They have therefore been placed on a call-off list.
- Projects demonstrating facility need. Sport NI is unlikely to secure funding for these projects in the foreseeable future. However, they have been held on a long-term term waiting list in the event that significant additional funding becomes available.

Moneyslane Football Club was assessed as demonstrating very significant facility need. Having met the relevant programme management requirements, the applicant was, on 22 September 2011, granted an award of £245,000 towards the construction of a sand carpeted grass pitch and a floodlit 3G pitch. The project is on schedule and is expected to be 80% completed by 31 March 2012 and fully completed within the first quarter of the new financial year.

The projects for Wallace High School and Dromore First Presbyterian Church were amongst those assessed by Sport NI as having demonstrated facility need and both have been placed on a long-term waiting list.

Salmon Stocks

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, given her Department's awareness and monitoring of the critical state of salmon stocks (i) what measures have been put in place to restrict the taking of salmon; (ii) what powers her Department has to enact restrictions on the taking of salmon for the 2012 season; and (iii) to outline the longer term action she will take and the associated timetable.

(AQW 6964/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) Measures in place for salmon caught by rod and line include compulsory catch and release from the opening day of the season until 31 May and a daily bag limit of 2 salmon from 1 June until the end of the season. There are also restrictions on the methods of fishing on particular waters. Commercial salmon fishermen are restricted by season and there is no fishing for salmon at weekends. There are also restrictions on the mesh size and construction of nets. Both commercial and recreational salmon fishermen must affix the appropriate carcass tags to any salmon they take and to be in possession of an untagged salmon carcass is an offence. These measures are defined in the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966, as amended, the Public Angling Estate Byelaws and the Fisheries (Tagging and Logbook) Byelaws (NI) 2001.
- (ii) I am currently considering powers under the Fisheries Act to introduce a range of salmon conservation measures in respect of commercial fishing and recreational angling.
- (iii) My Department will conduct a public consultation process on a range of options on the future of both commercial and recreational salmon fishing in the coming months. This will inform the development of salmon conservation policy and a robust legislative framework to protect and conserve wild Atlantic salmon in the DCAL jurisdiction. My Department is working towards having this legislation in place by the 2013 fishing season.

Illegal Nets: Lough Neagh

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 5140/11-15 and AQW 5920/11-15, whether the 25,831 yards of illegal nets that were seized by her Department were taken from the net owners premises or from Lough Neagh.

(AQW 7080/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The illegal nets referred to above were seized from Lough Neagh.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in her Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7090/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: From the information held I can confirm the following:

DCAL		
Year	FTE	Union
2000/01	nil	-
2005/06	2	NIPSA
2010/11	2	NIPSA
ALBs		
2000/01	25	23 NIPSA, 2 not recorded
2005/06	30	26 NIPSA, 1 TGWU, 1 GMB, 2 not recorded
2010/11	35.26	31.10 NIPSA, 2GMB, 2 not recorded, 0.16 UNISON

Staff listed carry out a number of representative roles, for example branch committee members, health and safety roles, and union learning roles under general union facilities arrangements.

Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what funding exists to assist local communities to celebrate Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee; and what additional funding is being made available for this purpose.

(AQW 7120/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am supportive of an inclusive approach to commemorations. I endorse the principles developed by the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund to remember the past in the context of an inclusive and accepting society.

My officials explored the potential of the Community Festival Fund being used by local councils to support community-led commemorative activities. Some councils were supportive while others expressed concern this would impact on their ability to assist the diverse range of community events already supported by the Fund. Therefore individual councils can decide whether to support commemorative activity but they should engage with the Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund to ensure an inclusive approach.

There is no additional funding available for this event.

Fish Species: Lough Neagh

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what is the current estimated stock of (i) coarse; and (ii) game fish species in Lough Neagh.

(AQW 7129/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) There is currently no data on populations of pollan, roach, rudd, bream, rudd/roach/bream hybrids, pike, perch, tench, stone loach, gudgeon, minnow and stickleback which make up coarse fish present in Lough Neagh.
- (ii) Records conclude that salmon populations in the Rivers Maine and Blackwater, which both flow into Lough Neagh, are failing to consistently achieve conservation limits and are outside safe biological limits.

The status of the population of migratory trout in Lough Neagh is unknown at present but research is currently being undertaken and a report is due towards the end of this year.

UK City of Culture 2013: Londonderry

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the work carried out by her Department on the promotion of Londonderry as the 2013 UK City of Culture.

(AQW 7130/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have been vocal in my support for City of Culture. I believe it has the potential to deliver significant benefits in relation to community development, education, social inclusion, health and well-being as well as opportunities to boost tourism and the local economy.

My officials continue to work closely with the Culture Company and City of Culture partners in Derry to help ensure that 2013 is a successful year and brings lasting benefits. Business cases are in development to underpin financial support and my officials are in regular contact with partners in Derry to provide support and advice.

Quangos: Cost to Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the cost of each quango operating under the remit of her Department for each of the last three years.

(AQW 7131/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the past three years there have been 12 Executive Non Departmental Public Bodies in total operating under the remit of the Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure. Details of funding provided to them in the last three full financial years is contained in the table below.

Name of body	Notes	Funding provided		
		2010/11 £000	2009/10 £000	2008/09 £000
Libraries Northern Ireland		37,958	34,285	34,706
National Museums Northern Ireland		24,499	17,462	21,492
Sports Council for Northern Ireland		25,400	25,377	24,184
Arts Council of Northern Ireland		27,178	27,481	16,334
Armagh Observatory and Planetarium		2,055	1,530	1,503
Northern Ireland Screen Commission Ltd		1,368	1,450	1,479
Northern Ireland Museums Council Ltd		324	349	309
2013 WPFPG Company Ltd	1	nil	nil	nil
North South Language Body		6,516	6,466	6,514
Waterways Ireland		4,537	5,394	7,323

Name of body	Notes	Funding provided		
		2010/11 £000	2009/10 £000	2008/09 £000
Northern Ireland Events Company Ltd (NIEC)	2	10	73	118
Fisheries Conservancy Board	3	Nil	Nil	739

Notes

- 1 2013 WPF Company was incorporated in 2010/11 but did not receive funding from the Department until the current year (2011/12).
- 2 NIEC no longer trades but receives financial support to ensure its orderly winding up.
- 3 Fisheries Conservancy Board (FCB) was subsumed into the Department on 1 June 2009.

Armagh County Museum

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much revenue was raised by the Armagh County Museum in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7132/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: National Museums NI has provided the following information, showing the revenue raised by Armagh County Museum in each of the last three years;

Year	2010/11	2009/10	2008/09
Gross Revenue*	£2789	£3841	£3755

* Gross revenue includes shop receipts, donations and sponsorship.

Bag and Drift Net Operations off the County Antrim Coast

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 6521/11-15, what communications, through British Government Departments, her Department has had with the EU Commission, over the last five years, in relation to the bag and drift net operations off the Co. Antrim coast.

(AQW 7198/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL officials have been part of the team supporting the delegation from Britain attending North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO) annual meetings.

As part of the team, DCAL officials have had discussions and prepared pre-briefs with EC Officials on the North of Ireland's commercial salmon fisheries.

The NI Fisheries Management Focus Area Report was prepared and compiled by DCAL officials and submitted to the EC Head of Delegation to NASCO in 2008.

DCAL officials also provided responses to queries from the EC through DEFRA on European Habitats Directive compliance in 2011 and 2012.

Bag Nets Operated off the County Antrim Coast

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 6518/11-15, in relation to fish being 'landed' and the tagging obligations, whether this is referring to being landed on shore, as opposed to being landed in a boat, and if so, whether there is a lacuna in the law if the fish are taken ashore in another jurisdiction.

(AQW 7199/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Fish caught by net holders licensed under the 1966 Fisheries Act must comply with the legislation specified for each type of net as outlined in AQW 6518/11-15 regardless of where the fish are landed.

Fish Species: Conservation Limits

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in establishing conservation limits for all fish species which are routinely the subject of commercial fishing, by net or line, in Lough Neagh and its feeder rivers.

(AQW 7220/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The methodology used to establish Conservation Limit's and monitor stock status relative to that target for migratory salmonids, and escapement targets for eels, where both have temporary residence in Lough Neagh is not directly applicable to other fish species that are commercially fished in Lough Neagh.

Conservation Limits have been established for the River Main and Blackwater salmon populations. Work to define a Conservation Limit for salmon escapement to Lough Neagh from the Lower River Bann is under development.

Robust estimates of what represents 40% of pristine eel escapement have been developed as required by the EC eel regulation.

Re-imagining Communities Programme

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the success of the Re-imagining Communities programme to date.

(AQW 7227/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: An independent evaluation of the Re-Imaging Communities programme was completed in June 2009 and the findings indicate that the programme has been a success. The report can be found on the Arts Council's website. It concluded that the programme has been a considerable success not only in relation to its own aims and objectives, but also in relation to the wider context of inter-group relations across the north of Ireland. In addition the report highlights 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. A total of £3.3million has been invested in 155 projects.

All the evidence collected in the evaluation suggests that there remains a considerable market for such activities. The programme has a proven track record of dealing sensitivities around murals and I believe it has been very successful in building positive relations.

Salmon and Grilse

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of salmon and grilse, passing upstream through each fish counter, in each river, for each year since the counters were installed; and to detail the periods of time when the counter was not operating, or for which there was doubt as to the accuracy of the count.

(AQW 7260/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Adult Salmon returns are recorded on index catchments of the DCAL Salmon Management Strategy. The index catchments represent rivers typical of geographical regions of the North of Ireland.

Table below indicates numbers of salmon moving upstream in index catchments 2002 - 2010.

	Glendun	Main	Blackwater	Shimna
2002	85	211	431	
2003	68	205	310	
2004	103	239	399	
2005	65	198	199	
2006	75	179	273	
2007	95	479	n/a	
2008	127	548	n/a	
2009	41	333	n/a	
2010	84	296	n/a	96

Note 1: The count from the River Main is a partial count, the River Blackwater counter has been inoperable 2007 - 2010, and the Shimna River counter is a partial count as the counter was only commissioned in 2010 and required operational validation.

Note 2: 2011 data is not yet fully analysed and compiled.

Salmon and Grilse

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an estimate of the percentage of salmon and grilse, passing upstream which pass through each fish counter, in each river, for each year since the counters were installed; and to outline the means by which each estimate is determined.

(AQW 7262/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL cannot differentiate between 2 sea winter fish (2SW) and 1 sea winter fish (1SW) passing upstream through the fish counters located on DCAL Salmon Management Strategy index catchments. DCAL use resistivity counters and are unable to apportion 2SW and 1SW component of each adult returning stock due to the technical limitations of this methodology. The DCAL salmon research station on the River Bush traps, visually inspects, and removes scale samples from a representative

selection for subsequent age determination of upstream migrating salmonid adults and consequently can record the 2SW/1SW components of each annual salmon run (see table below).

Smolts returning as adults to the River Bush as % grilse

Smolt Release Year	% Grilse
1989	86.7
1990	87.0
1991	84.4
1992	93.4
1993	88.4
1994	92.2
1995	87.2
1996	85.0
1997	95.3
1998	90.4
1999	90.7
2000	96.9
2001	95.2
2002	96.2
2003	92.4
2004	91.3
2005	87.3
2006	94.1
2007	90.1
2008	82.5

Note that 2009 onwards data is not included as 2 SW stock component not yet fully analysed and compiled.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how she is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to stimulate growth of the creative industries by nurturing creative talent and creative enterprises and encouraging innovative cross-sectoral collaborations, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7263/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The prioritisation of the creative industries within the 'Winning in Europe' document highlights recognition by government of the sector's contribution to rebuilding and rebalancing the economy.

An EU Engagement initiative has been established within my Department to support Officials and sponsored Arms-length Bodies in exploring EU funding, policy and networking opportunities for the North's culture, arts and leisure base. This initiative builds on my Department's active participation in the cross-departmental Barroso Taskforce Working Group and the Executive's commitment to enhancing its engagement with the EU Commission.

The Creative Industries Innovation fund over 2011-15 will also prioritise support to businesses engaging in export-focused growth and innovative cross-sectoral collaborations. This will stimulate commercial opportunities across the EU and further afield.

Salmon Redds: Counts

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the number of man days spent counting salmon redds in each river system (i) in each of the last twenty years; and (ii) in the Autumn and Winter of 2011/2012 to date.

(AQW 7265/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Neither the Department nor the Fisheries Conservancy Board, which carried out the function prior to 1 June 2009, recorded the number of man hours spent counting salmon redds in any year.

Salmon and Grilse

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an estimate of the percentage of salmon smolts which have returned from each year's cohort, to each river, as adult fish, for each of the last twenty years.

(AQW 7266/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Monitoring of annual salmon smolt migrations from freshwater to the marine environment is carried out by DCAL on the River Bush only. The resulting return of adult grilse after one year at sea and of salmon after two years at sea is recorded over the subsequent two years. See below returns from 1989 - 2008.

Smolt Release Year	Total Adult Fish % Return
1989	10.8
1990	13.6
1991	14.2
1992	30.4
1993	17.1
1994	9.6
1995	19.5
1996	14.3
1997	15.2
1998	5.4
1999	8.1
2000	4.9
2001	5.7
2002	6.1
2003	4.6
2004	5.0
2005	4.8
2006	13.8
2007	8.3
2008	4.0

NB: 2009 onward data is not included as 2 Sea Winter stock component has not yet been fully compiled.

Mountain Biking

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) to outline her Department's policy on mountain biking; (ii) for an estimate of number of people currently participating in the sport; (iii) to detail the number of mountain bike trails available; (iv) for her assessment of mountain biking as a growth sport; and (v) for an estimate of the revenue generated by the sport.

(AQW 7383/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Cycling Ulster is the governing body of cycling sport, including mountain biking, and is responsible for all aspects of cycling including policy, participation, facilities, growth and revenue generation. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) policy on sport, which incorporates all recognised sporting activities, including cycling and mountain biking, is outlined in its 10-year strategy for sport, Sport Matters. Through Sport Matters, DCAL is seeking to improve participation, performance and places for sport as a whole in the north of Ireland in order to realise the strategy's 10 year vision of '... a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport ...'

As part of the implementation of Sport Matters, DCAL regularly gathers information on overall participation rates in sport, facility provision, growth and revenue generation. The latest DCAL published participation figures indicate that approximately 9% of the population participated in some form of cycling, including mountain biking, at least once in the last 12 months. Figures previously published by the Countryside Access and Activities Network (CAAN) indicate that the number of participants in mountain biking grew from 1,000 in 1995 to 15,000 in 2008. SportNI advises that there are 6 officially recognised mountain biking trails in the north and that the sport currently is growing chiefly amongst children under 14 years and adult males. The Department holds no

information on revenue generated by mountain biking. However, Sport Matters estimates that sport overall contributes c.£450 million per annum to the local economy and, of this, activity/sports tourism contributes c.£30 million.

GAA: Naming of Stadia and Trophies

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what progress has been made in dissuading the GAA from naming stadia and trophies in honour of dead terrorists.

(AQW 7386/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the naming of GAA grounds and trophies is not a matter for me but wholly a matter for the governing body of Gaelic games. I am not aware of any GAA ground or trophy in the north of Ireland that has been named in honour of any deceased person whom all sections of the community recognise as having been a terrorist.

GAA: Financial Support

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial support has been given to GAA clubs whose grounds are named in honour of dead terrorists, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7387/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware of any GAA club in the north of Ireland whose ground is named in honour of any deceased person whom all sections of the community recognise as having been a terrorist. Sport NI has, however, provided a total of £14,200,577 to GAA clubs across the north in the last five financial years up to 31 March 2011. A breakdown of this figure, and the names of the GAA clubs that have received funding, is provided below.

Organization Name	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Grand Total
Aghadrumsee St Macartan's GFC				£205,704		£205,704
Aghaloo O'Neills GFC				£251,319		£251,319
All Saints GAC			£248,195			£248,195
An Maigh Tir Na nOg GAC				£97,329		£97,329
An Ríocht GAC				£233,340		£233,340
Ardoyne Kickhams GAC				£7,420		£7,420
Armagh Harps GFC				£7,620	£21,123	£28,743
Ballerin GAC			£225,000			£225,000
Ballygalget GAC				£6,600	£29,970	£36,570
Ballymacnab GFC				£8,995		£8,995
Belleeks GFC				£241,688		£241,688
Beragh Red Knights GAC				£3,697		£3,697
Brookeborough Heber McMahon GAC			£68,987			£68,987
Carrickcruppen GAC				£68,958		£68,958
Clann Eireann GFC & Youth Club				£5,010		£5,010
Clann na nGael Aughtnabrack				£235,000		£235,000
Clonduff GAC				£245,000		£245,000
Crossmaglen Rangers GFC					£29,925	£29,925
Derrygonnelly Harps GFC			£142,302			£142,302
Derrylin O'Connells GAA			£137,604			£137,604
Derrynoose GAC				£1,699		£1,699
Dromara GAC			£245,000			£245,000
Dromore St Dympna GFC				£232,310		£232,310
Drumgath GAC				£245,000		£245,000
Drumragh Sarsfields GAC			£798,000	£6,996		£804,996
Dungannon Thomas Clarke GFC				£226,675	£47,111	£273,786
Dunloy GAC				£144,700		£144,700
Eglishe St Patricks GAC				£245,000		£245,000
Enniskillen Gaels GAA	£407,572				£28,624	£436,196
Fintona Pearses GAC				£245,000		£245,000
Galbally Pearses GFC			£200,565			£200,565
Glen Rovers GAC			£188,793			£188,793
Glenn GAC				£4,700		£4,700

Organization Name	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Grand Total
John Mitchel's GAC				£612,826		£612,826
John Mitchel's Glenullin GAC				£9,272		£9,272
Keady Michael Dwyers GFC				£245,000		£245,000
Kevin Lynch Hurling Club				£245,000		£245,000
Kickhams Creggan GAC		£240,000		£7,822		£247,822
Kilcoo GAC				£245,000		£245,000
Kildress Wolfe Tones GAC		£245,000				£245,000
Kilrea Pearses GAC				£3,500		£3,500
Knocks Grattans Hurling Club			£10,000			£10,000
Lagmore Gaels					£8,774	£8,774
Lisnaskea Emmetts GAC		£220,000				£220,000
Loughgiel Shamrocks GAC				£2,468	£61,114	£63,582
Madden Raparees GFC				£1,299		£1,299
Maghera Sean MacDermotts GAC				£10,000	£30,000	£40,000
Na Magha Hurling and Camogie Club		£286,342				£286,342
O'Brien's GAC		£245,000				£245,000
O'Donovan Rossa GAC (Magherafelt)			£225,000			£225,000
Ogra Colmcille GFC					£27,011	£27,011
Owen Roe GAC, Coleraine			£245,000	£4,900		£249,900
Patrick Sarsfield GAC				£9,491		£9,491
Pearse Óg GFC			£245,000			£245,000
Pearses Gaelic Football & Camogie Club			£170,000			£170,000
Russell Gaelic Union					£59,436	£59,436
Saval GAC				£5,799		£5,799
Sean Dolans GAC				£10,000		£10,000
Sean O'Learys GAC (Newbridge)					£30,000	£30,000
Shane O'Neill's GAC				£4,900		£4,900
Slaughtneil Robert Emmets GAC			£119,140			£119,140
St Agnes GAC					£14,612	£14,612
St Brigids GAC (Belfast)				£7,650		£7,650
St Canice's GFC			£245,000			£245,000
St Colmcille's GAC (Armagh)			£210,000	£1,218		£211,218
St Colm's GAC		£100,000		£8,808		£108,808
St Comgall's GAC				£225,000		£225,000
St Enda's (Omagh)					£31,316	£31,316
St Enda's GAC				£245,000		£245,000
St Eugenes GAC (Castlederg)				£221,285		£221,285
St Eugene's GFC				£2,500		£2,500
St Galls GAC				£4,434		£4,434
St John's GAC (Belfast)					£56,998	£56,998
St Joseph's GAC (Craigbane)				£245,000		£245,000
St Malachy's GAC (Castledawson)			£225,000			£225,000
St Malachy's GAC (Castlewellan)				£245,000		£245,000
St Malachy's Hurling Club					£30,000	£30,000
St Martins GAC				£245,000		£245,000
St Mary's GAC (Ahoghill)			£225,000		£20,000	£245,000
St Mary's GAC (Faughenvale)		£235,000		£2,000		£237,000
St Mary's GAC (Slaughtmanus)			£210,000			£210,000
St Molaise GAC (Irvinestown)					£28,515	£28,515
St Treas GFC (Ballymaguigan)				£9,000		£9,000

Organization Name	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Grand Total
Stewartstown Harps GAC				£245,000		£245,000
Tattyreagh St Patrick's GAC				£9,600		£9,600
Tempo Maguire's GAC			£245,000			£245,000
Tír na nÓg GAC			£245,000			£245,000
Tullysaran O'Connells GAC				£249,500		£249,500
Watty Graham's GFC				£8,016		£8,016
Wolfe Tone GAC (Derrymacash)				£245,000		£245,000
Wolfe Tones GAC (Bellaghy)			£180,000	£7,500		£187,500
Grand Total	£407,572	£1,571,342	£5,053,586	£6,613,548	£554,529	£14,200,577

GAA: Financial Support

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what financial support has been given to GAA events organised in connection with trophies named in honour of dead terrorists, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7388/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has provided no financial support for any GAA events in the last five years. From 1 April 2010 responsibility for events transferred from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

I am not aware of any GAA events in the north of Ireland organised in connection with trophies named in honour of any deceased person whom all sections of the community recognise as having been a terrorist.

GAA: Naming of Stadia and Trophies

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she is seeking to discourage the GAA from naming their grounds and trophies in honour of dead terrorists; and how such efforts are deployed.

(AQW 7389/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the naming of GAA grounds and trophies is not a matter for me but wholly a matter for the governing body of Gaelic games. I am not aware of any GAA ground or trophy in the north of Ireland that has been named in honour of any deceased person whom all sections of the community recognise as having been a terrorist.

Horse and Greyhound Racing and Breeding

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much her Department has spent on (i) horse racing and breeding; and (ii) greyhound racing and breeding, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7432/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport in the north of Ireland. Sport NI has provided no funding to horse racing or breeding in the last three years. Greyhound racing is not recognised as a sporting activity and it has therefore received no funding from Sport NI in the last three years.

Human Resources Staff

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many staff are employed in her Department's Human Resources section.

(AQW 7759/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are 6.22 full time equivalent staff employed in my Department's Human Resources section.

Boxing: Strategic Implementation Plan

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council (UPBC) and Sport NI, in developing their four year plan to identify how UPBC proposes to implement the Irish Amateur Boxing Association's Strategic Plan in Ulster for the period 2011-16, will include an initiative to ensure that boxing is open and inclusive for all people who wish to take part.

(AQW 7782/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am already aware that one of the key objectives of the Strategic Implementation Plan 2012-2016, developed by the Ulster Provincial Boxing Council (UPBC) and Sport NI, is to ensure that anyone who wishes to participate in the sport of boxing at participative and competitive levels has the opportunity to do so. To assist the UPBC in the implementation of its plan, Sport NI is currently developing a business case for the sport going forward. I have already written to Sport NI to stress the importance of ensuring that this process is based on inclusion and provides opportunities for the development of boxing clubs from all sections of the community that are affiliated to the governing body.

Department of Education

Redundancies: Packages for Teachers

Mrs McKeivitt asked the Minister of Education when teachers will be informed of the redundancy packages that will be available in 2012/2013.

(AQW 6377/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Employing Authorities wrote to controlled and maintained schools on 30/31 January 2012 advising of the compensation terms available to teachers made redundant at 31 August 2012. The Department wrote in similar terms to voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools on 2 February 2012.

Viability Audits: Recommendations

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education how he plans to implement the recommendations of the viability audits, particularly in relation to the development and implementation of the area based planning process.

(AQW 6554/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has received the first viability audit reports from the Boards on Monday 16 January 2012. The Boards have also sent each school a copy of the information specifically relating to that school. My officials have made an initial assessment of the reports and are engaging with the Boards to obtain further information. Boards have been asked to resubmit the viability audits by 6 February and to submit proposals to address the position by the 15 February. When the information is complete the five reports will be published by the Boards as soon as practicable.

The purpose of the viability audits, as set out in the Terms of Reference, was:-

- i to identify and make proposals to address immediate concerns around unviable schools to protect the education of pupils; and
- ii. to support the development of detailed area profiles to inform the wider strategic area planning process.

Work on both of issues will be supported by the information contained in the final reports. In terms of area planning, the viability audit data will be combined with a wide range of other educational, demographic and economic data to provide detailed area profiles which will provide the information base for the area planning process.

Education Research Forum

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the work of the Education Research Forum: (ii) how many times it has met; and (iii) to detail the associated costs to date.

(AQW 6606/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: (i) The Education Research Forum was established in 2008, comprising representatives from each of the Higher Education Institutions here and both the Department of Education (DE) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). Its role has been to exchange research information, knowledge and skills on current and emerging issues in relation to education with a view to enhancing evidence-based policy and practice. I am conscious that the forum has not met for some time and I have asked my officials to review its role in the context of our programme of education reform.

- (ii) The Education Research Forum has held 5 formal meetings as well as various sub-group meetings.
- (iii) The direct costs to the Department of Education were in relation to a Symposium event in April 2009 held at Stranmillis College. Room hire and hospitality for the event amounted to £292.78.

Redundancies: Funding

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education whether his Department plans to work with teachers and the Education and Library Boards to ensure that schools can avail of the recent fund for redundancies in the most flexible and efficient way.

(AQW 6908/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have made funding available to allow schools and employing authorities to manage teacher redundancies at August 2012. The funding I have made available will allow employers to offer enhanced compensation of up to 90 weeks' salary, depending on age and length of service. This will help encourage volunteers to transfer into redundant posts, keeping compulsory redundancies to a minimum. Many of those volunteering will be older teachers, at the top of their pay bands. Not only will this lead to an immediate drop in the wage bill, but it will protect the jobs of younger teachers.

I am optimistic that, through collaborative working between my Department, the Employing Authorities and the teacher unions, redundancies in 2012 can be managed as far as possible on a voluntary basis.

Loreto Grammar School, Omagh: Capital Works

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in light of the appeal by his Department in relation to Loreto Grammar School, Omagh, to detail the implications for capital works.

(AQW 6920/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department, in conjunction with its legal advisors, is currently considering the detail of the judgement specific to the Loreto Grammar project and will re-engage with the school in due course to deal with the findings.

No part of the judgement impacts on capital projects which are currently under construction. The Department's legal advice is that the ruling applies to all projects previously announced but which have not yet commenced. The Minister has stated that future capital projects coming forward will be looked at in the context of Area Planning and no project will be considered in isolation.

Loreto Grammar School, Omagh: Court of Appeal Judgement

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking in relation to the Court of Appeal's judgement on Loreto Grammar School, Omagh.

(AQW 6922/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department, in conjunction with its legal advisors, is currently considering the detail of the judgement specific to the Loreto Grammar project and will re-engage with the school in due course to deal with the findings.

No part of the judgement impacts on capital projects which are currently under construction. The Department's legal advice is that the ruling applies to all projects previously announced but which have not yet commenced. The Minister has stated that future capital projects coming forward will be looked at in the context of Area Planning and no project will be considered in isolation.

Dunmurry High School: Pupils

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Education what measures his Department has taken to ensure that all pupils currently attending Dunmurry High School will obtain a place at another school before it closes in June 2012.

(AQW 6971/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: All proposals for school closures are governed by the statutory Development Proposal process. Following publication there is a statutory two month consultation period during which anyone may make their views known to the Department. I then make a decision to approve or reject the proposal taking account of all pertinent information and comments received. Always included in this is an assessment of the availability of alternative places for pupils whose school may close. It is the statutory responsibility of the Education & Library Boards to ensure adequate provision in their areas.

In the case of Dunmurry High School, a proposal for closure was published by the South Eastern Education & Library Board on 13 December 2011. The consultation period ends on 13 February 2012. I can make no further comment at present on Dunmurry High School as I can consider the proposal only after the consultation has closed and the required information has been collated.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in his Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7016/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: DE STAFF

For each of the years 2000/01, 2005/06 and 2010/11, 6 full time equivalent staff (accredited NIPSA representatives) may from time to time have availed of facilities time as set out in the NICS facilities agreement to undertake trade union duties.

In addition, for the 3 years in question the following full time equivalent staff members were employed full-time on NIPSA trade union duties:

2000/01	2005/06	2010/11
1	1.5	1.5

ALB STAFF 2000/01

	NIPSA
ALBs	8-10*

* Excludes ELBs - there were no secondee arrangements prior to August 2005

2005/06

	NIPSA	T&G	GMB	UNISON
ALBs	16	2	3	3.5

2010/11

	NIPSA	T&G	GMB	UNISON
ALBs	15	2	3	3.5

Primary Schools: Lagan Valley

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of first preference applications for each Primary School in Lagan Valley area for the 2011/12 academic year. [R]

(AQW 7034/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: According to the South-Eastern and Southern Education and Library Boards, the number of first preference applications to each primary school in the Lagan Valley area for the 2011/12 academic year is set out in the table below:-

Largymore Primary School	17
Brownlee Primary School	21
Dunmurry Primary School	23
Lisburn Central Primary School	32
Seymour Hill Primary School	30
Tonagh Primary School	22
Carr Primary School	9
Anahilt Primary School	10
Dromara Primary School	30
Harmony Hill Primary School	94
Knockmore Primary School	8
Moira Primary School	53
Old Warren Primary School	13
Killowen Primary School	58
Ballinderry Primary School	37
Pond Park Primary School	98
Maghaberry Primary School	35
Ballymacash Primary School	53
Riverdale Primary School	35
Meadow Bridge Primary School	45
Downshire Primary School, Hillsborough	91
St Joseph's Primary School	57
St Aloysius Primary School	52
St Colman's Primary School	53
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	40
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	32
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	29
Dromore Central Primary School	93
Fair Hill Primary School	39
St Michael's Primary School (Finnis)	12
St Colman's Primary School	11

Preschool Places

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of first preference applications for each pre-school provider in the Lagan Valley area for the 2011/12 academic year.[R]

(AQW 7035/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: According to the South-Eastern and Southern Education and Library Boards, the number of first preference applications to each pre-school provider in the Lagan Valley area for the 2011/12 academic year is set out in the table below:-

Grove Community Playgroup	8
Sunshine Community Playgroup	19
Anahilt Pre-School Playgroup	16
Legacurry Playgroup	21
Rainbow Corner Playgroup	23
Seymour Hill Pre-School Playgroup	24
Busy Bees Playgroup	37
Rhyme Times Playgroups	9
Dromara Playgroup	51
Brownlee Playgroup (by Little Rays)	17
Little Oaks Pre-School	29
Oakwood Integrated Children's Centre	44
Poppins Day Nursery	9
Jolly Rodgers Day Nursery	4
Rainbow Playgroup	14
Jolly Jester's Day Nursery	14
The Old Station Playgroup	21
Barbour Nursery School	74
Pond Park Nursery School	123
Holy Trinity Nursery School	66
Dromore Nursery School	86
Dunmurry Primary School Nursery Unit	25
Lisburn Central Primary School Nursery Unit	28
Harmony Hill Primary School Nursery Unit	65
Moira Primary School Nursery Unit	66
Old Warren Primary School Nursery Unit	33
Killowen Primary School Nursery Unit	59
Ballinderry Primary School Nursery Unit	37
Maghaberry Primary School Nursery Unit	55
Ballymacash Primary School Nursery Unit	60
Downshire Primary School, Hillsborough Nursery Unit	82
St Aloysius Primary School Nursery Unit	40
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School Nursery Unit	43
Fair Hill Primary School Nursery Unit	31

Viability Audit: Primary and Post-primary Schools

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the next steps in taking forward the viability audit of primary and post-primary schools, including the consultation process for developing Area Plans for the South Eastern Education and Library Board area. **(AQW 7036/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: My Department received the first viability audit reports from the Boards on Monday 16 January 2012. The Boards have also sent each school a copy of the information specifically relating to that school. My officials have made an initial assessment of the reports and are engaging with the Boards to obtain further information. Boards have been asked to resubmit the viability audits by 6 February and to submit proposals to address the position by the 15 February.

When the information is complete the five reports will be published by the Boards as soon as practicable.

The Terms of Reference for the Area Planning process were issued on 15 December 2011. Public consultation in each Board area, including the South Eastern Education & Library Board area, will take place following the Department's consideration of the initial draft area plans to ensure compliance with the Departmental policy framework. Full detail of the consultation process will be made available at that time. The Department will consider and, if satisfied, approve the area plans after the consultation has been completed and the responses considered.

Maghera High School: Use of Former Site

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the use of the former Maghera High School site; (ii) whether he is aware of the damage done to the building since its closure; and (iii) to detail (a) the valuation of the site when the school closed; (b) the most recent valuation; and (c) the estimated cost of repairing any damage to the building. **(AQW 7154/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: There have been two expressions of interest in using the former Maghera High School site for other educational purposes. I understand that there has been at least one other expression of interest in the site. However, until the options for other educational use are fully explored, the site will not be placed on the open market.

At the time of closure, the site was valued at £1million. It was subsequently revalued in June 2011 with the valuation remaining the same at £1million.

I am aware that some damage has been done to the school and the North Eastern Education and Library Board has advised that the cost of repairing this has been just over £3,000.

C2K: Costs

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to detail the price a school pays for (i) the lowest priced laptop; (ii) the highest priced laptop; and (iii) an interactive whiteboard, under the current C2K contract. **(AQW 7160/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: C2k has a range of prices for hardware, which is part of its managed service for schools.

- (i) and (ii) Under the current C2K framework, post – primary and special schools have two options and will pay either £849 or £1089 for a laptop. Primary schools have one option and will pay £787.

Whilst we understand that schools make direct comparisons between the C2k and internet/shop prices, it must be borne in mind that the C2k prices are higher because they cover more than just the laptop. C2k prices include support functions, such as helpdesk provision of all locally hosted software, licensing, encryption, (where appropriate), virus protection, maintenance and extended 'new for old' warranty.

Improved value for money was a key focus of assessing tenders for the new C2k service. The cost of the proposed new service demonstrated a 23% saving. The new contract will ensure the prices of items are more competitive, as the prices will be annually benchmarked against prices offered by other suppliers. Where appropriate, prices will be reduced to match the comparison price.

- (iii) Interactive whiteboards are not part of C2K services. Schools purchase these via the Education and Library Board Inter-Board framework, negotiated by the SELB on behalf of the five boards - a new framework will be in place from 1 April 2012. Present prices allow choices of makes and specifications and range from £1700 to £2700. The prices cover a survey of the school room, provision of advice (type of whiteboard), fitting, training and extended warranty. The only additional cost is the electrical connection, provided by a qualified electrical contractor.

Dromintee Primary School, Newry: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Dromintee Primary School, Newry. **(AQW 7161/11-15)**

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;

- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

Scoil Na Fuiseoige, Belfast: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Scoil Na Fuiseoige, Belfast.
(AQW 7162/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

St Columba's Primary School, Draperstown: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for St Columba's Primary School, Draperstown.
(AQW 7163/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Forkhill: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for St Oliver Plunkett Primary School, Forkhill.
(AQW 7164/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;

- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

St Colman's Primary School, Lisburn: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for St Colman's Primary School, Lisburn.
(AQW 7165/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

Schools: Holywood Area

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the capital projects for schools in the Holywood area.
(AQW 7171/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: You will be aware that I have commissioned the 5 Education & Library Boards working in conjunction with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools to undertake a strategic planning process based on each Board area to shape the future pattern of education delivery.

In any area, potential projects, such as that for the Holywood multi-schools project, will be critically assessed as part of the area planning process to determine how they will contribute to the overall infrastructure needed. Future capital investment will be targeted at supporting area plans emerging from this process. No school building project will be looked at in isolation but will be considered in the context of the wider area.

You will appreciate that until this work is completed it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the position of any potential project or how any available funding might be allocated.

Preschool Places

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of applications received for a pre-school place in the 2012/13 academic year at (a) Dundela Infants School, Belfast; (b) Loughview Integrated Nursery, Belfast; (c) St Colmcille's Pre-School, Belfast; (d) Ravenscroft Nursery, Belfast; (e) Orangefield Nursery, Belfast; (f) Sandbrook Nursery, Belfast; (g) Little Ducks Playroom, Belfast; (h) Dundonald Nursery, Dundonald; (i) McArthur Nursery, Belfast; (j) Knocknagoney Nursery, Belfast (k) Glendhu Nursery, Belfast; (l) Avoniel Nursery, Belfast; (m) Greenwood Nursery, Belfast; (n) St Matthews Nursery, Belfast; (o) Braniel Nursery, Belfast; (p) Brooklands Nursery, Dundonald; (q) Castlereagh Nursery, Belfast; (r) Belmont Pre-School, Belfast; (s) Kings Road Nursery, Belfast; and (t) Ballybeen Women's Centre Pre-School, Dundonald.

(AQW 7203/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The admissions process for places in pre-school education in the 2012/13 academic year is currently ongoing. The Belfast and South-Eastern Education and Library Boards, who administer the admissions process for the areas in which the named providers are located, have advised me that they will not be in a position to provide the information requested until after the process is completed on 1 June 2012, when final placement letters issue to parents. I will be pleased to provide the information to you after that date if that would be helpful.

St Joseph's Primary School in Madden, County Armagh: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for St Joseph's Primary School in Madden, Co. Armagh.
(AQW 7232/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit. (AQW 7233/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for St Mary's Primary School, Newcastle. (AQW 7234/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuiseoige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

Taughmonagh Primary School, Belfast: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Taughmonagh Primary School, Belfast. (AQW 7235/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;

- 2 Scoil Na Fuisseige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

Bangor Grammar School: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Bangor Grammar School.

(AQW 7236/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Updates for the new builds at the above schools are detailed as follows:

- 1 Dromintee Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 2 Scoil Na Fuisseige Primary School commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete July 2012;
- 3 St Columba's Primary School commenced construction work in August 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 4 St Oliver Plunkett Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete March 2012;
- 5 St Colman's Primary School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 6 St Joseph's Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete January 2012;
- 7 Magherafelt Primary School and Nursery Unit commenced construction work in May 2011 and is due to complete August 2012;
- 8 St Mary's Primary School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete October 2012;
- 9 Taughmonagh Primary School commenced construction work in January 2011 and is due to complete May 2012;
10. A new build for Bangor Grammar School commenced construction work in February 2011 and is due to complete February 2013.

Computer:Pupil Ratio

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the average computer to pupil ratio in (i) primary; and (ii) post-primary schools.

(AQW 7239/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: C2k has advised that based on the PCs and laptops provided by C2k the average computer to pupil ratio in Primary Schools is 1:6. For Post-Primary Schools the ratio is 1:5.

Schools enhance their hardware provision by making direct purchases via the C2k's managed service school catalogue and when such purchases are taken into account the ratio for Primary schools is 1:5 and for Post-Primary Schools it is 1:3.

The ratio in Special Schools is 1:2.

Schools can also purchase items not in the C2k catalogue and when they do so the above ratios are improved. The Department does not hold information on such purchases.

Bullying: School Buses

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how many complaints (i) schools; and (ii) Education and Library Boards have received in relation to bullying on buses in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7246/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not collect this information from schools. The Education and Library Boards may be in receipt of complaints about bullying on buses; however recording systems are not sufficiently detailed to produce accurate statistics.

The Department recently published research into the "Nature and Extent of Pupil Bullying in Schools in the North of Ireland" (2011) in which 4.2% of Year 6 pupils and 5.9% of Year 9 pupils surveyed reported that they had been bullied on the school bus.

Pupil behaviour is a matter for schools which are required, by law, to have measures in place to promote good pupil behaviour as part of their discipline policy. When developing a policy, a school community must decide on its position in respect of pupil behaviour off site and out of school hours, including while travelling to and from school.

The Anti-Bullying Forum (NIABF) focused on the theme of travelling to and from school free from bullying during Anti-Bullying Week 2009. At that time young people produced a 'Top Tips' leaflet, which is available at http://www.niabf.org.uk/cms/images/stories/top_five_tips.pdf, on keeping safe from bullying when travelling to and from school.

The Education and Library Boards also have policies and practices to help address the issue of bullying on school buses. For example, the North Eastern Education and Library Board is a member of a 'Safe Travel Group' which is made up of local Principals, the PSNI and Translink and sponsored by the Community Safety Partnership. The group has developed and implemented an action plan, held awareness raising events and meets regularly to consider local and timely issues. As suggested through that group, the NEELB take action when they are made aware of bullying on their buses or at stations. The perpetrators will receive an initial warning letter, which if ineffective will be followed by a meeting with the Board, the parents and the school. This may result in the suspension or withdrawal of the pupil's bus pass.

C2K: Call-out Costs

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education what is the average cost to a school of a call-out for C2K services. (Aqw 7248/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: C2k has advised that there is no cost to a school for its managed services on-site support.

C2K: Expenditure on Services

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education how much schools have spent on C2K services in each of the last two years. (Aqw 7249/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There is no cost to schools for the C2k managed ICT service which provides networked computers, administration and management systems for school staff, a managed learning environment called Learning NI and full service support via the C2k helpdesk.

Schools can enhance their ICT provision by purchasing additional equipment from C2k's managed service school catalogue which includes full support services for any purchases made or they may purchase via shops or the internet. The latter would of course not include the support services included with purchases made through the C2k catalogue.

C2k has advised that schools have spent the following in relation to school catalogue purchases in the last two years:

2010/11	2011/12 (up to 31/01/12)
£3,549,605	£1,921,313

We do not have information on expenditure on ICT provision purchased directly by schools from a non C2k source.

Ulster-Scots School

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the feasibility of a school dedicated to teaching Ulster-Scots language and culture. (Aqw 7256/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Management of education provision in the schools' estate is, in the first instance, the responsibility of the relevant School Managing Authority.

Any significant change, such as opening a school dedicated to teaching Ulster-Scots language and culture, requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal. As part of this statutory process I assess the feasibility of a Development Proposal and make my decision taking account of all issues pertinent to that case. As no such proposal has been published, I cannot provide an assessment.

School Mergers: Proposals

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the proposals for school mergers on which a decision will be made in 2012. (Aqw 7275/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Management of education provision in the schools estate is in the first instance the responsibility of the relevant School Managing Authority. Any significant change, such as an amalgamation, would require the publication of a statutory development proposal to support that intent.

My Department is currently considering a two proposals for the amalgamation of four schools to form two new schools with effect from 31 August 2012, these schools are:-

- St Aidan's Christian Brothers and St Bernadette's Primary Schools, Belfast.
- Edmund Rice and Star of the Sea Girls' Primary Schools, Belfast.

In addition, I approved proposals in 2011 for the amalgamation of four schools to form two new schools with effect from 31 August 2012, these schools are:-

- St Mary's Boys' and St Mary's Girls' Primary Schools in Strabane
- Elmbrook and Erne Special Schools in Enniskillen

Students: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education what statistical data has been collected from schools in relation to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender students in accordance with Section 75 obligations as set out in his Department's Equality Schemes, in the past ten years.

(AQW 7281/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department does not routinely collect information from schools in relation to lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender students and is not required to do so. The main data collection exercise, the school census, gathers information held by schools which is not self-reported by pupils and, therefore, would not be an appropriate vehicle through which to collect information on sexual orientation.

The Department is obliged to have regard to promoting equality of opportunity and good relations across all of the section 75 groups and takes that responsibility very seriously. It therefore makes extensive use of data that is collected as part of external research, including information on sexual orientation, to inform its policies and programmes.

Strathearn Grammar School, Belfast: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Strathearn Grammar School, Belfast.

(AQW 7314/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: (i) Strathearn Grammar School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete September 2014.

(ii) The acquisition of the former Beechmount Leisure Centre site was completed in January 2011. The construction element of the major capital project for Coláiste Feirste is one of a number of potential projects which will be assessed as part of the Area Planning process to determine how they will contribute to the overall infrastructure needed. Until this work is completed and outcomes determined, there is nothing further I can provide in terms of an update on specific projects.

Coláiste Feirste, Belfast: Newbuild

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the site acquisition and new build for Coláiste Feirste, Belfast

(AQW 7315/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: (i) Strathearn Grammar School commenced construction work in March 2011 and is due to complete September 2014.

(ii) The acquisition of the former Beechmount Leisure Centre site was completed in January 2011. The construction element of the major capital project for Coláiste Feirste is one of a number of potential projects which will be assessed as part of the Area Planning process to determine how they will contribute to the overall infrastructure needed. Until this work is completed and outcomes determined, there is nothing further I can provide in terms of an update on specific projects.

CRED Policy Enhancement Scheme: Awareness Sessions

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and location of the awareness sessions on the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity policy held with schools and youth organisations since 2011.

(AQW 7342/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Awareness Sessions on the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity policy were held as follows:

	Date	Location	Education Sector
BELB	4 October 2011	Ulidia Resource Centre	Post-Primary & Youth
	11 October 2011	Ulidia Resource Centre	Post-Primary & Youth
	13 October 2011	Ulidia Resource Centre	Post-Primary & Youth
	18 October 2011	Ulidia Resource Centre	Primary
	20 October 2011	Ulidia Resource Centre	Primary
	26 October 2011	Ulidia Resource Centre	Primary
	24 January 2012	Ulidia Resource Centre	Primary
	26 January 2012	Ulidia Resource Centre	Nursery
	9 February 2012	Ulidia Resource Centre	Post-Primary

	Date	Location	Education Sector
NEELB	16 March 2011	Antrim Board Centre	All Schools
	21 March 2011	Antrim Board Centre	All Schools
	25 March 2011	Antrim Board Centre	All Schools
	11 November 2011	Antrim Board Centre	CASS Officers
	5 December 2011	Antrim Board Centre	Successful Applicants for CRED Enhancement Scheme
SEELB	3 October 2011	Ardnabannon OEC	Youth
	15 October 2011	Ardnabannon OEC	Youth
	26 & 27 October 2011	SEELB HQ	Primary
	3 November 2011	SEELB HQ	Post-Primary
SELB	11 February 2011	Armagh City Hotel	Youth
	28 & 29 March 2011	Manor House, Killadeas	Youth
	20 & 21 October 2011	Belfast	Youth
	16 November 2011	Newry Teachers' Centre	Primary
	23 November 2011	Clounagh Centre, Portadown	Primary
	29 November 2011	Dungannon Teachers' Centre	Primary
	5 December 2011	Bann House, Portadown	Youth
	11 January 2012	Clounagh Centre, Portadown	Post-Primary
	19 January 2012	Bann House, Portadown	Youth
	1 February 2012	Amma Centre, Armagh	Primary & Post-Primary
WELB	20 January 2011	Station Centre, Omagh	Youth
	28 January 2011	North-West Teachers Centre	Schools
	11 February 2011	Technology Education Centre	Schools
	7 October 2011	North-West Youth Office	Youth
	21 October 2011	Omagh Youth Centre	Youth
	21 November 2011	North-West Teachers Centre	Schools
	21 November 2011	North-West Youth Office	Youth
	5 December 2011	Technology Education Centre	Schools
INTER-BOARD	24 March 2011	Antrim Board Centre	All school sectors
YCNI	13 September 2011	Greater Belfast area	Youth
	17 January 2012	Greater Belfast area	Youth

CRED Policy Enhancement Scheme: Youth and Schools Interboard Panel

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to list the groups represented on the joint Youth and Schools Interboard Panel. (AQW 7344/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The joint Youth and Schools CRED Interboard Panel comprises representatives from each of the five Education and Library Boards from both schools and youth sections. Representatives from the Department of Education and the Education and Training Inspectorate attend as observers.

CRED Policy Enhancement Scheme: Senior Education Officers

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education who is represented on the Senior Education Officers Group to which the Interboard Panel reports.

(AQW 7347/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Senior Education Officers Group comprises of Senior Education Officers from each of the five Education and Library Boards and includes the Director of the Regional Training Unit.

CRED Policy Enhancement Scheme: Funding

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to list the groups which have received funding from the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Enhancement Scheme.

(AQW 7349/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Groups which have received funding through the ELB led Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Enhancement Scheme are as follows:

BELB (Schools)	Arellian Nursery School	New Lodge Nursery School
	Ashfield Boys' High School	Our Lady's Nursery School
	Belfast Boys' Model School	Ravenscroft Nursery School
	Belfast Hospital School	Shaftesbury Nursery School
	Belfast Model School for Girls'	St Dominic's High School
	Naiscoil/Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	St Gemma's High School
	Cathedral Nursery School	St Louise's College
	Cliftonville Integrated PS	St Malachy's College
	Corpus Christi College	St Patrick's College
	Hazelwood Integrated College	St Peter's Nursery School
	Knockbreda High School* (SEELB)	St Therese of Lisieux PS
	Ligoniel PS	St Vincent de Paul PS
	Little Flower Girls' School	Tudor Lodge Nursery School
	Loughshore Educational Resource Centre	
BELB (Youth)	Ardoyne Youth Centre	Newlodge Youth Centre
	Blackie River Community Group	North Belfast Area Project/ Shankill Area Project
	East Belfast Area Youth Project	Nubia Youth Club
	Glen Parent	Roden Street Youth Service
	Glór na Mona	South Belfast Area Project
	Indian Community Centre Youth Club	St Michael's Youth Group
	Lorag Youth Group	West Belfast Area Project
	Newhill Youth Club	

NEELB (Schools)	Ballyhackett Primary School	Parkhall Integrated College
	Broughshane Primary School	Rasharkin Primary School
	Damhead Primary School	Seaview Primary School
	Drumard Primary School	St Brigid's PS, Mayogall
	Duneane Primary School	St Ciaran's Primary School
	Glenann Primary School	St Colmcille's Primary School
	Knockahollet Primary School	St Columba's PS, Kilrea
	Knocknagin Primary School	St John Bosco
	Millburn Primary School	St John's PS, Coleraine
	Mount St Michael Primary School	St Patrick's & St Brigid's
	Oakfield Primary School	Whiteabbey Primary School
NEELB (Youth)	Cheers Youth Forum	Newtownabbey/Carrickfergus/ Larne Capacity Building Programme
	Coleraine Diversity Competent Leadership Programme	OCNI Introduction to CR Course
	Dunclug Youth Forum	Windy Hall/Knocklyn/Stranocum Project
	Moyle Outreach/Detached Project (Armoyle)	
SEELB (Schools)	Ballinderry Primary School	Lagan College
	Ballykeigle Primary School	Lisnagarvey High School
	Ballymacrickett Primary School	McKinney Primary School
	Ballymacward Primary School	Moira Primary School
	Ballyvester Primary School	Our Lady & St Patrick's College
	Brownlee Primary School	Rowandale Int Primary School
	Cumran Primary School	Sacred Heart Primary School
	Downpatrick Primary School	St Anne's Primary School
	Dunmurry Primary School	St Colman's Primary School
	Glencraig Int Primary School	St Joseph's Primary School
	Greyabbey Primary School	St Macartan's Primary School
	Grosvenor Grammar School	St Mary's High School
	Killyleagh Primary School	St Mary's Primary School
	Kircubbin Int Primary School	St Patrick's Academy
	Knockbreda High School	St Patrick's Primary School
SEELB (Youth)	Ballymagee Youth Centre	Lisburn Rural Project
	Colin Youth Development	North Down Division
	Cregagh Youth Centre	NRG Kircubbin Community Centre
	East Down Rural Project	Old Warren Youth Initiative
	EDRP Ards Peninsula	St Comgall's Youth Club
	Lisburn BME Project	

SELB (Schools)	Aughnacloy Primary School	Pheonix Int Primary School
	Ballyoran Primary School	Presentation Primary School
	Ballytrea Primary School	Rathfriland High School
	Banbridge High School	Sperrin Int College
	Birches Primary School	Sperrinview School
	Bocombra Primary School	St Anthony's PS, Craigavon
	Ceara School	St Brigid's PS, Drumilly
	Cookstown High School	St Louis' Grammar School
	Cookstown Primary School	St Mary's PS, Aughnacloy
	Derryhale Primary School	St Mary's PS, Cabragh
	Fivemiletown Primary School	St Mary's PS, Fivemiletown
	Hart Memorial Primary School	St Mary's PS, Lisbuoy
	Holy Trinity College, Cookstown	St Mary's PS, Maghery
	Holy Trinity PS, Cookstown	St Mary's PS, Stewartstown
	Kilkeel High School	St Oliver Plunkett's Primary School
	Lisanally School	St Patrick's College, Banbridge
	Milltown Primary School	St Patrick's PS, Newry
	Moyallon Primary School	The Armstrong Primary School
	Newbridge Int College	Windsor Hill Primary School
	Newmills Primary School	
SELB (Youth)	Armagh Young Women's/Traveller Group	Seagoe Youth Group
	Banbridge Youth Group	SELB Inclusion Group (across SELB)
	Brownlow Youth Resource Centre	SELB Inclusion Unit Group, Cookstown
	Kildress Youth Group	SELB Inclusion Unit Group, Dungannon
	Legahory Young Girls' Muslim Group	Taghnevan Youth Group
	Oasis LGBT Group	Tandragee Youth Group
WELB (Schools)	Barrack Street Boys' Primary School	Lisneal College, Derry
	Belmont Special School	Portora Royal Grammar School
	Bready Jubilee Primary School	St Cecilia's College
	Culmore Primary School	St Joseph's Boys' School, Derry
	Cumber Claudy Primary School	St Mary's PS, Altinure
	Foyleview Special School	St Michael's College
	Gortin Primary School	St Patrick's PS, Gortin
	Greenhaw Primary School	

WELB (Youth)	Bovalley Community Youth Group	Limavady NRA
	Caw Youth Club	Lincoln Court
	Cedar Foundation	Lincoln Youth Club
	Derry Travellers	Omagh Boys & Girls Club
	Destined	Pennyburn Youth Club
	Down Syndrome	Pilots Row Youth Club
	Drummond Centre	Pilots Row Youth Club
	Enagh Youth Forum	Reach Across
	Foyle Down Syndrome	Rosemount Youth Club
	Glebe Outreach	Sion Mills Youth Club
	Hospital Road Youth Club	Strabane Youth Council
	Irish Street Y&CA	

* This school is partnered with St Gemma's High School and they receive CRED funding from BELB

CRED Policy Enhancement Scheme: Budget

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the budget for the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Policy Enhancement Scheme in each of the next three years.

(AQW 7350/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As you will be aware, the education budget faces significant challenges over the period to 2014-15. I am currently reviewing my budget allocations for the next three years and until this exercise is complete I am unable to confirm any future budget allocations for the Community Relations, Equality and Diversity Enhancement Scheme.

Schools: Visits by Constituency

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of school visits he has made since coming into office, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 7365/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have visited 42 schools since coming into office.

Belfast North	3
Belfast South	5
Belfast West	2
East Derry	2
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	2
Foyle	6
Lagan Valley	3
Mid Ulster	1
Newry and Armagh	2
North Antrim	3
South Down	1
Upper Bann	10
West Tyrone	2

Viability Audit: Sustainable Schools Policy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what weight will be given to each of the three criteria set out in the Viability Audit Policy when considering the future of a school.

(AQW 7390/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As previously stated in response to AQW 6549/11-15, the six criteria outlined in the Sustainable Schools Policy and their associated quantitative and qualitative indicators provide a framework for assessing the range of factors which may affect a school's sustainability. Sustainable Schools is the basis of my Department's policy for the planning of educational provision on an area basis.

Last September the Education and Library Boards, working with CCMS and the other sectors, were asked to conduct a viability audit of all schools in their areas. Its purpose was to identify schools facing significant viability challenges in any or all of the three indicators set out in the terms of reference (delivering quality education, sustainable enrolment trends and financial stability), to identify the root cause(s) of their problems and present proposals to address them. The data gathered for the audit will feed into the Area Planning process. Weightings will not be applied to the viability audit's criteria – the intention is to look at each school in the round.

It is, in the first instance, the responsibility of the managing authorities to determine proposals for schools, including those experiencing stress. The Sustainable Schools Policy states that the local circumstances of each individual school will need to be considered in determining what action should be taken, and that, as a result, each case should continue to be assessed individually. When I make decisions on development proposals for a significant change to a school, including closure, I will continue to do so, on a case by case basis, taking into account all pertinent information. The over-riding consideration is the quality of education that a school provides for its pupils.

Best Foot Forward

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education how the Best Foot Forward for Schools initiative is being made available to schools.

(AQW 7391/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Best Foot Forward resource was developed by Travelwise NI, a Department for Regional Development (DRD) initiative, to encourage the use of sustainable transport options.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) worked with DRD to update this resource which is available to all schools via the NI Curriculum website, www.nicurriculum.org.uk. This website provides advice, guidance and resources to assist teachers in their delivery of the curriculum.

The resource is also available for download from C2k's Learning NI library, available to teachers. Further work is being progressed by C2k and DRD to make it available via Learning NI in a course format. This is expected to be available shortly.

Taxi Spend

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how much his Department spent on taxis in the last financial year.

(AQW 7397/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education spent £996 on taxis in the last financial year ended 31 March 2011.

Youth Workers: St Agnes' and St Michael's Youth Clubs, West Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6726/11-15, whether youth workers from St Agnes and St Michael's Youth Clubs, West Belfast, have been redeployed.

(AQW 7429/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Youth provision in the Belfast area is a matter for the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB).

The BELB has advised that one full-time youth worker from each club has been redeployed on a temporary basis. The youth worker from St Agnes' Youth Club has been on temporary secondment since November 2009 and the youth worker in St Michael's Youth Club moved on a temporary basis from December 2011. To ensure the two clubs continue to operate effectively, the BELB has allocated additional part-time hours to both centres for youth support worker-in-charge posts.

Reading Support: Children who are Blind

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's strategy for helping children who are blind with reading skills.

(AQW 7448/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has a range of policies in place to enable every child to learn to read. These include the school improvement strategy, the literacy and numeracy strategy and the revised curriculum and its assessment arrangements.

I recognise that pupils who are blind or have a visual impairment need additional support with their reading. That is why my Department is continuing to support the Royal National Institute of Blind People's (RNIB) Vision Strategy.

In support of the Vision Strategy, my Department is providing funding for the Regional Vision Resource Base (RVRB) at the Fortwilliam Centre, Belfast, which I was delighted to open back in June 2011.

I was pleased to note that the Education and Training Inspectorate's "Report of an Evaluation of Provision for Pupils with a Visual Impairment in Mainstream Schools in Northern Ireland", published on 2 February 2012, found provision for visual impairment in mainstream schools to be very good. The report also found that the ELBs provided a very good standard of VI support.

Boards of Governors: Training

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education (i) what training is available for Boards of Governors; and (ii) what evaluation process exists to ensure that Boards of Governors are carrying out their duties to the highest standard.

(AQW 7472/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) It is extremely important that school governors, who play an important role in our education service in an entirely voluntary capacity, are supported, including through effective training. The education and library boards are responsible for providing the training and support that Boards of Governors need in order to fulfil effectively their statutory responsibilities. The ELBs have advised that all new governors are offered a place on an induction programme and that existing governors are offered an annual governor training programme, both of which cover a variety of essential topics.

The Department of Education also provides opportunities for governors to hear directly about its strategic priorities and has recently completed a series of ten information seminars for school governors.

Additionally, governors have access to an on-line information guide on the DE website entitled 'Every School a Good School – the Governors' Role' which sets out their roles and responsibilities.

- (ii) The Education & Training Inspectorate looks at the effectiveness of a Board of Governors as part of the school inspection process. I have asked for the school inspection procedures to be reviewed and strengthened so that governors can have feedback on how they are doing and good practice can be identified and shared and that work is now in hand.

Shared Education: Advisory Group

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to detail the terms of reference for the Advisory Group on Shared Education and when these will be published.

(AQW 7491/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I will publish the terms of reference for the Ministerial Advisory Group by 1st April 2012.

Area-based Plans: Development

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6649/11-15, to outline the criteria used to determine the development of constituent local plans.

(AQW 7499/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Given the wide scope and complexity of the task and the geographical spread within some Boards, it is likely that Board level plans will be developed by combining lower level local plans.

It will be a matter for the Education & Library Boards, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectoral bodies, to determine the most appropriate means of arriving at area plans, in compliance with the Terms of Reference issued on 15 December 2011.

Area-based Plans: Education and Library Boards

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to detail the criteria to be used to determine the outcome of area-based plans submitted by the Education and Library Boards.

(AQW 7500/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Terms of Reference issued to the Boards on 15 December 2011 require the area plans to be submitted by them to reflect Departmental policies and priorities, and deliver a specified list of objectives.

They are available in full at:

<http://www.deni.gov.uk/area-planning-terms-of-reference.htm>

In considering the plans, my Department will assess the extent to which these requirements have been met.

Staff: Financial Package

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of staff within his Department who have taken any form of a financial package and are now re-employed by his Department.

(AQW 7559/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: No staff who took any form of financial package are now re-employed by the Department of Education.

Teacher:Pupil Ratio

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what was the average teacher-pupil ratio at (i) primary schools; and (ii) post-primary schools in each of the last two years.

(AQW 7578/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information is contained in the table below and is routinely published on the DE website.

PUPIL: TEACHER RATIOS IN NI BY SCHOOL TYPE: 2009/10 - 2010/11

School Type	2009/10	2010/11
Primary ¹	20.4	20.2
Post-primary	14.6	14.7

Source: Teachers Payroll and Pensions System and Annual School Census

1 Includes pupils and teachers in nursery classes.

Department for Employment and Learning

'Youth on the Move'

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made on the key objective to align with the Europe 2020 Flagship Initiative 'Youth on the Move', as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 6859/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): My Department is active in promoting the European Union's flagship educational exchange programme Erasmus and other EU policies within the higher education sector. It has membership of several national advisory boards and strategic working groups whose main functions are to provide strategic oversight for the UK Higher Education International and Europe Unit, and to provide expert input on UK/European Higher Education activities.

The aims of the Northern Ireland European Social Fund (NIESF) Programme 2007-2013, which is administered by my Department, contribute to "Youth on the Move's" objective of promoting more and equal opportunities for young people in education and in the labour market. Priority 1 of the NIESF Programme 2007-2013 provides opportunities for 16-19 year olds not in employment, education or training (NEETS). The programme is on track to achieve the target of assisting 4,500 of these young people. The Objectives of Priority 2 of the ESF programme are also in line with the objectives of "Youth on the Move" as its purpose is to develop a skilled and adaptable workforce (including the younger workforce) by increasing the number of workers qualified to levels 2 and 3 and reducing the number of workers without essential (basic) skills.

The Department will continue to work to identify and use opportunities to maintain and enhance links with the policies and programmes contained within "Youth on the Move".

Stranmillis University College, Belfast: Facilities

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Employment and Learning why he did not bid for additional capital funding, during the last monitoring round, in order to improve the facilities at Stranmillis University College, Belfast.

(AQW 6894/11-15)

Dr Farry: Stranmillis University College has been allocated £1.635m of capital funding for the current spending review period. It has indicated how this will be spent and has prepared economic appraisals to cover the draw down of funds in the current year. Funds secured under the last monitoring round were required to be expended by 31 March 2012. There was not sufficient time available for the College to identify new capital proposals, prepare economic appraisals, obtain approval of these, procure the capital works and to execute the works before that date.

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

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 6504/11-15, whether representatives of Queen's University, Belfast or Stranmillis University College, Belfast have met with representatives of Methodist College, Belfast to discuss any aspect of the proposed merger of Queen's and Stranmillis.

(AQW 6896/11-15)

Dr Farry: Queen's University Belfast and Stranmillis University College have both advised me that no representatives of their respective institutions have met with representatives of Methodist College Belfast to discuss any aspect of the proposed merger of Queen's and Stranmillis.

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

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, given that 40 of the 55 responses to the public consultation on the proposed merger of Stranmillis University College, Belfast and Queen's University, Belfast were opposed to the merger, for his assessment of the claim that the merger has 'overwhelming' support.

(AQW 6897/11-15)

Dr Farry: Of the 55 responses received, 13 were from corporate entities and 42 were from individuals. The majority of the individual responses were negative. The majority of the corporate responses were supportive. As with any consultation, responses are not necessarily scientifically representative and they also reflect views at a particular snapshot in time when the consultation is conducted. On balance, the responses which were against the merger came primarily from individuals and limited corporate representation whilst the supportive responses came from a much wider range of individuals and corporate entities.

Furthermore, I have had many meetings with a wide range of stakeholders with varying opinions which have informed the conclusions that I have made.

Stranmillis University College: Meeting with Staff

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he intends to update the Assembly on the outcome of his meeting with the staff of Stranmillis University College, Belfast on 19 January 2012.

(AQW 6899/11-15)

Dr Farry: I made a statement to the Assembly on 28 November 2011 setting out the work that I have asked the Department to undertake to inform the way forward on teacher education. I am not intending to make any further policy statement on this issue until the study has been concluded.

Students: Non-UK Nationals

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of non-UK nationals, and their proportion of the student population, studying at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; (ii) the University of Ulster; and (iii) the Regional Colleges, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6939/11-15)

Dr Farry: The information on total enrolments, total non-UK national enrolments and their proportion of the student population for each of the last three years, for which data are available at (i) Queen's University Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster are detailed overleaf.

(i) Queen's University Belfast

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Total student enrolments	22,810	22,705	24,195
Total Non-UK national student enrolments	2,175	2,140	2,510
Percentage of Non-UK national student enrolments	9.5%	9.4%	10.4%

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

(ii) The University of Ulster

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Total student enrolments	23,160	26,030	25,520
Total Non-UK national student enrolments	2,995	3,605	4,010
Percentage of Non-UK national student enrolments	12.9%	13.8%	15.7%

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes: Figures are rounded to the nearest 5.

(iii) Regional Colleges

The table below details enrolments of non-UK nationals, studying Professional and Technical Courses at the Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges for the last 3 years for which full-year data are available.

Non UK National Professional and Technical Enrolments in NI FE Colleges (2008/09-2010/11)

	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Total enrolments	142,486	163,350	155,425
Total Non-UK national enrolments	4,579	5,711	4,874
Percentage of Non-UK national enrolments	3.2%	3.5%	3.1%

Source: Further Education Statistical Record

Agricultural Industry: Funding for Courses

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much funding has been allocated in the 2011/12 financial year for (i) vocational; and (ii) apprenticeship courses in the agricultural industry.

(AQW 6941/11-15)

Dr Farry: The primary responsibility for education and training for the agricultural industry rests with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

The six Further Education (FE) colleges are funded through the recurrent block grant for the provision of further education up to and including level 3, essential skills and higher education provision delivered in FE colleges. This funding is allocated annually among colleges on the basis of an agreed, planned volume of provision to be delivered during the next academic year. The total planned delivery is agreed in line with the curriculum policy and Departmental priorities, categorised into broad areas of the curriculum, such as level, priority skills areas, vocational and externally regulated provision. Funding is not allocated to specific courses, qualifications or industry sectors. The Department sets the strategic direction for the Further Education sector in Northern Ireland and each college is responsible for its own curriculum offer.

Funding is allocated on an academic year basis and in 2011/12 the six colleges have a target to deliver provision to the value of £147.7 million in further education, essential skills, and higher education vocational provision. It is not possible to quantify or estimate how much of the total funding will relate to provision in the agricultural industry.

Similarly it is not possible to break down spend on apprenticeships at industry level. ApprenticeshipsNI is a demand led provision and the uptake of places is determined by employers in Northern Ireland. My Department funds the training element of the full framework apprenticeship in the occupational areas required by employers in Northern Ireland. The closing position for financial year 2011/12 has yet to be determined. ApprenticeshipsNI expenditure for the 2010/11 financial year was £25,043,650, 40% of which is funded from the European Social Fund.

Universities: Drop-out Rates

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how the drop-out rates at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; and (ii) the University of Ulster compared to other UK universities' rates in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6942/11-15)

Dr Farry: Data on drop out rates for Higher Education Institutions are only available for undergraduate entrants who fail to return to Higher Education in the following academic year. In terms of reporting information on drop out rates in Higher Education, the Department concentrates on full-time first degree entrants.

The drop-out rates in Queen's University and the University of Ulster compared with the UK average for each of the last 3 available years for which data are available are detailed below:

	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Queen's University Belfast	6.3%	7.1%	7.7%
University of Ulster	12.4%	13.2%	10.0%
Total UK average	9.0%	8.6%	7.9%

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- 1 Data on drop out rates for Higher Education Institutions are obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's Performance Indicators data.
- 2 The latest available data are for 2008/09 entrants failing to continue in Higher Education in 2009/10.
- 3 The data measures those full-time first degree entrants who fail to continue in Higher Education in a particular academic year after entry in the previous academic year.

Universities: Drop-out Rates

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the drop-out rate at (i) Queen's University, Belfast; (ii) the University of Ulster in each of the last three available years, broken down by school; and what these figures represent as a percentage of the number of students in each school.

(AQW 6943/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department does not hold information on drop-out rates by school and therefore subject area is used as a proxy.

Data on drop out rates for Higher Education Institutions are only available for undergraduate entrants who fail to return to Higher Education in the following academic year. In terms of reporting information on drop out rates in Higher Education, the Department concentrates on full-time first degree entrants.

The drop-out rates in Queen's University and the University of Ulster, broken down by subject area, in each of the last three available years are detailed in the table below:

Subject Area	The Queen's University of Belfast			University of Ulster		
	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Medicine & dentistry	0.0%	1.1%	2.4%	...	...	...
Subjects allied to medicine	3.6%	6.5%	5.8%	9.1%	8.9%	10.2%
Biological sciences	9.8%	8.6%	9.2%	8.7%	11.1%	10.1%
Agriculture & related subjects	1.5%	9.4%	2.7%	3.1%	15.8%	3.6%
Physical sciences	8.6%	9.6%	8.9%	12.4%	7.4%	6.6%
Mathematical sciences	7.8%	11.6%	15.0%	...	...	...
Computer science	13.6%	11.3%	13.5%	16.5%	18.1%	10.9%
Engineering & technology	11.6%	10.7%	13.1%	21.7%	26.9%	17.4%
Architecture, building & planning	7.8%	4.7%	8.3%	14.2%	10.4%	10.9%
Social studies	5.9%	8.9%	6.3%	11.1%	11.9%	9.2%
Law	5.1%	2.5%	3.7%	11.4%	8.2%	10.3%
Business & administrative studies	2.9%	3.1%	6.0%	11.0%	13.3%	8.4%
Mass communications and documentation	13.0%	17.1%	13.9%	9.7%	14.1%	8.4%
Languages	6.1%	6.0%	7.9%	10.2%	17.4%	12.9%
Historical and philosophical studies	8.7%	6.5%	7.3%	13.8%	18.3%	10.5%
Creative arts & design	4.3%	11.6%	14.3%	16.2%	13.1%	8.8%
Education	...	...	...	10.7%	17.4%	12.5%
Total	6.3%	7.1%	7.7%	12.4%	13.2%	10.0%

Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)

Notes:

- 1 Data on drop out rates for Higher Education Institutions are obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency's Performance Indicators data.
- 2 The latest available data are for 2008/09 entrants failing to continue in Higher Education in 2009/10.
- 3 The data measures those full-time first degree entrants who fail to continue in Higher Education in a particular academic year after entry in the previous academic year.
- 4 Percentages calculated on small populations are suppressed and represented as '...' in the above table.

Students: Fees Paid by Non-UK and Non-EU Nationals

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the amount of fees generated by universities and colleges through the enrolment of (i) non-UK nationals; and (ii) non-EU nationals in each of the last three years; and what percentage of the total amount of fees generated these figures represent.

(AQW 6945/11-15)

Dr Farry: Universities

The tables below show the amount of fees generated by universities through the enrolment of:

- (i) non-UK nationals in each of the last three years; and
- (ii) non-EU nationals in each of the last three years.

Also:

- (iii) the percentage of the total amount of fees generated that the non-UK income figures represent; and
- (iv) the percentage of the total amount of fees generated that the non-EU income figures represent.

Table One: Queen's University Belfast (QUB)

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
(i) Total Fees generated from non-UK nationals by QUB (£m)	£9.67m	£10.65m	£11.72m
(ii) Total Fees generated from non-EU nationals by QUB (£m)	£7.49m	£8.30m	£9.04m
(iii) Estimated non-UK income as % of overall total	20.9%	20.6%	21.2%
(iv) Estimated non-EU income as % of overall total	16.2%	16.0%	16.2%

- 1 (i) and (iii) above refer to EU nationals from outside the UK.
- 2 (ii) and (iv) above refer to nationals from outside the EU.
- 3 For the purposes of financial reporting, only non-EU fee income is accounted for separately by Queen's University Belfast. Currently, Home/EU income is not accounted for separately, between UK and non-UK students. In the absence of available income figures for this category, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) has made an apportionment, based on student numbers.

Table Two: University of Ulster (UU)

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
(i) Total Fees generated from non-UK nationals by UU (£m)	£2.95m	£2.80m	£3.06m
(ii) Total Fees generated from non-EU nationals by UU (£m)	£3.49m	£3.11m	£3.24m
(iii) Estimated non-UK income as % of overall total	6.6%	5.5%	5.9%
(iv) Estimated non-EU income as % of overall total	7.8%	6.2%	6.3%

- 1 (i) and (iii) above refer to EU nationals from outside the UK.
- 2 (ii) and (iv) above refer to nationals from outside the EU.

Table Three: Stranmillis University College

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
(i) Total Fees generated from non-UK nationals by Stranmillis (£m)	£0.01m	£0.02m	£0.03m
(ii) Total Fees generated from non-EU nationals by Stranmillis (£m)	£0.01m	£0.01m	£0.01m
(iii) Estimated non-UK income as % of overall total	0.28%	0.60%	0.94%
(iv) Estimated non-EU income as % of overall total	0.24%	0.36%	0.32%

- 1 (i) and (iii) above refer to EU nationals from outside the UK.
- 2 (ii) and (iv) above refer to nationals from outside the EU.

Table Four: St. Mary's University College

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
(i) Total Fees generated from non-UK nationals by St. Mary's (£m)	£0.08m	£0.1m	£0.1m
(ii) Total Fees generated from non-EU nationals by St. Mary's (£m)	£0.00m	£0.00m	£0.00m
(iii) Estimated non-UK income as % of overall total	3.50%	4.61%	4.16%
(iv) Estimated non-EU income as % of overall total	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%

- (i) and (iii) above refer to EU nationals from outside the UK.
- (ii) and (iv) above refer to nationals from outside the EU.

Further Educations Colleges

The tables below show the amount of fees generated by the six Further Education Colleges through the enrolment of:

- non-UK nationals in each of the last three years; and
- non-EU nationals in each of the last three years.

Also:

- the percentage of the total amount of fees generated that the non-UK income figures represent; and
- the percentage of the total amount of fees generated that the non-EU income figures represent.

Table Five: Further Education Colleges

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
(i) Total fees from non-UK nationals (£m)	£1.98m	£1.38m	£0.66m
(ii) Total fees from non-EU nationals (£m)	£0.14m	£0.19m	£0.48m
(iii) Non-UK fee income as % of total fee income	11.3%	7.1%	3.6%
(iv) Non-EU fee income as % of total fee income	0.8%	1.0%	2.6%

- (i) and (iii) above refer to EU nationals from outside the UK.
- (ii) and (iv) above refer to nationals from outside the EU.
- For the purposes of financial reporting, only non EU fee income is accounted for separately by the further education colleges. Non-UK students have been identified by nationality and the related fees are disclosed within the table above.

Students: Illegal Mobile Phone Possession

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) whether Belfast Metropolitan College or North West Regional College were aware that one of their students had a court order preventing him from possessing a mobile phone and that he had breached this order in the past; (ii) whether these institutions were aware that he had recently received a suspended sentence for a breach of this order; (iii) how students in these situations are monitored by a college; (iv) what support is being given to the students affected by the breaches of this order (v) whether there is an onus on the colleges to maintain the confidentiality of the student who is subject to the order; and (vi) if so, how this impacts on the protection and duty of care that a college has to its other students.

(AQW 7000/11-15)

Dr Farry: I would refer you to the individual colleges for the specific aspects of the cases in relation to the individual in question.

All six Further Education (FE) colleges have robust safeguarding procedures in place, developed in conjunction with a number of external agencies, including the PSNI and Social Services.

Upon enrolment at an FE college, a student is asked to declare any criminal convictions. Where a student makes such a declaration, the college will initiate its safeguarding procedures, to ensure that the student will not pose a risk to other students. These arrangements include a thorough risk assessment, conducted by the college, which will evaluate the level of adjustments needed, or whether it is appropriate for the student to enrol at the college.

Where a student discloses information of this nature, the college will only make it available to staff or students where it is deemed necessary, informed by a risk assessment carried out as part of its safeguarding procedures.

Certificate of Education

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much has been spent on students from Stranmillis University College, Belfast achieving the Catholic Certificate of Education in each of the last thirteen years.

(AQW 7001/11-15)

Dr Farry: This is information which my Department does not hold and I requested Stranmillis University College to provide it. The College provided information for the last six academic years in the table below which represents the reimbursement made in each year to students.

Year	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
£	7,010	6,125	6,527	1,804	5,400	2,956

University of Ulster: Student Transfers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how many (i) courses; and (ii) student places were transferred from the University of Ulster Coleraine campus to other sites in each of the last three years; and how many (a) courses; and (b) student places were transferred from other University of Ulster sites to the Coleraine campus over the same period.

(AQW 7072/11-15)

Dr Farry: The University of Ulster has advised that no courses or student places have been transferred either to or from the Coleraine campus in the last three years.

Unemployment: Craigavon Area

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what plans he has to tackle unemployment in the Craigavon area during this Assembly term.

(AQW 7077/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department will tackle unemployment in the Craigavon area by providing a comprehensive range of services and programmes to help people find and sustain employment. Specific plans include the support of the Employment Service frontline to engage clients in work-focused activity, helping them to overcome barriers to employment. In addition, we will ensure that clients have access to more intensive support such as Steps to Work, our main adult return to work programme. This is complemented by our active engagement with employers in the area to help source placement and job opportunities. Between April 2011 and November 2011 1718 unemployed people in the Craigavon area have been helped into work and this work will continue.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in his Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7092/11-15)

Dr Farry: The detail on the number of full time equivalent (FTE) staff who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time for each of the years requested, is set out in the table below:

Year	2000/01	2005/06	2010/11
Number of FTE staff*	0.14	0.31	0.29

* Information on FTE staff is not available from the Construction Industry Training Board.

All facilities time has been granted to trade union representatives of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)

Antisocial Behaviour: Holylands Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the progress of the schemes aimed at combating anti-social behaviour in the Holylands area of Belfast, and in other areas with a large student population.

(AQW 7104/11-15)

Dr Farry: Belfast City Council's Holylands Inter-Agency Group's Implementation Plan outlines a number of short, medium and long term measures to try to address the ongoing problems in the area.

Although the Plan is specific to the wider Holylands area, many of the measures outlined are applicable across Northern Ireland.

The Plan covers the following six key themes, Alcohol, Policing, Student accommodation, Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and Local Neighbourhood, Student behaviour, Holylands management and Environmental.

Other medium and long-term measures are currently being progressed by the different departments and Agencies on the Holylands Inter-Agency Group. Some of these involve the introduction of legislation to tackle specific issues. These include The

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act. (One of the key elements of this legislation is its capacity to empower the police to close nuisance premises). Also, Fixed Penalty Notice powers under the Justice Act (NI) 2011 for minor offences such as drunk in a public place, disorderly behaviour and breach of the peace will be commenced in April 2012.

In addition Department of Justice officials are finalising the development of a Community Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland.

The Department for Social Development is currently carrying out a review of the definition and regulation of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). It has been engaging with key stakeholders, including DEL, to ensure all relevant matters are included. It then intends to produce proposals for change for public consultation by 31 March 2012.

Both Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster continue to develop clear and consistent guidance for students regarding their rights and responsibilities as students, required standards of behaviour; issues regarding living off campus and consequences faced if things go wrong. These are reviewed at least annually and good practice is shared where appropriate.

Other measures include the introduction of CCTV, Community Safety Wardens, increased police presence, the enforcement of alcohol bye-laws and the deployment of Student Liaison Officers in the Holylands area.

In addition, Belfast City Council commissioned a Strategic Study to examine the key issues in the wider area and to try to identify a long term solution. A series of workshops involving key stakeholders has just been completed to finalise the recommendations of this Study. When the study report is finalised my Department, in conjunction with the Belfast City Council, intends to hold an event to disseminate the findings of the report.

The Implementation Plan is currently being reviewed and I will forward a copy to you when finalised.

St Mary's University College: Funding

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 6828/11-15, given his Department's role as the main funder of St Mary's University College, for his assessment of the benefits of his Department engaging with the Equality Commission on this issue.

(AQW 7689/11-15)

Dr Farry: I acknowledge that my Department is the main funder of St. Mary's University College. However, under current legislation my Department has no remit in this area and, I repeat, it is a matter for the Equality Commission of Northern Ireland.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Electricity Interconnection

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) whether her Department, or the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, has undertaken cost-benefit modelling of the benefits of having (a) a latest generation, high efficiency flexible gas fired power station constructed, instead of the Electricity Supply Board providing electricity through the North/South interconnector; and (b) greater electricity interconnection with the British mainland and access to its cheaper electricity; and (ii) for her assessment of whether either of these options could potentially offer greater benefits to consumers than the proposed North/South interconnector.

(AQW 6900/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Investing in new power stations is a commercial decision that depends on a company's ability to trade competitively. It must be able to move its power through a reliable electricity grid with adequate interconnection capacity with Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

The planned North South Interconnector will provide the capacity needed to promote investment and competition, while restoring the Moyle interconnector to Scotland and introduction of the interconnector between the Irish Republic and Wales will improve electricity flows into and out of the market to the benefit of consumers.

North/South Interconnector

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she will ensure that consumers have the relevant information on alternatives before any final decision is reached on the proposed North/South interconnector, such as a new power station and greater interconnection with Great Britain.

(AQW 6901/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Approval of investment by NIE in North South interconnection as part of the programme to upgrade the Northern Ireland grid system is the responsibility of the Utility Regulator, in keeping with its statutory and energy policy objectives. Economic regulation aims to achieve a balance between the viability of the required project for the company and its shareholders and ensuring value for money for consumers.

The Regulator when approving investment to upgrade the grid has and will consult interested parties.

North/South Interconnector

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the dominance of Republic of Ireland state owned energy businesses in the Northern Ireland market; and the impact that a second North/South interconnector will have on competition in the energy market.

(AQW 6902/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Single Electricity Market uses market mitigation measures to monitor and address the effect of market dominance by any commercial operator. The SEM Committee recently published a draft decision paper on an external assessment of market power and liquidity in the SEM. This found that these measures are effective in ensuring competitive bids by generators trading in the market.

The extra capacity of a second North South interconnector will facilitate increased competition from the most efficient plants in the market.

Electricity: Customer Switching System

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the maximum number of consumers that are able to change electricity supplier on an annual basis.

(AQW 6954/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The current electricity customer switching system can facilitate up to 120,000 switches within a 12 month period. An unconstrained switching system is expected to go live in May 2012.

Electricity: Switching Supplier Targets

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what targets are in place with regard to the number of consumers switching electricity suppliers.

(AQW 6957/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have not set targets relating to the number of consumers switching electricity supplier.

My Department and the Utility Regulator continue to work to create competitive energy market conditions that offer consumers a choice of electricity supplier. In addition, work is underway to improve the information available to consumers so that they can make informed decisions in relation to their electricity supplier and to enhance the current electricity switching arrangements to ensure that customers can switch supplier within three weeks of request, in line with EU and domestic legislation. Ultimately the choice to switch energy provider is at the discretion of the consumer.

Electricity: Switching Supplier Support

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps her Department (i) has taken; and (ii) plans to take to encourage and support consumers in changing electricity suppliers.

(AQW 6960/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My officials continue to engage with the Utility Regulator and energy companies to encourage new entrants into the Northern Ireland electricity supply market, and to ensure there are no barriers to customer switching.

The EU Third Package of energy legislation contains obligations to enhance consumer information and protection, and to ensure energy companies facilitate switching within three weeks of request. My Department has made legislation requiring the Utility Regulator to implement this obligation via licence conditions. The Utility Regulator, in consultation with the industry, is developing the necessary conditions to give effect to these and other Directive requirements.

Electricity: Price Reduction

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she expects that Northern Ireland electricity companies will follow the lead of companies on the mainland in reducing consumer prices in response to falling fuel costs.

(AQW 7004/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I understand that the Utility Regulator monitors wholesale and retail energy prices on an ongoing basis and is keeping the matter under review. If wholesale energy costs continue to fall, this will be reflected in the electricity bills of Northern Ireland consumers in due course.

North/South Interconnector

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, if the new north/south interconnector proceeds, (i) whether it will be put out to tender so that an organisation other than the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) could build and operate it in competition with the existing interconnector, or whether it is assumed that ESB will build and operate it; (ii) if so, whether it will be built as a merchant plant operating in the market at its own risk, or on the basis of a guaranteed regulated income; and (iii) for her assessment of these options for the benefit of consumers in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7008/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Utility Regulator has yet to make a decision on the method of procurement to be used under European procurement law. The interconnector would be regulated as part of the Northern Ireland transmission system and operated by SONI, the transmission system operator for Northern Ireland.

The Utility Regulator has a duty to ensure that its decisions ensure value for money and protect customers.

Energy: Opportunities for Generation

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the companies which currently offer opportunities for individuals to generate energy via (i) wind turbines; (ii) solar panels; (iii) air source heat pumps; and (iv) ground source heat pumps. **(AQW 7030/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: DETI does not hold details of companies that offer opportunities for individuals to generate energy. However any individual installing microgeneration onshore wind turbines or solar photovoltaic (up to 50kW installed capacity) must use the services of a Microgeneration Certification Scheme approved equipment installer in order to become accredited under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation.

Domestic renewable heat technologies, including air source and ground source heat pumps, will also be required to be certified under MCS and installed by MCS accredited installers in order to receive support under the proposed Northern Ireland Renewable Heat Incentive.

The Microgeneration Certification Scheme website (www.microgenerationcertification.org) details registered installers for these technologies, as well as others, for Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Energy: Grants for Generation

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the financial incentives or grants that are available for individuals to generate energy via (i) wind turbines; (ii) solar panels; (iii) air source heat pumps; and (iv) ground source heat pumps. **(AQW 7031/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: Wind turbines and solar photovoltaic panels are incentivised by the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation which provides a revenue stream for the renewable electricity generated in the form of Renewables Obligation Certificates. There are no grants available for the generation of renewable electricity.

DETI recently consulted on proposals to provide financial support for a range of renewable heat installations, including solar thermal panels, air source heat pumps and ground source heat pumps. It is proposed that these technologies should be supported under a future Renewable Heat Incentive scheme for Northern Ireland and through grant payments for domestic customers known as Renewable Heat Premium Payments. The proposed level of support for these technologies can be found in the consultation paper on the DETI website. The Department is currently carrying out further analysis on the proposed scheme in advance of finalising levels of support. An announcement will be made in due course.

Social Tariff

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 3412/11-15, to outline her Department's intentions to introduce a social tariff; and whether she will bring forward a paper on this issue to the Executive. **(AQW 7038/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: I am already on record as stating that I have no plans to introduce a social tariff at this time and as such will not be bringing forward any paper on the issue to the Executive.

Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 6012/11-15, when the further energy efficiency measure will be in place; and to outline the benefits of this measure to non-vulnerable households. **(AQW 7054/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: The Department can give no commitments as to timescale or form of a measure which remains policy under development and which will require the approval of the Executive, full consultation and subsequent legislation.

Economic Activity: Derry

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 5185/11-15, what initiatives and projects she has introduced in the last three years to increase economic activity in Derry. **(AQW 7055/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: Over the last three years, my Department in conjunction with Invest NI has issued circa 500 offers of assistance to companies within the Londonderry City Council area, generating over £100 million of investment and promoting almost 900 new jobs. During this time some 474 new business starts were also created in the area and Invest NI has hosted some 30 visits to the Londonderry City Council area by potential inward investors.

Invest NI's North West Regional Office was actively involved in the Sector Working Groups which have been set up to develop the Regeneration Plan ("One Plan") for the City. The plan was launched in 2011 after a two year engagement process. Invest NI also continues to work closely with Londonderry City Council and other stakeholders to maximise opportunities for economic growth. This currently includes two significant economic development projects, one tailored to exploit and maximise the opportunities that the UK City of Culture status offers for local businesses, and the second targeted at Growing the Digital Economy. Both are considered catalyst actions if Londonderry is to gain the economic benefits targeted in the "One Plan".

The Londonderry Stakeholder Forum was set up by Invest NI in October 2010 as a means of ensuring closer working relationships between the key stakeholders in economic development in the City. Comprising representatives from amongst others, Council, Chamber, Ilex, DSD, DEL and the University, the forum meets regularly to discuss current activities and ideas for increasing economic activity, aligned to the regeneration plan, and local economic development in general. At present the forum is working on a sales proposition for the city as well as scoping projects targeted at enhancing the social economy.

Of course, the last three years has seen our local business base subjected to the full impact of the economic downturn and, in an attempt to alleviate this, we have been taking various proactive steps to support our local business base.

As a direct response to the downturn, I launched "The Jobs Fund" in April 2011 with a ring-fenced £19m budget to support business owners to create new, sustainable jobs that will tackle our current levels of unemployment. To date, the uptake in Londonderry has been most encouraging with nine projects approved and a further two in negotiation. Collectively these projects will create 143 new jobs with 63 already created. This includes recently announced job creation projects for One Stop Data (24 jobs), Axa Insurance (13 jobs) and Fresh Food Kitchens (5 jobs).

The Jobs Fund, through its Neighbourhood Renewal Area (NRA) Business Start grant, has also issued offers of support to 95 individuals to start new businesses in Londonderry. While many of these businesses are still at a very early stage, this support has already led directly to the creation of 37 new jobs. In addition, a further 18 new, young entrepreneurs aged 16-24 have been offered support through the NEET Business Start Grant (aimed at young people Not in Employment, Education or Training). The Jobs Fund has also supported three social enterprises in Londonderry which will create a further nine new jobs.

As you can see from the above, my Department and Invest NI is continuing to seek to maximise economic development opportunities in both Londonderry and the North West region as a whole and you can be assured that we will continue to help companies in the city cope with the effects of the downturn and build for the future opportunities that City of Culture status will provide.

Energy Efficiency Directive

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what consideration his Department has given to developing further policy on energy efficient measures to comply with the potential targets under the proposed new Energy Efficiency Directive.

(AQW 7067/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department is working closely with the Department of Social Development, which has statutory responsibility for domestic energy efficiency, and with other Northern Ireland departments, to develop further policy measures to comply with potential targets under the proposed new Energy Efficiency Directive.

Home Heating Oil: Industry Regulation

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues regarding regulation of the home heating oil industry; and whether she has any plans to regulate this industry.

(AQW 7071/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have no plans to extend the powers of the independent regulator.

The Office of Fair Trading report published on 18 October 2011, on the competitiveness of the UK energy market for customers not connected to the gas grid, did not see any justification for price regulation in Great Britain or Northern Ireland on competition grounds. It reported that retail and wholesale heating oil prices in recent years had been lower in Northern Ireland than other parts of the UK.

Invest NI: Land Bank, Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the current status of the InvestNI Land Bank in the Upper Bann constituency, including any reserves, the number of sites and their value.

(AQW 7079/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's land is held in support of economic development projects brought forward by qualifying businesses with an approved business case and immediate property need.

Within the Upper Bann Constituency the agency holds 332 acres in 6 locations across Lurgan, Portadown, Craigavon and Banbridge. Whilst a significant proportion of this has been developed and is occupied by businesses there remain circa 176 acres available. At 31st March 2011 this land was valued, by DFP Land & Property Services, at approximately £11.3 million.

Invest NI employs a long term strategy in respect of its land holding and does not hold land in reserve.

The table attached at Annex A provides information in respect of Invest NI's land holding, the amount of available land and its valuation broken down at each location.

ANNEX A

Location	Town	Land Holding (Acres)*	Land Availability (Acres)	Valuation (£) as at 31 March 2011**
Mandeville	Craigavon	99.00	95.18	4,600,000
Charlestown Road	Portadown	60.16	22.30	2,845,000
Halfpenny Valley	Lurgan	60.37	44.70	2,312,500
Craigavon Food Park	Portadown	43.36	13.00	1,490,000
Silverwood	Lurgan	44.12	0.50	65,000
Scarva Road	Banbridge	25.13	0	N/A
Total		332.14	175.68	£11,312,500

* Figures are correct as at 31st December 2011

** An asset valuation exercise on all Invest NI property is undertaken by DFP Land and Property Services (LPS) on an annual basis. Indicative per acre valuations are also undertaken by LPS which reflect the restrictive covenants contained within the 999 year lease offered by Invest NI.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in her Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7091/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) & (ii) No records of facility time usage are held in the Department or its arm's-length bodies for 2000/01 or 2005/06.
- (iii) During 2010/11 our records indicate that a total of 6 days* of facility time (full-time equivalent of 0.02) were spent on trade union duties on behalf of NIPSA.

* facility time occurrences of less than half a day are normally not recorded.

Invest NI: Unspent Funds

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with the Minister of the Environment regarding the planning issues that contributed to the return of over £21 million in unspent funds by InvestNI.

(AQW 7095/11-15)

Mrs Foster: There were no planning issues which contributed to the return of funds by Invest NI.

Invest NI: Entrepreneurship Programmes

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the ongoing expenditure on the advertising of entrepreneurship programmes by InvestNI, which organisation is currently entitled to, and in a position to deliver these programmes during the period January to March 2012.

(AQW 7096/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI is not currently advertising a business start programme. Invest NI's Go For It advertising campaign is a generic message to encourage individuals to consider self employment and entrepreneurship. Due to the current legal action by Enterprise Northern Ireland, Invest NI is prevented from delivering a business start programme. Other organisations wishing to deliver such programmes should consider whether they need to take legal advice in relation to this.

Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when her Department will submit its legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 7101/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Oil Industry Regulator: Legislation

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline her plans to introduce legislation to provide for an oil industry regulator.

(AQW 7109/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Member is referred to the answer provided in AQW No. 3734/11-15.

Invest NI: Foreign Representation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 6313/11-15, what is the cost of the current level of foreign representation by InvestNI; and what performance metrics and timescales have been put in place to determine the success of this representation.

(AQW 7116/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The current level of export-focused foreign representation by Invest NI costs £1,074,200 per annum.

Programme for Government 2011-15 has tasked Invest NI with increasing the value of manufacturing exports by 15%.

Economic Policy: Independent Review

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether the finding in the Independent Review of Economic Policy, that only 82 percent of promoted jobs are actually created, is still regarded as an accurate benchmark; and, if not, what is the reliable percentage.

(AQW 7121/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The 82% finding in the Independent Review of Economic Policy was the result of a one-off exercise using point-in-time data, which was considered reliable at that time. Unfortunately, system constraints mean that the provision of precise point-in-time job creation data to answer Assembly Questions is only possible following an extensive exercise which would involve disproportionate cost. In addition, by its nature 'point in time' job creation information is complex and open to misinterpretation without an in-depth understanding of the job creation profile of the individual projects that have been supported during the time period in question.

Importantly not all grant offered by Invest NI is paid out to assisted businesses. Each project that is offered assistance by Invest NI is intensively monitored to ensure financial assistance is only paid out to companies based on actual jobs created within the control period specified in the Letter of Offer. In addition, if the original number of jobs promised by a project fail to be completely implemented, then Invest NI is free to consider its options with regards to seeking clawback of any assistance paid.

The important constraint to be borne in mind when analyzing job creation is the job creation profile of any given project, i.e. any supported project will have a lead time between the assistance being granted, to the project's full implementation and all jobs being created. For example, a project which is offered assistance in 2011 to create 300 jobs may not actually have created all of these jobs for up to five years depending on the company's implementation plan. This is further complicated by the fact that at present, Invest NI has some 1,500 employment related live Letters of Offer in process, each of which has its own implementation plan, job creation profile, delivery date and control period. This underlines the complexity of providing accurate and specific figures on actual jobs created at any given period in time.

However, Invest NI has recently conducted a similar exercise to that undertaken for IREP for the NI Audit Office, the results of which will be published in their forthcoming review. Invest NI is also developing systems in order to make such information more readily available in future, but even when these systems are put in place, difficulties will remain with interpreting such data, given the intricacies and complexities discussed above.

Radon Gas: Fermanagh

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether any of the areas licensed for gas exploration in Co. Fermanagh have been identified as having a high level of radon gas.

(AQW 7157/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A map of estimated in-house radon levels in Co Fermanagh may be seen on page 15 of the radon report published on the DoE website:

<http://www.doeni.gov.uk/niea/pollution-home/radiation/radon.htm>

Across the southeastern half of the area licensed for gas exploration less than 1% of homes are estimated to be above the Radon Action Level.

Higher levels are predicted in that part of the licence area northwest of a line between Enniskillen and Belcoo. Recent analysis by British Geological Survey indicates that in approximately 10% of this part of the licence area between 10 and 30% of homes may have radon levels exceeding the Action Level. These higher radon levels are associated with underlying limestone.

The target of shale-gas exploration is the Bundoran shale. Across almost all the area where this formation comes to the ground surface, to the west, southwest and southeast of Enniskillen, less than one percent of homes are expected to have radon levels

exceeding the Action Level. An airborne geophysical survey flown over all Northern Ireland in 2005/6 did not indicate abnormal levels of radioactivity arising from the Bundoran shale.

The potential for radon occurring in domestic gas supplies sourced from shale is not thought to be significantly more than in domestic gas sourced from conventional reservoirs. The Health Protection Agency estimates that natural gas used for cooking contributes only about 0.2% of the average indoor radon level; see http://www.hpa.org.uk/webc/HPAwebFile/HPAweb_C/1194947373777.

ASSI: Fermanagh

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the (i) size; and (ii) percentage of the area which is licensed for gas exploration in Co. Fermanagh which is also designated as an Area of Special Scientific Interest.

(AQW 7158/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) The area designated as Areas of Special Scientific Interest which lies within the petroleum licence in Co. Fermanagh is 74.1 square kilometres.
- (ii) This represents 9.9% of the area licensed for petroleum exploration in Co. Fermanagh.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how she is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to establish a smart specialisation platform, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7184/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The European Commission is encouraging Member States and regions to develop Smart Specialisation Strategies in order to meet the "Europe 2020" objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. Smart Specialisation Strategies are designed to help regions identify and concentrate resources on key priority areas; increase cooperation at a local, national, EU and international level; and ensure more effective use of European funding.

The draft economic strategy and the MATRIX Panel reports have already identified our capabilities and opportunities for growth in key market areas and therefore provide a strong foundation for developing a Smart Specialisation Strategy. At a European level we are co-operating with the European Regions Research and Innovation Network (ERRIN), (a network of more than 90 EU regions) to facilitate the development of a smart specialisation strategy for Northern Ireland.

As part of that process we hosted with ERRIN and the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive a workshop on Smart Specialisation in Brussels at which 130 delegates from across Europe attended.

My Department has also recently appointed a smart specialisation co-ordinator to co-ordinate and develop Northern Ireland's smart specialisation strategy.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how she is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to improve the business environment, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, to promote enterprise, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7185/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department contributes to the delivery of three of the four Thematic Priorities identified in "Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12". Specific EU related activities undertaken over the period, aimed at supporting SMEs, include:

- Encouraging smaller companies to engage more fully with the 7th Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities. This has involved supporting the sector to prepare applications and find partners. By 31 October 2011, Northern Ireland based SMEs had secured €3.3m from this source.
- Engaging directly with EU counterparts through membership of networks such as the "European Regions Research and Innovation Network" (ERRIN) which facilitates knowledge exchange, joint action and project partnerships between its members with the aim of strengthening their research and innovation capacities.
- Participating in and hosting EU workshops to exchange best practice and identify learning/funding opportunities for Northern Ireland in areas such as Smart Specialisation and Horizon 2020.
- Imminent appointment of additional staff resource based in Brussels, to engage directly with the EU institutions on this agenda and identify new funding opportunities for NI.

DETI continues to manage drawdown of the €306 million European Regional Development funds available to NI through the Sustainable Competitiveness Programme, 2007-2013. NI SMEs have been assisted through a range of initiatives funded from this source including New Grant for R&D, proof of concept activity, business advice services and product and process development schemes.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how she is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to facilitate access to European funding, including structural funds, rural development funds and research and development framework programmes, to support innovation, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7186/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department contributes to the delivery of three of the four Thematic Priorities identified in "Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12". Specific activities undertaken over the period, aimed at supporting innovation, include:

- Encouraging companies and research bodies to engage more fully with the 7th Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration activities. This has involved supporting the SME sector, Universities and other research bodies to prepare applications and find partners. In the period 31 October 2010 to 31 October 2011, Northern Ireland based researchers (in private companies, academia and other) secured €11.54m from this source.
- Engaging directly with EU counterparts through membership of networks such as the "European Regions Research and Innovation Network" (ERRIN) which facilitates knowledge exchange, joint action and project partnerships between its members with the aim of strengthening their research and innovation capacities.
- Participating in and hosting EU workshops to exchange best practice and identify learning/funding opportunities for Northern Ireland in areas such as Smart Specialisation and Horizon 2020.
- Imminent appointment of additional staff resource based in Brussels, to engage directly with the EU institutions on this agenda and identify new funding opportunities for NI.

DETI continues to manage drawdown of the €306 million European Regional Development funds available to NI through the Sustainable Competitiveness Programme, 2007-2013. €160m of this is specifically earmarked for R&D and innovation support activities such as New Grant for R&D, R&D Centres of Excellence and Innovation Advisers. My officials are also involved in early discussions with DFP on the Commission's proposals for the 2014-2020 Structural Funds period and support for innovation remains a key focus within these.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on the key objective to encourage greater participation in the Framework Programme, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7187/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) is the EU's main instrument for funding research in Europe. The programme runs from 2007 to 2013 and has a budget of €50 billion. Up to 31 October 2011 €36.5million has been drawn down by Northern Ireland organisations. The target is to draw down €50 million by 2013.

DETI through Invest NI and Intertrade Ireland, promotes the funding opportunities afforded by the EU Framework Programme. These are promoted through conferences, tailored workshops with UK National Contact Points, dissemination of work programmes through the Enterprise Europe Network and general advice to researchers. Financial support is also available to help researchers develop FP7 proposals. Invest NI also provides a Brussels-based service to facilitate closer engagement with the European Commission Officials.

Work is also ongoing to improve the support mechanisms available to organisations who wish to engage in the Framework Programme. As part of this, Invest NI have recently launched a pilot FP7 Mentoring programme to provide support to academic researchers to develop FP7 applications.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what progress has been made on the key objective to encourage universities, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute, the public and private health and life sciences sectors to increase the number of applications to the Framework Programme, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.

(AQW 7188/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) is the EU's main instrument for funding research in Europe. The programme runs from 2007 to 2013 and has a budget of €50 billion. Up to 31 October 2011 €36.5million has been drawn down by Northern Ireland organisations. The target is to draw down €50 million by 2013.

DETI through Invest NI and Intertrade Ireland, promotes the funding opportunities afforded by the EU Framework Programme through a variety of ways. These include conferences, tailored workshops with UK National Contact Points, dissemination of work programmes through the Enterprise Europe Network and general advice with researchers. Financial support is also available to help all researchers develop FP7 proposals. Invest NI also provides a Brussels-based service to facilitate closer engagement with the European Commission Officials.

To encourage University engagement on Framework, Invest NI have recently launched a pilot FP7 Mentoring programme to provide support to academic researchers to develop FP7 applications.

The Department has been working with other departments, including DARD to develop measures to specifically support increased AFBI engagement on the Framework Programme.

Similarly in relation to the life and health sciences sector, Invest NI plan to invest £5M over a 5 year period into the Connected Health Innovation Centre at Jordanstown. As part of this the centre will seek research funding from European and International funding bodies.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Petroleum Licences

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the granting of petroleum licences for hydraulic fracturing operations was not subject to a strategic environmental assessment, when the identification of marine renewable generation zones has been subject to the strategic environmental assessment process.

(AQW 7217/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 sets out the requirements for Strategic Environmental Assessments to be carried out on plans or programmes within Northern Ireland of which the first formal preparatory act is on or after 21st July 2004, or where the first formal preparatory act is before 21st July 2004 but it has not been adopted or submitted to the legislative procedure for adoption before 22nd July 2006.

Petroleum licensing onshore Northern Ireland is a plan or programme for energy which was adopted before 21st July 2004 and, therefore, does not require a Strategic Environmental Assessment to be undertaken on it.

The Offshore Renewable Energy Strategic Action Plan 2009- 2020 is a plan or programme for energy of which the first formal preparatory act was on or after 21st July 2004 and, therefore, was subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Tourism: Signature Projects

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans there are to review the Signature Project formula for supporting tourism initiatives; and what consideration she has given to adding Lough Neagh to the Signature Projects.

(AQW 7221/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Strategic Framework for Action 2004-2008 identified five Signature Projects as the key drivers for tourism within Northern Ireland.

The DETI draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020 has identified nine key tourism destinations. One of these destinations is Lough Neagh.

My department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board continue to engage in consultations with key stakeholders including local authorities and the Lough Neagh Partnership with a view to further developing the area as a tourism destination.

Geothermal Energy: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what work has been carried out on the development of geothermal energy in (i) Ballymena; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Ballycastle.

(AQW 7229/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As per my response to AQWs 5716/11-15 and 5717/11/15, my Department is committed to development of a range of renewable energy technologies in order to support ambitious targets of 40% renewable electricity and 10% renewable heat by 2020. In addition, I am aware of the potential geothermal energy could play in the future energy mix.

Deep geothermal energy is eligible for incentives in the form of Renewable Obligation Certificates for renewable electricity generation. My Department is also assessing how renewable heat from deep geothermal resource could be incentivised.

In order to assess the potential for geothermal energy in Northern Ireland, the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) co-ordinated a research programme from 2008-2011, supported by the Innovation Fund, into the geological characterisation of potential deep geothermal energy targets in the Lough Neagh and Larne sedimentary basins, and the Mourne Mountains granites. The data acquired provides new insight into the deep geothermal aquifer potential of the northeast of Northern Ireland, including the areas near Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle.

Further to this, GSNI will continue to interpret this data as part of its work programme and as a partner in the €850,000 IRETherm research project into the deep geothermal resource potential of the island of Ireland. This project, funded by Science Foundation Ireland and led by the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, runs from 2011-2015 and includes the development of 'state of the art' modelling techniques with which to interpret the new Northern Ireland datasets and to further assess the potential of selected resource areas such as the Rathlin (Ballymoney and Ballycastle) and the Lough Neagh (Antrim and Ballymena) sedimentary basins.

In addition, my Department worked with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in GB during the roll-out of funding for towns and communities wishing to avail of capital support through the Low Carbon Communities Challenge (LCCC). In February 2010, as a result of DETI's work, two Northern Ireland applicants were successful in gaining funding of up to £500,000 for renewable energy projects, one of which was Ballymena Borough Council. The Ballymena proposal was a two phase project, with the first phase being a biomass district heating scheme, it was proposed that a geothermal scheme would be developed as part of phase 2. Unfortunately, the funding secured for this scheme by Ballymena Council was returned to DECC unspent.

Finally, since 2009 funding has been available from DECC, specifically for deep geothermal installations, under the UK wide Deep Geothermal Challenge Fund. My Department is not aware of any Northern Ireland applicants to this scheme.

Credit Unions

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why under the Financial Services Authority's proposed regulations, Credit Unions will not be able to invest for more than twelve months after 2013.

(AQW 7280/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Investment safety and liquidity are the primary concerns underpinning the Financial Services Authority's (FSA) proposed twelve-month limit on the investment period for Credit Unions from 1 April 2013.

Following the joint HM Treasury and FSA consultation exercise, I wrote to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury (FST) setting out a number of concerns with the proposals within the document; one of these related to the twelve month limit on investment periods for those credit unions which will transfer as 'version 1' on 31 March 2012 and which will comprise the majority of transferees. The letter was also copied to the Chief Executive of the Financial Service Authority for his observations. As a result of my intervention, FSA announced a policy change in respect of several issues, including the one year transitional easement for investment limits following the transfer date of 31 March 2012.

However, I am aware, from representations by trade bodies as well as correspondence received from individual credit unions, that there is considerable disappointment that the policy easement remains as an interim, transitional measure. In view of this, I have again written to the FST and the FSA, outlining the detrimental effect of this policy on credit unions here and requested that the issue be looked at again.

Telecommunications: Operators

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the operational competency of the telecommunication operators in Northern Ireland, in comparison with their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 7282/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no information and no remit to make an assessment of this nature. The UK telecommunications market is privatised and regulated independently of Government and on a national basis by OFCOM. Part of the OFCOM remit is to ensure that regulation delivers a competitive and efficient telecommunications marketplace.

Where my Department has contracts with telecommunications operators, performance measures have been put in place as part of the governance arrangements.

Telecommunications: Services

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment if she is aware of telecommunication services, or additional support mechanisms or services, that are available to users in other parts of the United Kingdom but are not available to Northern Ireland users.

(AQW 7283/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In Northern Ireland telecommunications services are delivered using a range of platforms including fibre, radio and mobile. The market has evolved through a combination of funding provided by Government to stimulate competition and emergence of new services and investments by network operators.

My Department takes note of the investments made by other nations and regions of the UK but I have no detailed information on the range of services such investments support and these will often be specific to the needs of such areas. As the UK telecommunications market is privatised, it is also largely a matter of choice for network operators as to where they make investments and the range of services they offer.

In some respects, other regions of the UK are currently making investments in order to catch up with the services that have been made available in Northern Ireland through DETI's strategic initiatives, particularly with regard to fibred broadband services.

Tamboran Resources

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for an update on the progress of the work programme of Tamboran Resources; and (ii) whether the Health and Safety Executive has received any notification of its intention to move to the next stage of operations.

(AQW 7359/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) Tamboran Resources Pty Ltd. is progressing in accordance with the work programme included in petroleum licence PL2/10, available for download at www.detini.gov.uk/deti-energy-index/minerals-and-petroleum/petroleum_licensing_2.htm. The company issued a press release on 1st February 2012 announcing the completion of the initial analysis of the feasibility of shale gas exploration in Northern Ireland. Further information about the work programme for Years 1 – 3 of petroleum licence PL2/10 is given in the answer to AQW7343/11-15.
- (ii) The Health and Safety Executive has not received any notification of the company's intention to move to the next stage of operations.

Home Heating Oil: Customers

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of the assertion by the Office of Fair Trading that it is “an anomaly of the Northern Ireland market that the most common household heating fuel, heating oil, is unregulated”, whether her Department intends to explore a form of regulation that would benefit home heating oil customers.

(AQW 7439/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As stated in my earlier response to the Member in AQW 5639/11-15, I have no plans to extend the powers of the independent regulator to cover the NI home heating oil sector.

I would also draw his attention to the remainder of paragraph 4.142 in the Office of Fair Trading report from which he quotes, as I believe this provides the full context for the comment. It reads: “We also recognise that regulation allows for other interventions, not just price control. For example initiatives to address fuel poverty or raise standards of conduct with respect to doorstep sales can be implemented by way of licence conditions. However, [all] these issues do not of themselves amount to a case for sector-specific regulation. Consumer law offers significant protection from unfair trading – we discuss this in the next section.”

The OFT study did not find evidence of either market power or coordination problems, with a choice of supplier generally available to consumers, low barriers to market entry, and no apparent evidence of collusion. They believe that regulation would not reduce retail prices.

Economy: Welfare Reform

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact of Welfare Reform on the economy.

(AQO 1231/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Clearly a sustainable welfare system is important to the stability of the UK economy. Nationally, and locally, it is also important that the reforms incentivise individuals to join the active labour market by ensuring that work pays. At the same time it is important that we retain vital support mechanisms to protect the most vulnerable in our society.

There are understandable concerns about any reforms to welfare – but if we want people to be productive, and part of, rather than outside of the labour market, then we should also be concerned about tackling the barriers to work by helping people to move into work.

An Executive Sub-Committee, chaired by the Minister for Social Development has been established to support the Executive in understanding the implications, across the departments, of Welfare Reform and to assist with developing a response to mitigate any negative impact and achieve the long term benefits for the people of Northern Ireland.

Tourism Strategy

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment when she will publish the Tourism Strategy.

(AQO 1232/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020 is a key priority for DETI. It is at an advanced stage and is currently being revised in light of the downturn in global tourism over the last few years and to align it with the Economic Strategy. The ambitious high level goals for increasing visitor numbers and tourism revenue over the next decade remain unchanged. The Strategy aims to double the current contribution tourism makes to the Northern Ireland Economy to £1 billion and to increase visitor numbers from 3.2million to 4.5million by 2020. I aim to seek Executive approval for the Tourism Strategy in line with the timeframe for approval of the Economic Strategy and Programme for Government.

Northern Ireland Tourist Board: Financially Assisted Projects

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the benefits of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board ‘Financially Assisted Projects’ to tourism and the wider economy.

(AQO 1233/11-15)

Mrs Foster: NITB directly funded 99 capital projects across Northern Ireland providing £60 million in financial assistance which levered an additional £90 million over the last three years. This huge investment provided confidence to the private sector and resulted in a total investment of over £300 million in tourism projects.

The visitor economy directly supports 5.6% of Northern Ireland’s total workforce or 1 in 18 jobs and sustains 40,000 jobs. These people are employed in every constituency and at every skill level.

Investment in the infrastructure is the first step in building a long term sustainable tourism sector in Northern Ireland. To realise this investment the NI2012 Programme of events leading into UK City of Culture 2013 is planned to showcase and change global perceptions of Northern Ireland as a place not only to visit but to live, work, study and invest.

Renewable Energy: Training and Qualifications

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions her Department has had with the Department for Employment and Learning, to ensure that proper training and qualifications are available for people interested in working in the renewable energy sector.

(AQO 1234/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I chair the Sustainable Energy Inter-Departmental Working Group on which DEL is represented and the skills requirements of the renewable energy sector have been regularly discussed.

Invest NI works closely with DEL and was represented as a steering group member in a recently completed DEL study on skills in the renewable energy sector. The report which was launched in September 2011 has resulted in four of NI's Further Education colleges developing training solutions for the renewables sector.

As a result of this and other awareness raising activities there is ongoing communication between DEL and Invest NI on the skills required in the renewable energy sector and these discussions will continue as the sector's requirements evolve.

Construction Industry: Economic Downturn

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what steps she has taken to address the impact of the economic downturn on the construction industry.

(AQO 1235/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Economic Strategy recognises the importance of taking action to rebuild the local labour market in the aftermath of the recession and identifies a number of actions which will support the construction industry, particularly through the delivery of a number of key infrastructure projects.

Invest NI's primary focus for the sector is on assisting businesses that are targeting external markets. A key focus has been on major construction events or projects where there is still significant spend anticipated.

I recently visited Moore Concrete in Ballymena where I saw firsthand how a focus on innovation and export can help companies in the construction sector survive the downturn. In the last three years, Moore Concrete has benefited from a number of Invest Northern Ireland programmes which have helped it develop new products, improve operational efficiency, increase skills levels and target new markets. As a result, the company has strengthened its position in both local and export markets and is continuing to expand its product portfolio and target potential new customers.

On 17 January I had a very positive engagement with the all party working group on construction which focussed on how the construction industry can help deliver the Executive's objectives set out in the PfG and Economic Strategy.

The industry has identified 16 PfG commitments that they can assist the Executive in delivering and I will continue to work with my colleagues on the Executive Sub-committee on the Economy to ensure we collectively support the sector through the delivery of the PfG and Economic Strategy.

Mobile Phone Coverage: West Tyrone

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact that Ofcom's proposals on the 4G spectrum auction will have on mobile phone coverage in West Tyrone, if they are adopted.

(AQO 1237/11-15)

Mrs Foster: These proposals are currently the subject of a second OFCOM consultation exercise which closes on 22 March 2012. The consultation documentation extends to 700 pages. Coverage proposals are linked to the Mobile Infrastructure Project by which the Chancellor of the Exchequer has set aside £150million to address mobile not-spots issues. My Department continues its engagement with Broadband Delivery UK and OFCOM to raise issues and to understand the coverage implications for Northern Ireland. We will also respond to the OFCOM consultation in due course and I would encourage all those with an interest in this matter to make their own representations to OFCOM.

Ulster Bank: Job Losses

Mr Ó hOisín asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her Department has had any discussions with the Ulster Bank about the impending job losses in the company.

(AQO 1238/11-15)

Mrs Foster: A stable and competitive banking sector that meets the needs of businesses and individuals is vital for economic recovery in Northern Ireland. While I have no statutory control of the banking sector, we have met with the main banks in Northern Ireland, most recently in December 2011, to emphasise the importance of supporting business development and growth. I also spoke with a representative of the Ulster Bank on the evening the redundancy announcement was made.

In addition to the discussion with the Ulster Bank I am also intending to meet with a representative of the Irish Bank Officials' Association (IBOA) the Finance Union.

Both the Finance Minister and I will continue to liaise with the UK and Irish governments and the local banking sector where appropriate to ensure that any impact on Northern Ireland's banks is minimised, and that we continue to have a competitive banking sector.

Department of the Environment

Councils Staff: Redundancy or Retirement Packages

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment how many local council staff who have taken (i) redundancy packages; or (ii) retirement packages have been re-employed by a public body in each of the last three years.

(AQW 5798/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

- (i) One local council member of staff who had taken a redundancy package has been re-employed by the same council in the last three financial years.
- (ii) Three council staff who had taken retirement packages has been re-employed by their original council employer council in the last three financial years.

Please note that these figures refer to staff being re-employed by the same council as it is not possible to verify whether they have been re-employed by other public bodies.

Councils: Commercial Leisure Facilities

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the name of any council owned commercial leisure facility which has (i) operated at a loss; and the level of loss; and (ii) made a profit; and the level of profit, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6073/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The name of each council run leisure facility and the level of profit and loss in the last three financial years are provided in the table below. The figures preceded by a minus sign are losses, while the others are profits.

Councils do not necessarily operate their leisure facilities on a commercial basis. Article 10 of the Recreation and Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, requires that each district council "...shall secure the provision for its area of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical and cultural activities..."

In practice, councils interpret the legislation to mean that they must operate the facilities to deliver affordable services which will maximise participation regardless of the public's socio-economic classification. Effectively, the consequence is that the facilities run almost exclusively at a loss.

The figures for Magherafelt District Council's Greenvale Leisure Centre are not provided at this point as their publication could be prejudicial to ongoing commercial negotiations in relation to the operation of the Centre. The figure will be supplied as soon as those restrictions are no longer relevant.

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
Antrim				
Antrim Forum Leisure Centre	-1,688,591	-2,646,670	-1,706,560	-6,041,821
Allen Park Golf Centre	-323,410	-428,443	-276,372	-1,028,225
Ards				
Ards Leisure Centre	-1,014,979	-989,295	-1,046,474	-3,050,748
Comber Leisure Centre	-408,304	-377,523	-402,991	-1,188,818
Portaferry Sports Centre	-102,878	-111,337	-115,280	-329,495
Ballygowan Leisure Facility	-1,046	-921	-671	-2,638
Parkway, Comber	-2,953	-13,137	-5,762	-21,852
Dairy Hall, Newtownards	-2,370	5,792	3,435	6,857
Londonderry Park, Newtownards	-45,868	-44,148	-46,749	-136,765
Crommelin Park, Donaghadee	-627	-1,442	-5,676	-7,745
The Commons, Donaghadee	-24,722	-17,959	-23,006	-65,687

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
Northfield, Donaghadee	-56	-4,805	-4,103	-8,964
Newtownards Road, Donaghadee	-124	-249	0	-373
Abbey Road, Millisle	-2,297	-878	-1,892	-5,067
Ballywalter Leisure Facility	569	391	51	1,011
Ballyhalbert Leisure Facility	-1,200	-362	-426	-1,988
Harbour Road, Portavogie	-327	-1,019	-3,796	-5,142
Cloughey	-2,453	-1,018	-7,832	-11,303
Anne St, Portaferry	573	-283	-465	-175
Church Grove, Kircubbin	-2,933	-7,829	-3,008	-13,770
Islandview Rd, Greyabbey	-2,938	-1,029	26	-3,941
Castle Park, Portaferry	134	-1,158	-427	-1,451
Cloughey Rd, Portaferry	-1,839	-617	-1,369	-3,825
Cottown	11	0	-149	-138
West Winds, Newtownards	-2,316	-13,326	-4,856	-20,498
Cloughey Bowling Pavilion	-50,931	-54,842	-45,995	-151,768
Moss Rd, Ballygowan	647	-723	1,263	1,187
Castle Place, Carrowdore	-3,142	-4,233	-4,212	-11,587
Glastry	1,545	1,442	-323	2,664
Armagh				
Orchard Leisure Centre	-891,113	-1,228,746	-1,665,258	-3,785,117
Tandragee Recreation Centre	-222,764	-236,918	-258,331	-718,013
Ardmore	-181,230	-79,082	-92,065	-352,377
Cathedral Road	-55,217	-40,003	-73,045	-168,265
Keady	-184,002	-216,590	-257,054	-657,646
Richhill	-137,555	-90,490	-210,888	-438,933
Ballymena				
Sentry Hill Sports Hall	-22,256	-35,531	-19,713	-77,500
Seven Towers Leisure Complex	-913,700	-1,218,825	-981,171	-3,113,696
Simpson & Wakehurst Playing Fields	-68,310	-83,962	-109,253	-261,525
Waveney Playing Fields	-16,083	-20,591	-19,062	-55,736
Smithfield Playing Fields	-23,816	-24,643	-26,686	-75,145
Showgrounds Complex	-472,473	-583,427	-470,014	-1,525,914
Ahoghill Playing Fields	-18,028	-18,853	-22,673	-59,554
Tober Pk/Cullybackey Playing Fields	-12,477	-13,240	-16,584	-42,301
Broughshane Playing Fields	-27,806	-26,946	-31,576	-86,328
Portglenone Playing Fields	-13,897	-14,831	-9,553	-38,281
Carnhill Play Area	-6,253	-1,840	-5,135	-13,228
Kells Playing Field	-9,552	-19,748	-20,463	-49,763

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
Ballee Playing Fields	-23,960	-24,487	-41,030	-89,477
Dunfane Playing Fields	-15,675	-41,000	-23,936	-80,611
Cargan Playing Fields	-445	-845	-1,517	-2,807
Ballykeel Playing Fields	-11,470	-17,882	-16,613	-45,965
Clough Playing Fields	-12,869	-8,827	-7,224	-28,920
Gracehill/Galgorm Playing Fields	-12,061	-17,092	-18,365	-47,518
Multi Use Games Area	-6,305	-30,244	-7,580	-44,129
Miscellaneous Play Areas	-160,524	-193,266	-209,378	-563,168
George V Park	-12,337	-19,743	-15,841	-47,921
Sentry Hill Park	-9,079	-11,691	-11,094	-31,864
People's Park	-254,981	-211,482	-217,246	-683,709
Moat Park	-6,126	-1,368	-6,273	-13,767
ECOS Grounds	-31,528	-14,963	-8,725	-55,216
Ballymena North	-12,728	-9,447	-27,037	-49,212
Ballymoney				
Joey Dunlop Leisure Centre	-657,842	-711,678	-765,820	-2,135,340
Riada Stadium	-53,332	-76,428	-78,482	-208,242
Megaw Playing Fields	-20,734	-24,087	-17,795	-62,616
Rasharkin Playing Fields	-18,131	-10,850	-9,008	-37,989
Balnamore Playing Fields	-17,022	-17,828	-19,390	-54,240
Dunloy Playing Fields	-21,896	-16,329	-15,358	-53,583
Dervock Playing Fields	-26,125	-27,593	-25,052	-78,770
Dunaghy Playing Fields	-16,360	-16,473	-17,166	-49,999
Drumaheglis Marina & Caravan Pk	-16,775	-22,304	-19,976	-59,055
Banbridge				
Banbridge Leisure Facility	-1,244,388	-715,777	-1,095,068	-3,055,233
Dromore Leisure Facility	-136,927	-152,089	-142,907	-431,923
Rathfriland Leisure Facility	-103,917	-90,066	-84,509	-278,492
Belfast				
Andersonstown Leisure Centre	-783,739	-912,752	-901,626	-2,598,117
Avoniel Leisure Centre	-992,691	-993,739	-1,021,236	-3,007,666
Shankill Leisure Centre	-997,422	-1,058,985	-1,106,150	-3,162,557
Ballysillan Leisure Centre	-866,856	-864,044	-902,975	-2,633,875
Grove Leisure Centre	-163,012	-32,244	-8,721	-203,977
Olympia Leisure Centre	-809,288	-828,338	-841,937	-2,479,563
Whiterock Leisure Centre	-827,215	-931,556	-970,417	-2,729,188
Falls Swimming Centre	-855,002	-941,542	-908,070	-2,704,614
Loughside RC	-126,967	-127,862	-153,917	-408,746

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
O Zone Tennis Courts Complex	-403,639	-356,474	-397,857	-1,157,970
Templemore Swim Centre	-164,864	-148,437	-175,892	-489,193
Grove Wellbeing Centre	-1,050,543	-972,927	-1,041,588	-3,065,058
Carrickfergus				
Carrickfergus Leisure Centre	-1,662,161	-1,291,067	-1,444,465	-4,397,693
Carrickfergus Marina	-213,145	-293,873	-316,624	-823,642
Bentra Golf Course	-110,905	-141,773	-108,893	-361,571
Woodburn Playing Fields	-21,182	-6,555	-13,185	-40,922
Beltoy Playing Fields	-20,724	-20,189	-22,840	-63,753
Whitehead Recreation Centre	-16,397	-28,779	-29,568	-74,744
Greenisland Recreation Centre	-25,510	-30,325	1,369	-54,466
Barnfield Artificial Pitch	16,375	22,791	17,193	56,359
Castlereagh				
Dundonald International Ice Bowl	-209,353	-157,284	-318,377	-685,014
Belvoir Centre	-128,716	-146,216	-135,271	-410,203
Robinson Centre	-538,562	-482,012	-386,700	-1,407,274
Lough Moss Centre	-268,419	-296,288	-305,369	-870,076
Castlereagh Golf Club	-524,279	-411,943	-385,531	-1,321,753
Coleraine				
Coleraine Leisure Centre	-742,756	-654,013	-647,913	-2,044,682
Jim Watt Sports Hall, Garvagh	0	0	-38,589	-38,589
Kilrea Sports Complex	-110,509	-114,547	-119,039	-344,095
Anderson Park, Coleraine	-11,142	-11,838	-10,802	-33,782
Rugby Ave Playing Fields, Coleraine	-62,991	-52,998	-47,741	-163,730
Portrush Recreation Grounds	-50,870	-27,868	-38,714	-117,452
Castlerock Recreation Grounds	-28,259	-42,088	-60,334	-130,681
The Warren, Portstewart	-44,535	-47,603	-44,502	-136,640
Brook Street Bowling, Coleraine	-18,645	-16,175	-20,463	-55,283
Watersports Centre, Portrush	-13,444	-13,694	-15,394	-42,532
Ballyreagh Golf Course	10,682	36,038	31,668	78,388
Cookstown				
Cookstown Leisure Centre	-1,568,006	-1,429,930	-1,467,344	-4,465,280
Craigavon				
Waves Leisure Complex	-521,603	-481,627	-509,114	-1,512,344
Cascades Leisure Complex	-753,824	-669,865	-693,010	-2,116,699
Craigavon Leisure Centre	-682,909	-672,018	-648,263	-2,003,190
Craigavon Golf & Ski Centre	-293,488	-177,088	-192,440	-663,016

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
Watersports Centre	-139,234	-210,426	-181,601	-531,261
Kinnego Marina	-199,392	-188,033	-151,910	-539,335
Derry				
Brandywell Stadium	-271,567	-326,636	-319,940	-918,143
Creggan Synthetic Pitch	-113,754	-115,982	-135,555	-365,291
Templemore Sports Complex	-997,050	-1,180,265	-1,374,995	-3,552,310
Brooke Park Leisure Centre	-276,113	-243,518	-252,234	-771,865
Derry City Baths	-381,878	-361,111	-358,896	-1,101,885
Brandywell Sports Centre	-46,295	-54,372	-70,268	-170,935
Brooke Park Bowling Green	-9,066	-5,462	-11,426	-25,954
Creggan Sports Hall	-12,439	-16,117	545	-28,011
Lisnagelvin Leisure Centre	-574,757	-562,127	-651,764	-1,788,648
St Columbs Park Leisure Centre	-146,995	-107,757	-144,199	-398,951
Prehen Boathouse	-16,065	-23,704	-25,094	-64,863
Lisnagelvin Bowling Green	-22,937	-36,590	-26,403	-85,930
St Columb's Pk Synthetic Pitch	1,716	-16,939	-7,294	-22,517
Down				
Down Leisure Centre	-969,074	-814,671	-962,044	-2,745,789
Newcastle Leisure Centre	-571,286	-527,467	-592,705	-1,691,458
Ballynahinch Leisure Centre	-302,938	-233,358	-294,585	-830,881
Tropicana	-61,786	-75,780	-78,058	-215,624
Newcastle Pool	-85,096	-98,170	-96,726	-279,992
Drumaness Hall	-138,013	-104,665	-109,647	-352,325
Killyleagh Community Centre	-472,904	-194,345	-206,552	-873,801
Killough Rd CC DSO	-101,668	-59,239	-63,255	-224,162
Ballymote	0	0	-217,205	-217,205
Castlewellan DSO Leisure	-89,156	-44,938	-58,773	-192,867
Dungannon & S Tyrone				
Dungannon Leisure Centre	-1,159,591	-1,316,192	-1,364,408	-3,840,191
Dungannon Outdoor Leisure facilities incl Pitches, Bowling Green & Tennis Courts	-224,761	-187,054	-212,993	-624,808
Fermanagh				
Lakeland Forum	-859,146	-916,590	-870,732	-2,646,468
Castle Park Centre	-267,976	-240,255	-275,665	-783,896
Bawnacre	-303,317	-301,686	-330,975	-935,978
Fermanagh Outdoor facilities	-99,642	-51,905	-80,583	-232,130
Fermanagh Bowling Green	-7,424	-9,188	-13,799	-30,411
Larne				

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
Larne Leisure Centre	-981,504	-920,751	-1,057,963	-2,960,218
Sandy Bay Playing Fields	-91,921	-80,681	-65,852	-238,454
Antiville Playing Fields	-193,349	-55,287	-45,936	-294,572
Millbrook Football	-3,012	-2,808	-2,824	-8,644
Craigyhill MUGA	-2,459	893	635	-931
Carnlough MUGA	7,266	7,376	2,123	16,765
Glenarm Playing Fields	-5,066	-1,614	-1,500	-8,180
Astro Synthetic Pitch	0	0	-11,449	-11,449
Limavady				
Roe Valley Leisure Centre	-861,268	-862,342	-914,198	-2,637,808
Dungiven Pavilion	-95,068	-81,639	-102,188	-278,895
Lisburn				
Leisure Plex	-1,543,230	-1,614,709	-1,608,202	-4,766,141
Brook Activity Centre	-295,356	-278,185	-285,172	-858,713
Glenmore Activity Centre	-213,627	-239,975	-248,587	-702,189
Grove Activity Centre	-230,909	-239,847	-245,278	-716,034
Kilmakee Activity Centre	-253,907	-268,748	-280,751	-803,406
Magherafelt				
Greenvale Leisure Centre	*	*	*	*
Maghera Leisure Centre	-367,635	-264,770	-347,084	-979,489
Meadowbank Sports Arena	-154,218	-132,066	-135,802	-422,086
Tobermore Golf Driving Range	-6,231	-7,143	-28,263	-41,637
Moyle				
PULSE	0	-13,282	-12,648	-25,930
Newry & Mourne				
Kilkeel Leisure Centre	-655,378	-575,166	-782,848	-2,013,392
Newry Swimming Pool	-668,657	-544,005	-684,813	-1,897,475
Newry Sports Centre	-537,252	-452,852	-643,561	-1,633,665
North Down				
Bangor Castle Leisure Centre	-589,900	-549,195	-635,667	-1,774,762
Queen's Leisure Centre, Hollywood	-315,738	-221,215	-294,168	-831,121
Bangor Sportsplex	-129,601	-128,607	-156,795	-415,003
Kingsland	-6,957	-7,372	-10,691	-25,020
Sea Park	-46,328	-49,694	-32,596	-128,618
Ward Park	-80,778	-62,801	-66,281	-209,860
Various facilities	-115,830	-72,060	-121,557	-309,447
Omagh				

Council Leisure Facility	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	Total
Omagh Leisure Centre	-1,445,633	-1,267,636	-1,170,123	-3,883,392
Strabane				
Riversdale Leisure Centre	-742,360	-802,875	-889,472	-2,434,707
Derg Valley Leisure Centre	-198,102	-203,745	-198,613	-600,460
Melvin Sports Hall	-140,245	-176,816	-203,462	-520,523

Councils: Financial Reserves

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the amount each council has in its formal financial reserves.
(AQW 6777/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Under Section 55 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 all income of a council is held in the District Fund and all expenditure falling to be discharged by the council shall be discharged out of that fund. A table is attached detailing both District Fund balance and Cash based reserves as of 31 March 2010. These figures were published in the Report by the Chief Local Government Auditor in December 2011.

It is impracticable for Councils to determine how much of their current District Fund will be used for possible future civil emergencies.

Council Financial Reserves 31 March 2010

Council	District Fund Balance	Cash Based Reserves
Antrim	2,222,203	300,000
Ards	1,882,058	1,300,000
Armagh	2,538,768	100,000
Ballymena	1,614,845	2,300,000
Ballymoney	353,300	1,600,000
Banbridge	2,172,649	400,000
Belfast	4,602,602	9,200,000
Carrickfergus	931,256	300,000
Castlereagh	1,351,192	1,300,000
Coleraine	1,043,857	1,000,000
Cookstown	2,368,613	800,000
Craigavon	2,485,895	1,000,000
Derry	2,276,270	24,000,000
Down	2,165,311	4,900,000
Dungannon	2,168,182	4,000,000
Fermanagh	1,450,291	1,600,000
Larne	1,345,964	0
Limavady	558,418	3,100,000
Lisburn	4,120,136	2,200,000
Magherafelt	613,677	3,800,000
Moyle	1,432,482	0
Newry & Mourne	1,982,965	600,000
Newtownabbey	4,342,822	0

Council	District Fund Balance	Cash Based Reserves
North Down	2,065,284	4,100,000
Omagh	1,200,089	400,000
Strabane	1,432,442	1,400,000

River Pollution: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment how many incidents of river pollution in the North Down area have been reported in each of the last two years.

(AQW 6906/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In each of the last two years, the number of pollution incidents reported to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in the North Down area, as defined by the North Down Parliamentary boundary, are in the table 1 below.

The environmental impacts of water pollution incidents are classified by their 'Severity' i.e. High, Medium or Low Severity. The definition of each severity class is detailed in Appendix A.

In the period January 2010 to December 2011, NIEA received 114 reports of water pollution. Upon investigation, 73 of these were confirmed as having had an environmental impact on a waterway.

Table 1

Year	No of Water Pollution Reports Received	No of Reports Where an Environmental Impact was confirmed	High Severity Incidents	Medium Severity Incidents	Low Severity Incidents
2010	59	38	0	4	34
2011	55	35	1	10	24

NIEA's enforcement policy, as it relates to water pollution incidents, is that for all High and Medium Severity water pollution incidents, where the polluter can be identified, the Agency will normally pursue appropriate enforcement action against that polluter.

Enforcement action may include one or more of the following:-

- Prosecution;
- Issuing of a Legally Binding Notice;
- Issuing of a Warning Letter and/or, for agricultural incidents, 'Breaching' under Cross Compliance (where the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development may initiate a deduction from a farmer's Single Farm Payment).

For the most significant water pollution incidents, having the greatest environmental impact, the enforcement action will generally be the initiation of prosecution proceedings through the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). Enforcement action is not normally taken for Low Severity Incidents.

Formal enforcement action was considered, in line with the Agency's enforcement policy, for the 15 water pollution incidents that were of High or Medium Severity. A prosecution file is currently being prepared for submission to the PPS in relation to the High Severity Incident.

In relation to the 14 Medium Severity incidents, the following action was taken:-

- 6 Warning Letters were issued;
- 1 further Warning Letter was issued after PPS withdrew the case in the Magistrates Court;
- 2 incidents resulted in 'Breaching' under Cross Compliance (where the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development may initiate a deduction from a farmer's Single Farm Payment);
- 1 incident investigation remains on-going;
- No polluter was identified in relation to 3 incidents; and
- Enforcement action was precluded in respect of 1 incident as Article 7B of the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 applied.

The statutory defences in the amended Water Order under Article 7B relate to water pollution situations where the 'sewage undertaker' was either not bound to receive a discharge into its sewer or works or was bound to receive it subject to conditions which were not observed i.e. Northern Ireland Water (NIW) was confirmed as the source of the pollution but the incident was not due to the act or default of NIW.

Village Urban Renewal Area: South Belfast

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether an Environmental Impact Assessment is required prior to the demolition of the remaining housing in the redevelopment zone of the Village Urban Renewal Area in South Belfast, and if so, why. **(AQW 6969/11-15)**

Mr Attwood: Demolition/site clearance of areas of 0.5 hectares and above may be deemed to be urban development projects for the purposes of Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations. The relevant legislation in Northern Ireland is 'The Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (NI) 1999' and urban development projects are listed at Schedule 2 Category 10. For Schedule 2 projects submission of an Environmental Statement is not mandatory but the planning authority must make a determination if one is required. The requirement to make a determination does not raise a presumption that a statement will be required.

It is also the intention to phase the remainder of the redevelopment of the Village area and in many cases the actual site area of the phase will be under 0.5 hectares so will fall outside the scope of the EIA Regulations. In practice the need for an EIA is unlikely to arise for a redevelopment of this nature.

Gorse Fires: Prosecutions

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment to detail any prosecutions which have been brought against people who have started gorse fires. **(AQW 6970/11-15)**

Mr Attwood: The Department has brought no prosecutions against people who have started gorse fires. However, an Interdepartmental Group on Wildfires that I established will present its report shortly and this will include recommendations for future action to address this problem. I am deeply disappointed that no prosecutions have arisen given that the evidence is that the fires were deliberate. I believe it is important to identify these persons responsible, the reasons why the fires occurred and what it may say about these involved.

Planning Service: Complaints

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how many anonymous complaints have been made to the Planning Service in relation to breaches of planning permission in each of the last five years; (ii) how many complaints have been (a) substantiated; and (b) malicious; and (iii) what measures are in place to protect individuals from unfounded or malicious complaints. **(AQW 6972/11-15)**

Mr Attwood: Breaches of planning control associated with the failure to comply with any condition or limitation subject to which planning permission has been granted are recorded on the Department's IT data base with a Breach Type of Breach of Condition.

The number of anonymous complaints made in relation to breaches of planning permission and the number of anonymous complaints closed with a reason of 'No Breach' in each of the last 3 business years to date are set out in the table below.

Details associated with Breach of Condition Complaints (Cases)			
	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12 (to 31 Dec 2011)
No. of Complaints received (case equivalent)	881(816)	650 (580)	457 (302)
No of Anonymous Complaints received (case equivalent)	149 (143)	106 (105)	48 (46)
Anonymous Complaints Closures as of 25 January 2012 (case equivalent)	123 (119)	79 (78)	15 (14)
No of Anonymous complaints closed with a reason of 'No Breach' as of 25 January 2012 (case equivalent)	45 (45)	28 (28)	9 (9)

These figures have been extracted from a live dataset which is continuously updated and validated. They should therefore be regarded as indicative only at this point in time and should not be compared with any previous figures published by Planning.

All alleged breaches of planning control will be investigated. However, where a complainant fails to provide an adequate level of detail in relation to an alleged breach this may result in the Department being unable to fully investigate or proceed with enforcement action due to insufficient evidence. Furthermore, after investigation, where there is no breach of planning control identified, the case will be closed and no further action taken by the Department.

Road Safety Education Officers

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of road safety education officers currently employed; (ii) the cost of their salaries, travel and other expenses; and (iii) the evaluation process used to assess the benefits of these posts. **(AQW 6985/11-15)**

Mr Attwood: There are 13 road safety education officers currently employed within the Department. The budgeted salary costs of for 2011-12 are in the region of £341k.

The most up to date information in respect of expenses, for April 2011 to end December 2011, show that £16,341 has been claimed for travel, £1,642 for daily subsistence and £416 for subscriptions to professional bodies, giving a total of £18,399.

The Road Safety Education Officer Service (RSEO) was independently reviewed in 2011 by the Department of Finance and Personnel's Business Consultancy Service (BCS) with expert technical advice and guidance on road safety issues provided by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL), an internationally recognised centre of excellence providing world-class research, consultancy, testing and certification for all aspects of transport.

The conclusions of the BCS report were that the need for the work of the RSEOS is as great now as ever as to how the DOE helps protect road users young and old and remains a high profile and an emotive issue. In addition, the challenging targets set in the Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy to 2020 cannot be achieved without effective road safety education.

The report, which was circulated to members of the Environment Committee, contains recommendations for improving, not only on the Road Safety Education Officer Service, but on the service provided to schools and the wider general public.

River Pollution

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of the Environment to detail (i) the number of reported cases of river pollution in each of the last three years; and (ii) the number of successful prosecutions taken against polluters.

(AQW 6986/11-15)

Mr Attwood:

(i) The number of reported cases of river pollution in each of the last three years

The following table provides a breakdown of the number of water pollution reports received and the number where pollution was confirmed by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) in each of the past 3 years.

Table 1: Number of reported and confirmed water pollution incidents in each of the past 3 years

Year	Number of water pollution reports received by NIEA	Number of reports where actual pollution was confirmed upon investigation
2009	2152	1248
2010	2080	1237
2011	2111	1299

The number of incidents where water pollution was confirmed by NIEA upon investigation is markedly lower than (slightly over half) the total number of incident reports. The reasons for this include the public mistaking non-pollution phenomena for pollution and minor, short-lived incidents having dispersed when NIEA staff attend the site.

(ii) The number of successful prosecutions taken against polluters

The following table provides a breakdown of the number of successful convictions for water pollution offences heard in court in each of the past 3 years.

Table 2: Number of successful court convictions for water pollution offences in each of the last 3 years

Year in which the case was heard	2009	2010	2011
Number of court convictions	39	46	60

It should be noted that while the great majority of the convictions listed above resulted in the court imposing a fine, the term conviction includes fines, conditional discharges and absolute discharges.

In a small proportion of cases where NIEA forwards a file to the Public Prosecution Service recommending prosecution, PPS decides for legal or other reasons not to proceed with a prosecution. There are also a proportion of cases where a prosecution reaches court but the court dismisses the case (i.e. there is no conviction). Cases such as these, where NIEA initiated a prosecution but no conviction resulted in court, are not listed in the table above.

Antisocial Behaviour

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans his Department has to give more powers to councils to tackle anti-social behaviour.

(AQW 6991/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which comes into operation on 1 April 2012, contains a range of measures to help district councils to deal more effectively with anti-social behaviour. From that date

councils will have improved powers to tackle littering, fly-posting and graffiti, abandoned vehicles, abandoned shopping trolleys, nuisance parking, dog-fouling, control of dogs, problem alleyways and a range of nuisance issues including noise nuisance.

Recycling: Food Waste

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of the Environment what action his Department is taking to encourage greater recycling of food waste. (AQW 7028/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department's Rethink Waste Programme has a series of measures to promote and support waste prevention and recycling including capital and revenue funds, a communications action plan and funding of a Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) delivery programme. These measures include the recycling of food waste.

Brown bins are currently supplied to householders by a total of 22 Councils for the collection of organic waste. Of these Councils, 18 also permit the inclusion of food waste in the brown bin. In addition, 4 councils within the arc21 group supply 23 litre food caddies in lieu of a brown bin for food waste.

Under the Department's Rethink Waste (Capital) Fund Grant scheme, in 2010/11 five Councils - Ballymena, Dungannon & South Tyrone, Omagh, Armagh and Newry & Mourne were awarded grants to extend their brown bin service to include food waste. In addition, grants for the purchase of kitchen caddies for food waste were also awarded to Craigavon, Dungannon and Lisburn Councils.

Home composting complements the 'brown bin service' provided by councils as it provides the means for householders to compost their garden and food waste. In 2010/11 eight Councils – Armagh, Coleraine, Derry, Dungannon, Magherafelt, Moyle, Omagh and Strabane were awarded a Rethink Waste (Capital) Fund grant by the Department to fund the purchase of home composters.

To encourage behaviour change, the Department's Rethink Waste Communications Action Plan promotes food waste reduction, reuse and, where waste is unavoidable, recycling. Fully funded Love Food Hate Waste and composting demonstration packages to raise awareness amongst the public have been offered by the Department to every council in Northern Ireland.

The Department also funds WRAP to provide technical advisory support to Councils to improve the quality and efficiency of collection and recycling services offered to households and businesses, food waste is a key focus for this support.

A further intervention in these times of economic need was money to the Council for the homeless to run a "Fareshare" scheme distributing 72,000 meals in the last 11 months in the greater Belfast area through 41 charities with food from various growers, suppliers and retailers, foods which otherwise may go to waste. I intend to increase funding for this type of intervention.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Waste Water

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment whether there are any measures in place to deal with the disposal of the waste water that would be generated from the process of hydraulic fracturing; and whether the cost of disposing of the waste water would be borne by his Department or councils.

(AQW 7123/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The disposal of waste water from the hydraulic fracturing process is the responsibility of the operator of the process.

It is the responsibility of Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) to safeguard the quality of the environment as a whole through effective regulation of activities that have the potential to impact on the environment.

NIEA, as a consultee to DOE Planning, will assess any proposals to dispose of waste water submitted as part of a planning application or any other fracking process and ensure that the proposed operator applies for the required environmental permissions, where required.

Any waste water disposal costs resulting from a hydraulic fracturing operation would be the responsibility of the company carrying out the operation.

Planning System: Reform

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any proposals for the reform of the planning system; and the timescale for the completion of any reform.

(AQW 7125/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I believe that NI needs generally a new phase of reform across a range of policy areas. Despite delay and doubt across a vast range of areas, NI has done reform well and to the benefit of great numbers. I bring the same perspective to planning.

I am working on a number of fronts to reform and remodel the planning system so that it supports the future economic and social development needs of all users in Northern Ireland and pay due regard to the wonder of our built and natural heritage and environment

The reforms to the planning system contained within the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 will result in a modernised system transferring to councils with quicker local development plans, faster decisions on planning applications, faster and fairer appeals and tougher and simpler enforcement.

In advance of the transfer of powers to councils I am bringing forward a Bill that will accelerate the implementation of a number of those reforms, to be administered by the Department. These will include the development of a Statement of Community

Involvement setting out opportunities for interested parties to become involved in development management and other planning control issues, enhanced community involvement through a requirement that developers engage in pre-application community involvement in advance of submitting an application for major developments. Higher penalties for a number of offences are also included.

I intend to introduce the Bill in this Assembly session and to have the reform in place sooner rather than later.

I am also bringing forward a number of administrative reforms which will speed up the processing of applications (including major applications) such as an extension to the streamlined planning application scheme with local councils, measures to ensure quicker responses from consultees and on a voluntary basis pre-application community consultation on key developments.

In addition, the Department is undertaking a revision of planning policy which will result in more strategic, simpler and shorter policy and a new complaints procedure has been introduced designed to make the process of complaining easier and more user-friendly for members of the public. I have a series of interventions involving representatives of the renewable industry (including anaerobic digestion) to identify how the planning service can be improved; there is an operational review of PPS21; a group looking at planning, business and the economy and across planning. I am starting to identify where in the immediate and short term, planning can be made more fit for purpose, responsive and fulfil economic and environmental imperatives.

Planning Applications

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the average time taken by the Planning Service to process planning applications which involve the creation of jobs.

(AQW 7127/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The average processing times for the 2010/11 business year are contained within the Development Management Statistics Northern Ireland 2010/11

Annual Statistical Bulletin (April 2010 to March 2011) which is publically available on the Department's website.

The majority of applications involving job creation would fall within the major category of development. The PSA target for processing major applications is to process 60% of major applications to decision or withdrawal in 23 weeks. In the year 210/2011, the time taken to process 60% of major applications was 25 weeks.

There are a number of reasons for this fall in performance including the redeployment of staff/resources as the reduction in fee income; the short term issues relating to the roll out of the Planning Portal; the priority reassessment of 2,500 deferred PPS21 applications; plus, the implementation of the agreed Action Plan to reduce the backlog of applications in the system over 12 months, all of which have missed the PSA target. The Department is committed to reducing the backlog.

In order to improve performance, the Department has been initiating a number of short term reform measures to improve performance and speed in decision-making to stimulate and support economic recovery in the Region. This includes measures such as

- the implementation and extension of the Streamlined Council Consultation Scheme.
- Publication of guidance for prioritising planning applications stating clearly the types of applications that should be considered for prioritising.
- Publication of guidance on consistency in decision making with particular emphasis on economic consideration to ensure a consistent approach to the consideration of the economic merits of planning applications by the Department so that local communities are treated equally and not disadvantaged.
- the Development Management Good Practice Guide particularly in relation to the active case management of Article 31 applications have been reinforced.
- encouraging applicants to engage with it in pre-application discussions (PADs) on the more significant development proposals. Through this process, it encourages the submission of high quality applications which will maximise the prospects of getting through the statutory process expeditiously.

Since becoming Minister, I have commenced a radical reform of planning. For example, general review of PPS21; new planning leadership team; development of a new HR strategy; dedicated groups of officials and external people interrogating how to streamline more, actively manage renewable applications etc. In this way, I aim to build a planning service even more fit for purpose that will provide decisions on planning applications in a timely manner.

River Pollution: Prosecutions

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment how many people have been prosecuted for river pollution in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7254/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The following table provides a breakdown of the number of prosecutions for water pollution offences concluded in court in each of the past 3 years.

Table 1: Number of prosecutions for water pollution offences concluded in court in each of the last 3 years

Year in which the prosecution was concluded in court	2009	2010	2011
Number of prosecutions	41	46	60

It should be noted that while the great majority of the prosecutions listed above resulted in the court convicting the polluter and imposing a fine, the figures include a small number of other court outcomes and sentences: including dismissal, conditional discharges and binding over orders.

George Best Belfast City Airport: Runway Extension

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the proposed extension of the runway at George Best Belfast City Airport.

(AQW 7258/11-15)

Mr Attwood: In March 2011 my Department requested that the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) make the necessary arrangements for a public inquiry into the proposed runway extension. In May 2011 the PAC suspended all preparations for the inquiry because GBBCA declared their intention to submit further environmental information to support the proposals. The public inquiry cannot proceed until all the necessary information has been submitted, circulated to relevant consultees for comment and advertised in the local press.

GBBCA have stated that they will not submit further environmental information until the process to modify the existing Planning Agreement between the Department and the airport has concluded. This appears to suggest that the application to extend the runway will not be before the PAC, until the issue of an airport noise contour has been concluded at the request of the airport. There is and there will not be any impediment by me, my Department or DOE Planning to the PAC process, if the airport management wish to advance the work.

The process to modify the Planning Agreement will include a public consultation on proposals for a noise management system, to be brought forward by the airport, and a Public Examination to independently consider all of the issues. After I have considered the independent report and recommendations of the Examination, I will decide the outcome and its examination in the planning agreement. It is hoped that the airport will submit their proposals in the near future which should allow the examination to be concluded by summer 2012. The process I have established will enable the appropriate involvement of interested parties.

Councils: Chief Executive Accountability

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment what plans he has to make council Chief Executives more accountable to his Department.

(AQW 7316/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Council Chief Executives are paid employees of a district council and are accountable to the elected members. It is the responsibility of the Chief Executive to implement the policies of the district council.

The Department of the Environment is responsible for the development of policy and legislation relating to the finance and audit framework of local government. Council members and officers must operate within the legal framework, as provided by the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and the Local Government (NI) Order 2005. The existing financial framework is further developed in the Local Government Finance (NI) Act 2011 which will be fully implemented from 1 April 2012.

I have to be mindful of my legal competence in relation to the actions of Councils. However, I will ensure that the proper authority of central Government is exercised going forward, particular in relation to RPA.

Belfast Area Metropolitan Plan

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the Belfast Area Metropolitan Plan.

(AQW 7318/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I would refer Mr Easton to an answer that he received on 2 December 2011 regarding BMAP (AQW 3928/11-15).

As regards recent progress, I can confirm that my Department received further reports from the Planning Appeals Commission on Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus proposals on 31 January 2012, and that all the PAC Reports on BMAP have now been delivered.

The PAC recommendations are currently being considered and the Plan is being prepared for adoption. At present it is anticipated that BMAP will be published in the early part of 2013.

I appreciate the frustration around BMAP. Consequently, I am assessing, if at all, what I can may do to release parts of BMAP in advance of full adoption.

Single Use Carrier Bags: Revenue

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an estimate of the revenue that will be generated in the first year of the single use carrier bag levy.

(AQW 7335/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I recognise that carrier bags present a significant environmental problem. Resolution of this problem is the key driver behind my proposal to introduce a carrier bag levy from April 2013.

Evidence from other countries demonstrates that a bag levy is a simple and effective means to reduce substantially the negative environmental impact of carrier bag consumption. A 10p levy on single use carrier bags and lower cost reusable carrier bags can therefore bring about significant environmental improvement.

In the first year I propose to discount the charge to 5p and limit the levy to single use carrier bags. This will provide consumers with time to adapt their shopping habits to the new levy.

The amount of revenue that will ultimately be raised will be dependent on consumer behaviour. In the event that the local experience is similar to that of other jurisdictions that have introduced bag charges, the single use carrier bag levy is anticipated to generate around £1.5m in net revenue in the first year.

Single Use Carrier Bags: Administration Costs

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment to provide an estimate of the annual cost of the administration and collection unit that will process the single use carrier bag levy.

(AQW 7336/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My officials have assessed a range of potential options for the administration of the Carrier Bag Levy, including the associated costs of each option, and have identified an in-house solution as the preferred solution.

I intend to introduce levy administration arrangements that provide an appropriate level of governance and accountability, which ensure that the administrative burden on retailers is minimised and which represents the best value for money.

As such, I can advise that in 2012/2013 including administration team start up, staff and IT system development and delivery costs it is anticipated that the Total Year 1 costs will be £500k. It is envisaged that administration costs for subsequent years will be £600k until 2016 when a formal review of the administration team and structures has been scheduled.

I and the Minister of Finance and Personnel made the argument – on a number of occasions – to Treasury that HMRC should collect the levy. This argument did not prevail. I rejected the proposal to contract out collection as neither right nor cost effective. DOE have developed an in-house system, demonstrating that Government has the capacity and imagination to rely on itself to do its business, not routinely rely on external suppliers.

Single Use Carrier Bags: Usage

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment how the administration and collection unit, established to process the single use carrier bag levy, will determine how many carrier bags that shops are using.

(AQW 7338/11-15)

Mr Attwood: My intention is to deliver simple and cost effective carrier bag levy administration arrangements which ensure minimum bureaucracy and cost to both business and the Department.

In the run up to go live in April 2013 the levy administration team will facilitate registration for those liable for the levy. Through a DOE developed IT system and utilising the NICS NI Direct portal, a secure channel will be provided to register and to submit subsequent bag usage returns and payments.

On a quarterly basis, the majority of businesses liable for the levy will submit on line returns on bag usage accompanied by the relevant payment to the Department. A small number of identified larger bag users will submit returns on a monthly basis. Bag consumption and compliance with the levy legislation across all businesses will be monitored by Customer Relations Officers deployed as part of the levy administration team.

Single Use Carrier Bags: Information Campaign

Mr Ross asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department intends to develop an information campaign on the introduction of the single use carrier bag levy; and to detail the estimated cost of the campaign.

(AQW 7339/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department will use the existing 'Rethink Waste' multi media campaign to promote valuable information about the carrier bag levy to consumers and to businesses across Northern Ireland. This campaign activity is planned to take place from December 2012 to April 2013, at an estimated maximum cost of £15,000. Consumers and businesses will be provided with all the information they will need in a very timely manner.

The Department will also use its own Communications Team to help promote the message and to avoid the additional costs of outside providers. This is a further example of Government relying on its own capacity and resources to promote positive public policy rather than relying on external consultants.

ASSI: Moneystaghan Bog

Mr Wells asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 6099/11-15, to detail the extent of the damage to the Area of Special Scientific Interest; and why a Restoration Order was not imposed.

(AQW 7352/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Moneystaghan Bog Area of Special Scientific Interest was declared mainly for the presence of intact deep peat deposits and the diversity of the associated vegetation. Damage was caused through the extraction of peat and the resultant slumping, drying and oxidisation of the adjacent intact raised bog. The area affected was approximately 256m² out of a total site area of 83,710m² resulting in damage to 0.31% of intact lowland raised bog feature. A case was brought before the courts, where an absolute discharge was imposed on two offences with an order for court costs of £125,

The Department did not request a Restoration Order in this case as it was considered that restoration to the former condition was not feasible. Officials have advised that the boundary of the bog will stabilise naturally over time through a slumping process. As a matter of policy NIEA would seek such an Order where appropriate.

Single Use Carrier Bags: Revenue

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment (i) how much revenue he expects the single use carrier bag levy to generate, given that the original proposal for a fifteen pence charge per bag has been reduced to five pence; and (ii) which of his Department's programmes will have their funding reduced as result of this change.

(AQW 7363/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I recognise that carrier bags present a significant environmental problem. Resolution of this problem is the key driver behind my proposal to introduce a carrier bag levy from April 2013.

Evidence from other countries demonstrates that a bag levy is a simple and effective means to reduce substantially the negative environmental impact of carrier bag consumption. A 10p levy on single use carrier bags and lower cost reusable carrier bags can therefore bring about significant environmental improvement.

In the first year I propose to discount the charge to 5p and limit the levy to single use carrier bags. This will provide consumers with time to adapt their shopping habits to the new levy.

The amount of revenue that will ultimately be raised will be dependent on consumer behaviour. In the event that the local experience is similar to that of other jurisdictions that have introduced bag charges, the single use carrier bag levy is anticipated to generate around £1.5m in net revenue in the first year. This figure is anticipated to increase to around £4m in 2014/15 when the levy will increase to 10p and extend to low cost reusable carrier bags.

The original proposal for a 15p levy was included in a Private Member's Bill. However, my officials have estimated that a 10p levy should be sufficient to deliver the target net revenue and maximise the overall benefit to the community. It is my intention that the levy will be reviewed in late 2015 or early 2016. If deemed beneficial, the amount of the levy can be changed following this review.

My Department will seek additional funding from DFP to cover any revenue shortfall. I will also assess baseline levels in the Department, further reduce relevant internal costs, etc. I will work to ensure that a situation does not develop that a levy to protect the environment ends up with reductions in monies to protect the environment.

Policy Planning Statement 21: Review

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the review of PPS 21, including when it will be completed.

(AQW 7412/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Work on the review of the operation of PPS21 is close to conclusion. I am currently finalising the review report and will announce the outcome of the review in the near future.

Single Use Carrier Bags: Compliance

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department intends to monitor retailers' compliance with the single use carrier bag levy.

(AQW 7600/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Prior to the April 2013 go live of the carrier bag levy, retailers identified as being liable will be asked to register with the Department. The levy administration team will facilitate and oversee registration. Through a DOE developed IT system using the NICS NI Direct portal, a secure channel will be provided to register and to submit subsequent bag usage returns and payments.

The majority of retailers will be required to submit quarterly on-line returns outlining bag usage accompanied by the relevant payment to the Department. A small number of identified retailers who use large numbers of bags will submit returns on a monthly basis. Bag consumption and compliance with the levy legislation across all businesses will be monitored and enforced by Customer Relations Officers deployed as part of the Department's levy administration team.

Carrier bag levy regulations, currently being drafted and which will be subject to public consultation, will allow for sanctions to be imposed on retailers for non compliance with the legislation requirements.

Local Government Reform: SOLACE

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the savings potential, in relation to the reform of Local Government, created by the proposals put forward by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives in August 2011.

(AQO 1242/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The proposals put forward by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives relate to the ICE (Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency) programme and form a report for the sector to examine the potential for efficiencies across the 26 councils, on a voluntary basis. Therefore, it is not a business case relative to local government reform, based on an 11 council model.

However, the ICE programme has put forward a number of specific efficiencies covering Customer-Facing Services, Information and Communication Technologies, Human Resources, Payroll and Procurement for detailed analysis. The report anticipates that the implementation of this programme will achieve savings in the range of £257 million to £570 million, over 25-years. These figures are to be treated as indicative, but the sector is confident that the savings will be at the higher end of these projections.

However, whilst the potential for savings is significant, it is my intention, in liaison with the sector, to align the ICE programme with the reform agenda.

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister of the Environment how he is engaging with European networks to deliver the opportunities detailed within Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-2012.

(AQO 1247/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Under the auspices of the Barroso Taskforce four thematic groups were established. The Department of the Environment leads on the Climate Change and Energy thematic group. The focus of the work of the group at this stage is on further developing the necessary networks to help engage with the European institutions. At the same time work is ongoing to scope out the key EU funding programmes, both current and future, with which to best target a programme of climate change and energy project bids. To increase our involvement in Europe five officials from my Department will shortly be taking up secondments across the European Commission. One of these officials will be a full time policy officer dedicated to the work of the Climate & Energy thematic Group.

The Barroso work is in addition to work undertaken across the Department to secure funding from other relevant EU environmental programmes. It is my belief that across government there has been insufficient work in taking forward EU funding opportunities. I will travel to Brussels in March where I will raise issues of funding and environmental protection – the first DOE Minister to put our case personally in Brussels since the restoration of devolution.

Road Safety: Omeath Road, Newry

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions his Department has had with the Department for Regional Development about improving road safety on the Omeath Road in Newry, particularly in relation to the canal.

(AQO 1248/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I appreciate the concern around safety at the Newry Canal.

While I understand that the recent tragic fatal collision on the Omeath Road remains under investigation, I shall write to the Minister for Regional Development on the concerns that have been raised about safety on that road and I will include the Omeath Road for discussion at my next meeting with the Minister.

Officials from the Department of the Environment and the Department for Regional Development liaise closely to consider how best to achieve the objectives and targets in the Road Safety Strategy. I can assure you that such engagement will continue between road safety partners, stakeholders and counterparts, North and South, to improve safety for all road users.

The concerns about infrastructure and engineering issues on specific roads are, in the first instance, an operational matter for the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service, but I will work with DRD to identify how best to respond to the risk.

Ravenhill Rugby Ground: Planning Approval

Mr A Maskey asked the Minister of the Environment what discussions his Department has had with Roads Service or the Department for Regional Development before granting planning approval for increased capacity stands at Ravenhill Rugby ground.

(AQO 1245/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Roads Service was one of a number of bodies formally consulted by the Department during the processing of this application. The consultation entailed ongoing and regular engagement between planning and Roads Service officials regarding the traffic, access and parking aspects of the application. This engagement extended to a meeting with the applicant in February 2011, following which further traffic information was submitted to the Department.

Following consideration of this further information, Roads Service commented they had no objection to the application subject to the imposition of planning conditions. These conditions which related to parking, circulation and access arrangements at the site were attached to the Notice of Opinion issued by the Department.

Waste Management: 25-year Contracts

Mr Brady asked the Minister of the Environment for his Department's assessment of the suitability of awarding 25-year contracts for waste management.

(AQO 1246/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I have carefully considered this issue since I became Minister. The advice provided suggests that the growth in waste volumes means that, mindful of the positive direction of travel on recycling, the waste procurement strategy is required. I wish to stress that the procurement group have to pass affordability and deliverability requirements, in respect of which critical work is ongoing. The Department has therefore concluded, on the basis of detailed analysis, that substantial new waste infrastructure is required to comply with the 2020 legislative target for landfill diversion. The size, complexity and capital cost of the required facilities entail a level of investment not generally available in the public sector. In common with local authorities elsewhere in Britain and in Europe as a whole, and on the basis of business cases which demonstrated that it represented the most viable approach, local government in Northern Ireland has opted for the public private partnership approach. Under this approach, the private sector provides the necessary investment to cover the capital costs of the facility and recoups its costs through a gate fee payable by the contracting authority over an extended period.

Planning: Zero-carbon Homes

Ms J McCann asked the Minister of the Environment how many planning applications for zero-carbon homes have been approved to date.

(AQO 1249/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The zero carbon tests can only be applied once a building is complete.

Due to the way information is recorded on the Planning Portal there is no mechanism to identify a planning application where the development is intended to qualify for rate relief once completed. I have asked officials to see if this system can be upgraded.

A manual search of all planning application files may identify proposals for potential zero carbon homes. This is not only disproportionate in terms of time and cost but would result in un-validated statistics being released.

The Department operates a Streamlined Council Consultation Scheme which has resulted in approximately 50% of all planning applications being progressed through this very successful scheme. Currently approvals issue on average within 52 working days. The types of applications assessed under this scheme include proposals for up to five dwellings; this would include zero carbon dwellings.

National Parks: Farming Consultation

Mr McNarry asked the Minister of the Environment how his Department is engaging with the farming community in advance of the introduction of any enabling legislation in relation to the establishment of National Parks.

(AQO 1250/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has an ongoing dialogue with a range of stakeholders, including farming representatives, about the issues surrounding national parks. Most recently, I met the President of the Ulster Farmers' Union on 30 January. I recognise the particular interest that the farming community and other rural dwellers have in this issue, and I will be meeting representatives from other, similar organisations in the coming weeks. I believe firmly in National Parks Legislation – I hope my Executive Colleagues will concur. This is an important potential opportunity for a number of areas, for better management of the environment and economic growth.

Taxis

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment what additional costs taxi operators are likely to face as a result of the Taxi Fare and Taximeters Regulations to be made under the Taxis Act (NI) 2008.

(AQO 1251/11-15)

Mr Attwood: As members will be aware I am currently consulting on proposals to introduce new taxi fare and taximeter regulations and this consultation closes 17 February 2012. The proposed regulations will set a maximum taxi fare for all taxis and will make it an offence to overcharge customers. These proposals aim to ensure that taxi drivers can earn a reasonable wage while providing the general public with the assurance that they are being charged a reasonable fare regardless of which part of Northern Ireland they live.

I will consider all responses to the consultation before reaching a decision, including any potential costs.

Environmental Impact Assessments: Regulations

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment if his Department plans to amend the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations to preclude the provider of additional environmental information, submitted to a public inquiry, from having to comply with the statutory advertisement and consultation procedure.

(AQO 1252/11-15)

Mr Attwood: There is no current statutory requirement for the provider of additional environmental information, submitted to a public inquiry, to advertise and consult on such information. The Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations currently require the Department to undertake these functions.

The existing procedure has led to delays in the public inquiry process therefore, I intend to bring forward new legislative proposals to ensure that any additional environmental information submitted for the purposes of a public inquiry will instead be made available for public inspection at a specified location by the Planning Appeals Commission and on the Commission's website. It will be up to the Planning Appeals Commission to inform the relevant parties and seek an adjournment if necessary to ensure full consideration of this information.

I believe these proposals remove any uncertainty from the existing process and enable smoother and quicker timetabling of events surrounding a public inquiry within the hands of the PAC who are best placed to deal with this.

Built Heritage: Tourism and Economic Development

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the contribution that built heritage assets can make to tourism and to economic development.

(AQO 1254/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Built Heritage plays a fundamentally important role in tourism and economic development and there is much unrealised potential for its increased role in future. These assets are important to the whole of society, particularly in the context of our tourism economy and overseas earnings in particular – that is 'new' money coming into the NI economy. They are unique, authentic irreplaceable elements of the past that help make Northern Ireland a better place to work, live and invest in. They contribute enormously to the character of our cities, villages and countryside. Many of these are destinations for tourists already, but others have yet to realise their full heritage and economic potential.

At the present time work is underway to find out just how important the built heritage is for the economy. We know already that for example, every £1 of Listed Building Grant Aid paid out by the Department, in total, at least £7.65 of investment is levered in to the construction sector: this is particularly important at the present time. Works to historic properties have also acted as a catalyst for regeneration, as demonstrated by the investment made in the built heritage of Derry~Londonderry, now the focal point for the 2013 UK City of Culture.

My officials are currently working towards the augmentation of work already done in connection with the NITB key signature projects. Officials are also planning and implementing heritage-related projects at many sites across Northern Ireland, such as at Dunluce Castle, County Antrim; Navan Fort, in County Armagh; Tullaghoge Fort, in County Tyrone; the wealth of Christian Heritage sites, particularly those in County Down linked to St Patrick, and; at Plantation-related sites throughout the North. All of these will continue my Department's work, and my own commitment, to help realise the heritage, tourism and economic value of these historic properties.

Pat Ramsey MLA has previously asked me about the promotion of built heritage assets in support of tourism and, in particular, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's (NITB) key signature projects. I refer you to the answer that I gave to him on that matter, because it is relevant again in this instance (reference AQO 9, for answer on 7 November 2011).

Department of Finance and Personnel

Civil Service: Surplus Posts

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) location; and (ii) number of surplus posts in the Civil Service at (a) Administrative Assistant; (b) Administrative Officer; (c) Executive Officer II; (d) Executive Officer I; and (e) Staff Officer; and (f) Deputy Principal grades, broken down by Department.

(AQW 6296/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The location and number of surplus posts in the Civil Service at (a) Administrative Assistant (AA); (b) Administrative Officer (AO); (c) Executive Officer II (EOII); (d) Executive Officer I (EOI); (e) Staff Officer (SO); and (f) Deputy Principal (DP) grades, broken down by Department are set out in the table overleaf.

AQW 6296/11 - LOCATION & NUMBER (FTE)* OF SURPLUS POSTS IN THE NICS AT AO, E02, E01, SO & DP as at 16/1/12

	AA	Location	AO	Location	E01	Location	E01	Location	SO	Location	DP	Location
DARD												
DCAL					2	Belfast						
DE												
DEL	1	Belfast			2	Belfast						
DETI												
DFP			1	Belfast					2	Belfast	1	Belfast
DHSSPS												
DOE					1	Belfast						
DOJ												
DRD												
DSD	2	1 Belfast	1	Belfast			1	Belfast	1	Belfast		
		1 Ballymena										
OFMDFM												
PPS												
Total	3		2		5		1		3		1	

* FTE – Full-time Equivalent

Civil Service: Staff Composition

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 6597/08, to detail the (i) actual; and (ii) percentage composition of Civil Service non-industrial and industrial staff, by grade, within each Department/agency, in each year from January 2009 to January 2012, broken down by (a) gender; (b) community background (including non-determined); (c) ethnic background; and (d) people with a disability.

(AQW 6409/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Civil Service personnel database is sourced from HRConnect and a number of Department of Justice databases, a process which requires considerable collation and validation, consequently data for 1st Jan 2012 is not available at this time. Information for the years 2009, 2010 and 2011 has been placed in the Library

To prevent disclosure of personal information and ensure confidentiality my Department has adopted a publication threshold of 10 for Community Background, Disability and Ethnicity data. Given the relatively small numbers involved for Disability and Ethnicity a two way classification by Grade Level and by Department when coupled with this thresholding, would have highly limited utility as nearly all cells would be suppressed. As a consequence Disability data is presented separately by Grade Level and by Department while Ethnicity is presented at the overall NICS level.

Civil Service: Staff Composition

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 5047/08, to detail the (i) actual; and (ii) percentage composition profile of the Civil Service's broad occupational groupings, in each year from January 2009 to January 2012, broken down by (a) gender; (b) community background (including non-determined); (c) people with a disability; and (d) ethnic minority.

(AQW 6410/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Civil Service personnel database is sourced from HRConnect and a number of Department of Justice databases, a process which requires considerable collation and validation, consequently data for 1st Jan 2012 is not available at this time.

Information for the years 2009, 2010 and 2011 is set out in the attached tables overleaf. In order to ensure confidentiality it has been necessary to suppress some numbers where the value is less than 10.

Table 1 Compositional Profile of NICS by Occupational Group at 1 Jan 2011

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,241	69.5	12,038	62.6	7,203	37.4	9,185	47.7	9,749	50.7	307	1.6
Secretarial	412	1.5	412	100.0	0	0.0	245	59.5	#		*	
Scientific	539	1.9	246	45.6	293	54.4	307	57.0	192	35.6	40	7.4
Technology	1,704	6.2	308	18.1	1,396	81.9	911	53.5	749	44.0	44	2.6
Legal	347	1.3	222	64.0	125	36.0	138	39.8	190	54.8	19	5.5
Computing	634	2.3	156	24.6	478	75.4	318	50.2	300	47.3	16	2.5
Specialisms	3,393	12.2	1,010	29.8	2,383	70.2	1,838	54.2	1,350	39.8	205	6.0
Centralised Services	266	1.0	76	28.6	190	71.4	183	68.8	#		*	
Industrial and No Group	1,165	4.2	60	5.2	1,105	94.8	613	52.6	499	42.8	53	4.5
Total	27,701	100.0	14,528	52.4	13,173	47.6	13,738	49.6	13,270	47.9	693	2.5

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Declared Disability		Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,241	69.5	1184	6.2	28	0.2
Secretarial	412	1.5	20	4.9	0	0.0
Scientific	539	1.9	19	3.5	*	
Technology	1,704	6.2	59	3.5	*	
Legal	347	1.3	*		*	
Computing	634	2.3	31	4.9	*	
Specialisms	3,393	12.2	122	3.6	*	
Centralised Services	266	1.0	*		0	0.0
Industrial and No Group	1,165	4.2	35	3.0	*	
Total	27,701	100.0	1,488	5.4	53	0.2

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect & Additional DOJ databases

Staff numbers are provided on a headcount basis

Includes all NICS Permanent staff with the exception of uniformed Prison service staff

Staff without a disability declaration have been placed in the 'No Declared Disability' category

Excludes staff who have not declared their ethnicity

* For confidentiality reasons the number of cases is too small to publish (i.e. below the publication threshold of 10 employed by NISRA for Community Background, Disability and Ethnicity data)

Number has been suppressed to avoid disclosing another number that is too small to publish.

Table 2 Compositional Profile of NICS by Occupational Group at 1 Jan 2010

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	18,627	68.0	11,528	61.9	7,099	38.1	8,773	47.1	9,559	51.3	295	1.6
Secretarial	460	1.7	459	99.8	1	0.2	268	58.3	#		*	
Scientific	553	2.0	250	45.2	303	54.8	310	56.1	198	35.8	45	8.1
Technology	1,715	6.3	304	17.7	1,411	82.3	931	54.3	740	43.1	44	2.6
Legal	316	1.2	200	63.3	116	36.7	124	39.2	180	57.0	12	3.8
Computing	645	2.4	161	25.0	484	75.0	322	49.9	305	47.3	18	2.8
Specialisms	3,042	11.1	770	25.3	2,272	74.7	1,674	55.0	1,225	40.3	143	4.7
Centralised Services	278	1.0	69	24.8	209	75.2	184	66.2	#		*	
Industrial and No Group	1,763	6.4	451	25.6	1,312	74.4	1,013	57.5	657	37.3	93	5.3
Total	27,399	100.0	14,192	51.8	13,207	48.2	13,599	49.6	13,139	48.0	661	2.4

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Declared Disability		Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	18,627	68.0	1110	6.0	29	0.2
Secretarial	460	1.7	23	5.0	0	0.0
Scientific	553	2.0	20	3.6	*	
Technology	1,715	6.3	54	3.1	*	
Legal	316	1.2	*		*	
Computing	645	2.4	31	4.8	*	
Specialisms	3,042	11.1	114	3.7	*	
Centralised Services	278	1.0	#		0	0.0
Industrial and No Group	1,763	6.4	67	3.8	*	
Total	27,399	100.0	1,441	5.3	53	0.2

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect & Additional DOJ databases

Staff numbers are provided on a headcount basis

Includes all NICS Permanent staff with the exception of uniformed Prison service staff

Staff without a disability declaration have been placed in the 'No Declared Disability' category

Excludes staff who have not declared their ethnicity

* For confidentiality reasons the number of cases is too small to publish (i.e. below the publication threshold of 10 employed by NISRA for Community Background, Disability and Ethnicity data)

Number has been suppressed to avoid disclosing another number that is too small to publish.

Table 3 Compositional Profile of NICS by Occupational Group at 1 Jan 2009

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Gender				Community Background					
			Female		Male		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,150	70.0	11,931	62.3	7,219	37.7	9,153	47.8	9,685	50.6	312	1.6
Secretarial	500	1.8	497	99.4	3	0.6	288	57.6	#		*	
Scientific	506	1.9	222	43.9	284	56.1	285	56.3	180	35.6	41	8.1
Technology	1,729	6.3	299	17.3	1,430	82.7	951	55.0	732	42.3	46	2.7
Legal	324	1.2	206	63.6	118	36.4	129	39.8	184	56.8	11	3.4
Computing	649	2.4	158	24.3	491	75.7	331	51.0	305	47.0	13	2.0
Specialisms	2,969	10.9	739	24.9	2,230	75.1	1,656	55.8	1,175	39.6	138	4.6
Centralised Services	365	1.3	97	26.6	268	73.4	231	63.3	#		#	
Industrial and No Group	1,157	4.2	48	4.1	1,109	95.9	627	54.2	478	41.3	52	4.5
Total	27,349	100.0	14,197	51.9	13,152	48.1	13,651	49.9	13,068	47.8	630	2.3

Occupational Group	Total Staff		Declared Disability		Ethnic Minority	
	No	Col %	No	Row %	No	Row %
General Service	19,150	70.0	1094	5.7	24	0.1
Typing	500	1.8	25	5.0	0	0.0
Scientific	506	1.9	20	4.0	*	
Technology	1,729	6.3	53	3.1	*	
Legal	324	1.2	10	3.1	*	
Computing	649	2.4	30	4.6	*	
Specialisms	2,969	10.9	115	3.9	*	
Centralised Services	365	1.3	26	7.1	0	0.0
Industrial and No Group	1,157	4.2	40	3.5	*	
Total	27,349	100.0	1,413	5.2	48	0.2

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect & Additional DOJ databases

Staff numbers are provided on a headcount basis

Includes all NICS Permanent staff with the exception of uniformed Prison service staff

Staff without a disability declaration have been placed in the 'No Declared Disability' category

Excludes staff who have not declared their ethnicity

* For confidentiality reasons the number of cases is too small to publish (i.e. below the publication threshold of 10 employed by NISRA for Community Background, Disability and Ethnicity data)

Number has been suppressed to avoid disclosing another number that is too small to publish.

Departmental Demographics

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 5048/08, to detail the (i) actual; and (ii) percentage composition profile of each Department/agency in each year from January 2009 to January 2012, broken down by gender and cross-referenced against community background (including non-determined).

(AQW 6411/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Northern Ireland Civil Service personnel database is sourced from HRConnect and a number of Department of Justice databases, a process which requires considerable collation and validation, consequently data for 1st Jan 2012 is not available at this time.

Information for the years 2009, 2010 and 2011 is set out in the attached tables overleaf. In order to ensure confidentiality it has been necessary to suppress some numbers where the value is less than 10.

Table 1 Compositional Profile of NICS by Department, with Gender cross-referenced by Community Background at 1 Jan 2011

Dept	Total staff		Females						Males					
			Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
DARD	3,075	11.1%	596	49.2%	574	47.4%	42	3.5%	943	50.6%	854	45.8%	66	3.5%
DCAL	296	1.1%	63	47.4%	#		*		83	50.9%	70	42.9%	10	6.1%
DE	635	2.3%	261	64.8%	#		#		131	56.5%	#		*	
DETI	630	2.3%	212	62.7%	#		*		180	61.6%	#		*	
DFP	3,610	13.0%	918	52.4%	804	45.9%	30	1.7%	1,031	55.5%	788	42.4%	39	2.1%
DEL	2,143	7.7%	574	39.6%	853	58.9%	21	1.5%	298	42.9%	385	55.4%	12	1.7%
DHSSPS	769	2.8%	237	59.1%	#		#		213	57.9%	#		*	
DOE	2,799	10.1%	652	47.7%	679	49.7%	36	2.6%	753	52.6%	623	43.5%	56	3.9%
DRD	2,493	9.0%	262	42.6%	#		*		1,033	55.0%	#		#	
CMED	1,490	5.4%	#		433	54.1%	*		318	46.2%	361	52.4%	10	1.5%
DSD (Core)	801	2.9%	#		244	54.7%	*		#		195	54.9%	*	
SSA	5,486	19.8%	1,428	41.7%	1,958	57.2%	39	1.1%	819	39.7%	1,216	59.0%	26	1.3%
OFMDFM	393	1.4%	134	60.6%	#		*		95	55.2%	#		*	
DOJ	2,516	9.1%	982	61.0%	550	34.2%	77	4.8%	559	61.6%	277	30.5%	71	7.8%
PPS	565	2.0%	#		186	52.1%	*		#		111	53.4%	*	
Total	27,701	100.0%	7,041	48.5%	7,183	49.4%	304	2.1%	6,697	50.8%	6,087	46.2%	389	3.0%

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect & Additional DOJ databases

Staff numbers are provided on a headcount basis

Includes all NICS Permanent staff with the exception of uniformed Prison service staff

* For confidentiality reasons the number of cases is too small to publish (i.e. below the publication threshold of 10 employed by NISRA for Community Background data)

Number has been suppressed to avoid disclosing another number that is too small to publish.

Table 2 Compositional Profile of NICS by Department, with Gender cross-referenced by Community Background at 1 Jan 2010

Dept	Total staff		Females						Males					
			Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
DARD	3,098	11.3%	596	48.9%	582	47.7%	42	3.4%	957	51.0%	851	45.3%	70	3.7%
DCAL	307	1.1%	67	47.2%	#		*		85	51.5%	#		#	
DE	662	2.4%	268	64.9%	133	32.2%	12	2.9%	143	57.4%	96	38.6%	10	4.0%
DETI	652	2.4%	209	60.6%	#		*		184	59.9%	#		#	
DFP	3,559	13.0%	893	53.1%	759	45.1%	31	1.8%	1,053	56.1%	783	41.7%	40	2.1%
DEL	2,024	7.4%	560	40.8%	791	57.6%	23	1.7%	275	42.3%	363	55.8%	12	1.8%
DHSSPS	852	3.1%	259	59.3%	166	38.0%	12	2.7%	236	56.9%	169	40.7%	10	2.4%
DOE	2,983	10.9%	700	47.6%	733	49.8%	38	2.6%	795	52.6%	659	43.6%	58	3.8%
DRD	2,601	9.5%	278	43.7%	#		*		1,086	55.3%	#		#	
CMED	1,602	5.8%	383	44.2%	472	54.4%	12	1.4%	350	47.6%	373	50.7%	12	1.6%
DSD (Core)	728	2.7%	#		222	56.2%	*		#		191	57.4%	#	
SSA	5,767	21.0%	1,515	41.9%	2,061	57.0%	42	1.2%	859	40.0%	1,263	58.8%	27	1.3%
OFMDFM	421	1.5%	146	60.6%	#		*		95	52.8%	#		*	
NIO	2,086	7.6%	798	60.2%	471	35.5%	56	4.2%	472	62.0%	254	33.4%	35	4.6%
Other	57	0.2%	17	68.0%	*		0	0.0%	18	56.3%	#		0	0.0%
Total	27,399	100.0%	6,859	48.3%	7,036	49.6%	297	2.1%	6,740	51.0%	6,103	46.2%	364	2.8%

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect & Additional DOJ databases

Staff numbers are provided on a headcount basis

Includes all NICS Permanent staff with the exception of uniformed Prison service staff

* For confidentiality reasons the number of cases is too small to publish (i.e. below the publication threshold of 10 employed by NISRA for Community Background data)

Number has been suppressed to avoid disclosing another number that is too small to publish.

Table 3 Compositional Profile of NICS by Department, with Gender cross-referenced by Community Background at 1 Jan 2009

Dept	Total staff		Females						Males					
			Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
DARD	3,158	11.5%	611	48.9%	593	47.5%	45	3.6%	977	51.2%	857	44.9%	75	3.9%
DCAL	282	1.0%	71	50.7%	#		*		78	54.9%	#		*	
DE	685	2.5%	275	65.3%	#		#		147	55.7%	#		*	
DETI	691	2.5%	223	60.6%	#		*		186	57.6%	#		#	
DFP	3,599	13.2%	906	53.4%	754	44.5%	36	2.1%	1,077	56.6%	784	41.2%	42	2.2%
DEL	1,931	7.1%	#		757	57.3%	#		#		349	57.1%	*	
DHSSPS	883	3.2%	262	57.5%	184	40.4%	10	2.2%	239	56.0%	175	41.0%	13	3.0%
DOE	2,986	10.9%	719	48.4%	730	49.1%	38	2.6%	789	52.6%	655	43.7%	55	3.7%

Dept	Total staff		Females						Males					
			Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined		Protestant		Catholic		Not Determined	
	No	Col %	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Females	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males	No	Row % Males
DRD	2,642	9.7%	295	44.0%	#		*		1,114	56.5%	#		#	
CMED	1,721	6.3%	#		506	54.6%	#		#		412	51.9%	*	
DSD (Core)	732	2.7%	#		221	55.9%	*		#		190	56.4%	#	
SSA	5,531	20.2%	1,458	41.4%	2,019	57.3%	46	1.3%	787	39.2%	1,190	59.3%	31	1.5%
OFMDFM	410	1.5%	145	62.0%	#		*		99	56.3%	#		*	
NIO	1,940	7.1%	767	62.1%	442	35.8%	26	2.1%	440	62.4%	239	33.9%	26	3.7%
Other	158	0.6%	56	73.7%	#		*		47	57.3%	#		*	
Total	27,349	100.0%	6,909	48.7%	7,018	49.4%	270	1.9%	6,742	51.3%	6,050	46.0%	360	2.7%

Notes:

Data sourced from HRConnect & Additional DOJ databases

Staff numbers are provided on a headcount basis

Includes all NICS Permanent staff with the exception of uniformed Prison service staff

* For confidentiality reasons the number of cases is too small to publish (i.e. below the publication threshold of 10 employed by NISRA for Community Background data)

Number has been suppressed to avoid disclosing another number that is too small to publish.

Civil Service: Breach of Contract Case

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the 'pay pressure due to settlement of High Court case' referred to in Tables D and E which accompanied his statement to the Assembly on 17 January 2012 on the January Monitoring Round.

(AQW 6700/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The issue relates to a breach of contract case taken against the NIO and the Department of Finance and Personnel by 53 lawyers employed by the Northern Ireland Civil Service. In December 2011, the parties agreed to settle. The terms of the settlement remain to be finalised. The Public Prosecution Service has bid for resources to enable it to meet any liabilities arising from the settlement.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the uptake of the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme in the (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballymena; and (iii) Moyle council areas.

(AQW 6995/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of properties benefitting from the current Small Business Rate Relief Scheme in the Ballymoney, Ballymena and Moyle Council areas are 431, 911 and 424 respectively as at 22nd January 2012.

Sports and Recreation Relief

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the football clubs which currently benefit from Sports and Recreation Rate Relief.

(AQW 7024/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Association football clubs are not identified separately in the valuation list from all other clubs that currently receive Sport and Recreation Relief. Extracting the details solely for football clubs from the list of all organisations that benefit from the Relief, is based on occupier name information only. Based on this, the football clubs currently benefitting from the Relief are shown in the table attached.

Some football clubs may also have associated social clubs occupying separate premises which also enjoy Sport and Recreation Relief in respect of other (non-football) recreational activities. These properties are not included in the list below.

Name of Club	Address
Annagh United FC	151 Tandragee Road, Annagh, Portadown, Armagh, BT62 3BP
Ardmore Cricket & Football Club	62B Ardmore Road, Ballyshasky, Londonderry, BT47 3QZ
Ardstraw Football Club	Unit D, 1 Douglas Road, Croshbalinree, Newtown Stewart, BT78 4NE
Armagh City Football Club	Unit A, HOLM PARK, 41 Ballynahone More Road, Ballynahone More, Armagh, BT60 1JD
Armoyn United Football Club	28A DRONES ROAD, MOYAVER UPPER, ARMOY, BALLYMONEY, BT53 8XJ
Ballyclare Comrades Social Club	25 The Square, Ballyclare, BT39 9BB
Ballymoney United Football Club	Showgrounds, 4A North Road, Town Parks, Ballymoney BT53 6BW
Ballynahinch United FC	8 Downpatrick Road, Ballylone Big, Ballynahinch BT24 8SH
Banbridge Town FC	2 LAWS LANE, BANBRIDGE, BT32 4BQ
Barn United Football Club	4 Taylors Avenue, North East Division, Carrickfergus, BT38 7HF
Carrickfergus Rangers Football Club	2 Taylors Avenue, North East Division, Carrickfergus BT38 7HF
Chimney Corner FC	51 Castle Road, Kilbegs, Antrim BT41 4NA
Crumlin United Football Club	26 Mill Road, Ballyromery, Crumlin, BT29 4XL
Coagh United FC	11 Ballinderry Bridge Road, Coagh, BT80 0BF
Desertmartin Football Club	34 Dromore Road, Dromore, Desertmartin, Magherafelt BT45 5JZ
Dollingstown FC	Planter's Park, 80 Dromore Road, Donaghcloney BT66 7NF
Drumaness Soccer Club	156A Drumaness Road, Cumber, Drumaness, BT24 8RL
H. & W. Welders Football Club	370 Holywood Road, Belfast, BT4 1SL
Islandmagee FC	68 Middle Road, Islandmagee, Ballystrudder, Larne BT40 3SX
Iveagh United FC	1 Thornhill Road, Dunmurry, Belfast BT17 9EJ
Killen Rangers Football Club	Unit D 1, Main Street, Killen, Castlederg, BT81 7SE
Knockbreda FC	31 Upper Braniel Road, Braniel, Belfast, BT5 7TX
Larne Football Club	7A Inver Road, Larne BT40 3BW
Limavady United Football Club	15 Rathmore Road, Limavady, BT49 0DF
Lurgan Celtic Football Club	84A North Street, Lurgan, Craigavon, BT67 9AJ
Mountjoy United Football Club	1 Lisnagirr Road, Omagh, BT78 5NT
North Fermanagh Cricket & Association Football Club.	39 Crevenish Road, Rosscolban, Kesh, Co Fermanagh, BT93 1RF
Northwest Football Association	Wilton Park, 41B Limavady Road, Londonderry, BT47 6LP
Park Football Club	101 Altinure Road, Altinure Upper, Claudy, Londonderry, BT47 4DE
Penarol FC	120 Railway Street, Ballymena BT42 2AF
Portstewart FC	Seahaven, 32 St Johns Close, Portstewart, BT55 7HJ
Seagoe FC	8A Tarsan Lane, Portadown BT63 5RT
Tobermore Football Club	16 Maghera Road, Tobermore, Magherafelt, BT45 5QB
Trustees of Abbey Villa Football Club	91 Abbey Road, Ballymacrui, Millisle, BT22 2DG
Trustees of Ards Rangers FC	Drome Park, 53 Portaferry Road, Newtownards, BT23 8SG
Trustees of Ballinamallard United	70 Enniskillen Road, Ferney, Drummurry, Ballinamallard, BT94 2EG

Name of Club	Address
Trustees of Bangor Amateur Football Club	102 Clandeboye Road, Bangor, BT20 3JU
Trustees of Crewe United Football Club	95 Lisburn Road, Ballypitmave, Crumlin, BT29 4NY
Trustees of Downshire Football Club	30 Old Coach Road, Hillsborough, BT26 6PB
Trustees of Dunmurry Football Club	23 Ashley Park, Dunmurry, Belfast, Antrim, BT17 9EH
Trustees of Fivemiletown United Football Club	39 Cooneen Road, Fivemiletown, BT75 ONF
Trustees of Killyleagh Youth Football Club	40 Comber Road, Corporation, Downpatrick, BT30 9QZ
Trustees of Lisbellaw United FC.	30 Drumeer Road, Drumad, Lisbellaw, Co Fermanagh, BT94 5DG
Trustees of Loughgall F.C.	Lakeview Park, 37 Ballygasey Road, Ballygassey, Loughgall, Armagh, BT61 8HY
Trustees of Moyola Park FC	Mill Meadow, 25 Bridge Street, Castledawson, BT45 8EB
Trustees of Oxford United Football Club	57 Silverwood Road, Knockramer, Lurgan, Craigavon BT66 6LE
Warrenpoint Town Football Club	65B Upper Dromore Road, Dromore, Warrenpoint, Newry BT34 3PN
Wellington Recreation Football Club	1 Willowbank Road, Millbrook, Larne, BT40 2SF

Vacant Properties: Cash Receipts

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 3380/11-15, to detail the amount of cash receipts from unoccupied properties since 31 October 2011.

(AQW 7047/11-15)

Mr Wilson: From 1st November 2011 to 29th January 2012 a total of £2.659M has been received in respect of domestic properties that are currently unoccupied in Northern Ireland.

Government Contracts: Tender Opportunities

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to tender for government contracts.

(AQW 7155/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Small and medium sized businesses are the backbone of the Northern Ireland economy and I am delighted that SMEs have been successful in winning many of our public sector contracts. For example, between May 2008 and November 2010 73% of contracts awarded by CPD and the Centres of Procurement Expertise (CoPEs) went to SMEs.

Public procurement opportunities are open to all and the Procurement Board, which I chair, has a key objective in its Strategic Plan to target the use of public procurement to support economic growth. The Board has also endorsed a number of initiatives, specifically targeted at encouraging SMEs to tender for public sector business. These include -

- the development of a simplified procurement process for low value contracts;
- guidance aimed at SMEs to help demystify the public sector procurement process;
- guidance for public sector buyers to help remove barriers to small businesses tendering for contracts;
- the implementation of eSourcing NI, a single electronic portal advertising all government tendering opportunities over £30k; and
- “Meet the buyer” events which explain the tendering procedures and engage with the supply base in a real and meaningful way. CPD alone supported 53 “Meet the Buyer” events around the province between March 2008 and September 2011 attended by approximately 2,600 suppliers.

Immigrant Workers: Numbers

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the current number of immigrant workers.

(AQW 7172/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The closest approximation to the information requested comes from the July - September 2011 Labour Force Survey (LFS). The LFS estimated¹ that there were some 71,000 people aged 16 and over in employment in Northern Ireland who were born outside the UK. [An estimated 55,000 of these were born outside both the UK and the Republic of Ireland.]

1 Since the LFS is a sample survey, these estimates are subject to sampling variation.

Civil Service: Courier Service

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what changes have been made in the last 12 months, or are intended to be made, to the courier service and the dispatch of documents within the Civil Service.

(AQW 7191/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There have been no changes made in the last 12 months to the NICS internal courier service or to the way in which documents are dispatched. The service will continue to be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains efficient and meets NICS requirements.

Civil Service: Formal Grievance Procedure

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what remedies are available through the formal grievance procedure in the Civil Service.

(AQW 7192/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The NICS grievance procedures state that a grievance is any complaint, concern, or problem which a staff member has in relation to an employment-related matter. Due to this broad definition there is no set list of remedies that a Department can implement or suggest to resolve a complaint. However if an employee's grievance is upheld, the Department will take reasonably practicable steps to ensure that the individual's complaint is satisfactorily dealt with.

Unemployment Statistics

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) International Labour Organisation; and (ii) claimant count unemployment statistics for each year since 2006, broken down by gender; and the number of these people who were under the age of 26.

(AQW 7240/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Claimant Count data, detailing unemployment statistics, can be found in the tables attached. Please note, that the LFS measure of unemployment is consistent with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) measure.

Labour Force Survey

Unemployment by gender (16+).

Period ¹	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
2006	25,000	5.8	13,000	3.7	39,000	4.8
2007	20,000	4.6	13,000	3.6	34,000	4.1
2008	24,000	5.3	8,000	2.3	32,000	4.0
2009	38,000	8.5	16,000	4.5	54,000	6.7
2010	42,000	9.3	16,000	4.4	59,000	7.1
Jul-Sept 2011	41,000	8.9	22,000	5.5	63,000	7.3

1 Annual data are derived from an annual LFS dataset; Jul –Sept 2011 data are from the quarterly LFS series.

Unemployment for those aged under 26.

Period ¹	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Jul-Sept 2011
Number ²	16,000	15,000	16,000	24,000	25,000	28,000

1 Annual data are derived from an annual LFS dataset; Jul –Sept 2011 data are from the quarterly LFS series.

2 Sample size too small to provide reliable estimates for male and female totals.

Claimant Count

The table below provides the annual average for the number of people claiming unemployment related benefits with the percentage of population aged 16 to 64:

Year	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	Rate	Number	Rate	Number	Rate
2006	20,940	3.8	7,010	1.2	27,950	2.5
2007	18,382	3.3	6,023	1.1	24,405	2.1
2008	21,597	3.8	6,258	1.1	27,855	2.4
2009	38,465	6.7	10,646	1.8	49,111	4.3
2010	42,976	7.5	13,838	2.4	56,813	4.9
2011	43,115	7.5	16,795	2.9	59,910	5.2

Notes: Data are not seasonally adjusted

Claimant Count information is only available for 16-64 population.

The table below provides annual average for the number of people aged under 26 who are claiming unemployment related benefits in Northern Ireland:

Year	Male	Female	Total
2006	6,950	3,020	9,970
2007	6,105	2,530	8,635
2008	7,780	2,745	10,520
2009	13,960	4,405	18,365
2010	14,925	5,125	20,045
2011	14,835	5,670	20,505

Notes: Youth Claimant count refers to those aged under 26, and does not include clerical claimant that make up less than one per cent of total.

Data rounded to 5 and are not seasonally adjusted.

Vacant Properties: Council Area

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many vacant properties, whose ownership has yet to be identified, there are in each council area.

(AQW 7257/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The latest figures available, as at 29th January 2012, indicate that the total number of vacant properties whose ownership is not identified within Northern Ireland is 19,895. The table below provides a breakdown of the total by District Council.

Number of vacant properties, whose ownership is not identified, as at 29th January 2012

District Council Area	Total
Antrim	321
Ards	789
Armagh	740
Ballymena	470
Ballymoney	259
Banbridge	565
Belfast	4,521
Carrickfergus	299
Castlereagh	315
Coleraine	713

District Council Area	Total
Cookstown	459
Craigavon	837
Derry	768
Down	708
Dungannon and South Tyrone	825
Fermanagh	1,644
Larne	281
Limavady	308
Lisburn	771
Magherafelt	419
Moyle	187
Newry and Mourne	1,186
Newtownabbey	524
North Down	482
Omagh	1,073
Strabane	430
District Council Area not known	1
Northern Ireland Total	19,895

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many business might benefit from the passage of the Rates Amendment Bill.

(AQW 7333/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Assembly has approved legislation that will raise most of the £6m a year required to fund the extension of the small business rate relief scheme. This will enable a further 8,300 business ratepayers to benefit from the expanded scheme over the next three years.

20% relief will be provided on properties with a net annual value of £5,001 –£10,000. The amount of relief under the main scheme will be broadly doubled, increasing the number receiving help by around 50%. The average award will be in the region of £740 per year.

It should be noted that to preserve the scheme's automatic nature it will apply to all non domestic ratepayers with small premises at or below a £10,000 net annual value but exclude businesses with more than three premises. Some types of property are excluded as well, such as car parks, advertising hoardings and telecommunications masts. You may be interested to know that around two thirds of rateable properties have an NAV of £10,000 or less.

The other measures contained in the Bill that will benefit businesses include providing a 50% rebate on occupation of long term empty retail premises and allowing 50% empty property relief to continue where a show window display is used for non-commercial purposes in empty retail premises. At this stage while it is difficult to estimate the number of businesses that may avail of each of these measures I would put it in the hundreds rather than thousands.

Special EU Programmes Body

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the measures his Department is taking to ensure that the Special EU Programmes Body maximises its possible spend.

(AQO 1266/11-15)

Mr Wilson: DFP officials are liaising closely with SEUPB to ensure that the PEACE III and INTERREG IVA Programmes spend their budgets in full and achieve their respective EU spending targets. If Programmes fail to meet these spending targets, the EU deducts the shortfall from the relevant Programme budget. My officials are working with SEUPB to make sure that this does not happen. Our aim is that all targets will be achieved and no funds deducted.

No measures are in place for PEACE as SEUPB report that it is spending well. However, SEUPB have advised that there is a significant risk that INTERREG will miss its targets in 2013 and 2014 and that as much as £35 million might be deducted. SEUPB say that this is the likely outcome if INTERREG does not increase the pace at which its funds are allocated and then spent. There is about £78 million in the INTERREG budget left to allocate to projects. SEUPB's current plan is to have it all allocated before the end of the year. (It has to be allocated by then if the projects are to have a realistic chance of spending before the Programme closes in December 2015). Allocating £78 million to suitable projects before the end of the year is a challenging objective. My officials are meeting regularly with SEUPB and are closely monitoring progress.

Special EU Programmes Body

Mr Murphy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what measures are in place to ensure that PEACE and INTERREG funds are fully spent by the Special EU Programmes Body in the current programmes.
(AQO 1258/11-15)

Mr Wilson: SEUPB have reported no spending difficulties with the PEACE III Programme. Therefore, there are no special measures in place to ensure that PEACE III will spend its budget and achieve its EU spending targets. With regard to the INTERREG IVA Programme, SEUPB have advised that it will fail to meet its EU spending targets in 2013 or 2014, or in both those years if the current pace of commitment and spend continues. When a Programme fails to meet its EU spending targets, the EU deducts the shortfall from the Programme budget. SEUPB have advised that as much as £35 million might be at risk but the Body is actively taking steps to manage this risk and ensure that no money is lost.

The INTERREG Programme has around £78 million still to allocate to projects. SEUPB plans to allocate this £78 million to projects by December this year. This should allow the projects in question ample time in which to spend and thereby help achieve EU targets. If all goes to SEUPB's plan, the Programme will achieve its EU spending targets and no money will be deducted from its budget. My officials will closely monitor SEUPB's actual performance via regular progress meetings.

Departmental Budgets

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether Departments are now permitted to switch resources from their programme funding into administration without the approval of his Department or the Executive.
(AQO 1262/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Over the last Budget period (2008-2011) the Executive operated an administration cost control regime to ensure that there was an incentive on departments to eliminate needless bureaucracy and waste. This approach was successful in bearing down on administration costs, however it became clear to me from discussions with Ministerial colleagues that costs of operating this regime had reached a point where they would outweigh the benefits anticipated from its continuation.

The Executive agreed in Budget 2011-15 that the administrative control regime should be suspended providing departmental Ministers with the flexibility to manage the resources at their disposal.

Departments however do continue to report administration costs to DFP and this is reported to the Assembly at each Monitoring round. Encouragingly the 2011-12 January Monitoring round showed a decrease of 3.8% in total departmental administration costs from the Budget 2011-15 opening position.

Public Sector Pensions

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on public sector pension negotiations.
(AQO 1263/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Public service pension negotiations have been conducted at central government level with trades unions.

Public service pension policy is a transferred matter but it has been a matter of practice for many decades that the pension arrangements for public service workers in Northern Ireland have been virtually identical to the equivalent arrangements in Great Britain.

With regard specifically to Increased Member Contributions the Northern Ireland Executive agreed on 22 September 2011 to:

- I. commit to the principle of delivering the targeted level of savings to the cost of public sector pension schemes in Northern Ireland, subject to the details of how those savings will be delivered being worked through over time;
- II. adopt this approach consistently for each of the different public sector pension schemes; and
- III. authorise engagement with the unions to discuss a graduated approach which protects lower paid public sector workers.

Ministers who have responsibility for the various Northern Ireland public sector pension schemes will take this forward. My Department is progressing the consultation processes in respect of the civil service pension scheme.

The agreement of the Northern Ireland Executive is required to implement the proposals for long term reform to public service schemes, including the move to career average schemes and pension age linked to State Pension Age. I will bring this matter to the Executive for consideration.

Rates: Empty Shops

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the fifty percent rates relief on empty shops includes premises located in out of town shopping developments.

(AQO 1264/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The proposal for a 50% rates concession for the occupation of long term empty shops applies throughout Northern Ireland and is not confined to town centres.

To do so would create significant difficulties defining what is in town, edge of town and out of town and the current town planning categories are not current or accurate enough to use for the purposes of local taxation. I will not have my Department hauled through the courts at public expense for creating a targeted incentive scheme that has imperfections. This is a one year scheme and therefore I want to keep it as straightforward as possible to administer.

As it happens most long term empty shops are in town anyway so this is where the scheme is expected to have most impact.

Welfare Reform Bill

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what implications the Welfare Reform Bill will have for his Department.
(AQO 1265/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Welfare Reform Bill has major implications for Northern Ireland. In relation to my Department, the abolition of Housing Benefit next year and in particular the rates element of Housing Benefit, is of most concern, as it will not be covered by the new Universal Credit system.

If the current proposals are passed by the Coalition Government this will require the Executive to consider an alternative way of providing support. The demand led AME funding from the Government for the current scheme will be converted to a fixed DEL allocation but with a 10% cut.

I am currently working with Ministerial colleagues on the Executive Sub Group on Welfare Reform to examine this important issue.

Economic Recovery

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of when the economy is likely to recover.
(AQO 1267/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Current global economic conditions are extremely challenging. While some sectors of our local economy are continuing to perform relatively well it is clear that the recovery for others will take longer.

For the UK as a whole the Office for Budget Responsibility has recently (29 November 2011) revised its growth forecasts downwards. There are no official regional forecasts for Northern Ireland but if the pace of the UK's recovery overall is slower than previously hoped then this will have implications for the pace of growth in all regions including Northern Ireland.

Procurement Policy

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what steps are being taken to improve procurement policy.
(AQO 1268/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Procurement Board is responsible for the development of public procurement policy and for monitoring its implementation within Northern Ireland public bodies.

Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) is responsible for the formulation and review of policy in consultation with major stakeholders in the Centres of Procurement Expertise for endorsement by the Procurement Board and, as appropriate, by the Executive.

Within this structure there is a programme of work which has been developed following engagement with stakeholders including contractor/supplier representatives. The current focus is on simplified processes for low value procurements.

Since June 2010 the Procurement Board has approved five new guidance notes on topics such as selection, evaluation and contract management and updated a further five. In addition there are currently a number of others in production or under review which I expect to be published within the next few months.

Fiscal Powers: Transfer to the Assembly

Mr P Maskey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has had discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding the transfer of fiscal powers to the Assembly.
(AQO 1269/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have had ongoing discussions with the Government on the transfer of certain fiscal powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly over the last eighteen months.

The Chancellor has already agreed that Air Passenger Duty on direct long haul flights will be devolved and officials are urgently working through the implementation issues associated with this.

I, alongside Executive colleagues, am currently working with the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the Ministerial Working Group on Rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy where the key consideration is the possible devolution of Corporation Tax powers. This work has also included correspondence and discussions with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. This Ministerial Working Group is also considering what other steps can be taken to support our wider economic rebalancing objectives and we have raised a number of non corporation tax options with the Treasury, in particular, investment allowances, R&D tax credits and national insurance holidays.

And outside this rebalancing work, I have also raised concerns with the Chancellor in relation to the suspension of the Aggregate Levy Credit Scheme and the Carbon Price Floor. While we are not calling for devolution in these instances, I have called on the Government to take action in both regards to mitigate the impact of these taxes on Northern Ireland and work is ongoing on these important issues also.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fire and Rescue Service: Recruitment Drive

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people initially failed an aspect of the aptitude test as part of the recruitment process in the 2011 Fire and Rescue Service recruitment drive, but successfully passed the test following an appeal.

(AQW 6875/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I understand that, of the 373 candidates who failed the practical aptitude test, 37 candidates were successful after re-testing.

Blood Donation: Gay/Bisexual Men

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the agencies and organisations he has had meetings with in relation to the lifetime ban on gay and bisexual men donating blood; (ii) when he plans to make a decision on lifting the lifetime ban, following the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs, for a one-year deferral period; and (iii) the countries in Great Britain from which Northern Ireland has received blood in (a) November 2011, (b) December 2011 and (c) January 2012.

(AQW 6961/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) In relation to blood donations by men who have had sex with men I have had meetings with the Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs (SaBTO), and the Rainbow Project.
- (ii) I will make a decision on this matter when I have considered all the relevant evidence and legal advice.
- (iii) Regarding blood received from other GB countries, the table below sets out the position at 25 January 2012.

Month	Country	Detail
November 2011	England (NHSBT)	4 units of phenotyped red cells imported for a patient with complex antibodies requiring urgent surgery.
December 2011	Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS)	50 units of group O neg red cells imported due to low stocks of O neg pre-Christmas.
January 2012*	Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service (SNBTS)	50 units of group O neg red cells imported due to low stocks post-Christmas

* as of 25 January 2012

Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry: Radiotherapy Unit

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the construction of the Radiotherapy Unit at Altnagelvin Hospital, Derry.

(AQW 6998/11-15)

Mr Poots: There are two stages to the project – the enabling works and the main project, each having a design and construction phase.

Design work associated with the enabling works is progressing well with the tendering process for the construction work due to be completed over the next couple of months. Construction of the enabling works is expected to commence in April 2012 and be completed in August 2013. In parallel with this, the process of appointing the design team for the main works is underway. Construction of the main works is planned to commence in late 2013 with the facility due to open in mid 2016.

Suicide: Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of suicides in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area in each of the last three years; and (ii) what measures he will take to reduce the number of suicides and attempted suicides across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7115/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- i) I have detailed below the number of deaths registered due to “suicide and self-inflicted injury”, or “undetermined injury whether accidentally or purposely inflicted” in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust area for each year between 2008 and 2010.

Registration Period	2008	2009	2010
Number of Suicide Deaths	69	47	51

- ii) The “Protect Life” strategy is currently being refreshed in light of findings from a review of international evidence and best practice. The “refreshed” strategy will be published in early 2012. Action will focus on: continued provision of the Lifeline services; training on suicide prevention; public awareness raising on the issue; continued support for community-led suicide prevention initiatives; local research into the causes of suicide; further development of community emergency response plans; projects and programmes to access vulnerable young men; and enhanced mental health crisis intervention services.

In addition, an independent evaluation of Protect Life is now underway, the outcome of which will inform future suicide and self-harm prevention policy in Northern Ireland.

PIP Breast Implants

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of concerns about faulty PIP breast implants, what consideration his Department has given to testicular cancer patients who opted to have a prosthetic testicle fitted.

(AQW 7128/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information provided by the HSC indicates that PIP testicular implants have not been used in the Health Service.

PIP Testicular Implants

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether PIP prosthetic testicles have ever been used by the Health Service; and what assurances he can give that men who have received them via the Health Service will have them removed and replaced free of charge.

(AQW 7133/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information provided by the HSC indicates that PIP testicular implants have not been used in the Health Service.

Fuel Allowance: Cancer Patients

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the First Minister and deputy First Minister’s announcement on the 8 December 2012, of a special payment of £100 through the Fuel Allowance Initiative for people receiving cancer treatment, to outline (i) when the payments will begin; and (ii) how potential recipients will be identified.

(AQW 7142/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is intended that payments will be issued to patients, who wish to receive payment, in February 2012.

Eligible patients will be identified by their General Practitioners (GPs) who have been requested by the Health and Social Care Board to examine their Practice Cancer Registers to identify those patients who would be eligible for the fuel allowance payment. GPs have been asked to write to each eligible patient identified seeking their consent for their personal information to be used by the Business Services Organisation, to enable a payment to be made to them if they so desire. All eligible patients should have received a letter from their GP by 30 January.

Students: Funding for Medical/Dental Degrees

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what financial assistance is available for students undertaking medical or dental graduate entry courses.

(AQW 7208/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department normally provides a non repayable grant for tuition fee costs and a means tested bursary for Year 5 Medical and Dental students undertaking a primary degree. Students already holding a degree are not eligible for this support. However, graduates can apply to their local Education & Library Board for a maintenance loan and supplementary allowances where applicable.

Oasis Dental Practice, Carrickfergus: Waiting List

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the number of Health Service patients registered with Oasis Healthcare in the Carrickfergus area; and (ii) how many people are currently on the waiting list due to over-subscription. [R]

(AQW 7213/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The number of Health Service patients registered at the De Courcey Oasis Dental Practice in Carrickfergus as at January 2012 was 3,024. This information was obtained from the Family Practitioner Services, Information and Registration Unit of the HSC Business Services Organisation.
- (ii) The information requested is not available.

Business Services Transformation Programme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the areas selected from the Business Services Transformation Programme proposals to become new centres of excellence were identified.

(AQW 7226/11-15)

Mr Poots: Sections 2 and 3 of the consultation document explain how the proposed shared service locations were identified.

Especially relevant from section 2 is the principle that there should be a “distribution of employment opportunities across Northern Ireland to minimise adverse economic impact”. Subject to that consideration, and to the availability of suitable premises, section 3 explains how the proposed centres of expertise have been selected. The approach taken comprises both analysis of the proximity of current staff to each of the proposed shared service accommodations, and the cost of making the accommodation ready for shared services occupation. In other words, the preferred option for the centres of expertise is one which emphasises fairness, business continuity and value for money.

Pseudomonas: Guidelines

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the pseudomonas guidelines published on the Chief Medical Officer's website in 2010 have been implemented.

(AQW 7267/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have commissioned an independent review of the circumstances contributing to the occurrences of pseudomonas infection within neonatal units across Northern Ireland, which led to the tragic death of a baby in Altnagelvin Area Hospital and the tragic deaths of three babies in the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital's neonatal intensive care unit.

The Review will examine the actions and responses of the DHSSPS, the HSC Board, the Public Health Agency and the HSC Trusts to relevant circulars and advice issued in respect of water sources and potential infection risk to patients, issued on and since 15 September 2010. In doing so the Review will seek to determine the extent to which this advice has been implemented.

I have asked the Review team to present an interim report to me by the end of March 2012 and to present their final report within eight weeks of the interim report. I will present the findings of the Review to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

Pseudomonas: Bacteria in Water Tanks

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the water tanks that service the Royal Jubilee Maternity Unit, Belfast and the Altnagelvin Area Hospital, Londonderry have been tested for the pseudomonas bacteria; and if so, what were the findings.

(AQW 7270/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that the water tanks supplying the Royal Jubilee Maternity Unit have been tested for pseudomonas and results have returned satisfactory. The Western Health and Social Care Trust has also confirmed that the water tanks serving the neonatal unit at Altnagelvin Hospital have been tested for Pseudomonas and are awaiting the results of the tests.

Shared Services: Proposals

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Shared Services proposals, for an estimate of the number of jobs that are currently based in Belfast that might be relocated.

(AQW 7341/11-15)

Mr Poots: Based on the proposals which are out for public consultation, the estimated number of jobs currently based in Belfast that might be relocated is a maximum of 144, with a possible lower number between 62 and 72. The number of actual staff affected cannot as yet be estimated. That will become known only in light of their wishes for redeployment within their existing organisations, retraining etc.

Bamford Review: Implementation

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) for an update on the implementation of the Bamford Review; and (ii) for his assessment of how the review will affect the South Down constituency.

(AQW 7410/11-15)

Mr Poots: The cross-Departmental Bamford Action Plan 2009-2011, published in October 2009, has been the vehicle for taking forward implementation of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. This Action Plan has now come to an end. An evaluation of the 2009-2011 Plan is being finalised and I hope to publish this evaluation shortly. The evaluation indicates that, overall, 80% of actions committed to were achieved.

Work is also progressing on the development of the Bamford Action Plan 2012-2015 which I plan to issue for public consultation later in the year.

The Action Plan will again follow a regional approach to the delivery of the Bamford Vision, and will seek to ensure that services are provided to the same standard across Northern Ireland and are, as far as possible, delivered in the community rather than in hospitals.

Prisons: Pharmaceutical Dispensing Contract

Mr B McCrea asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) whether the new pharmacy model has been implemented by the Prison Service; and (ii) how many pharmacists will be employed under this model.

(AQW 7416/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust is responsible for the delivery of healthcare services in prisons.

- (i) The new dispensing contract between the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and Lloyds Pharmacy has been in place since 1st May 2011.
- (ii) The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust currently employs 1 full time Senior Prisons Pharmacist who is responsible for leading and developing pharmaceutical services within prisons and for monitoring the performance of the dispensing contract.

The NI Prison Service currently employs 1 full time pharmacy liaison officer and 8 healthcare assistants who are responsible for the day to day delivery of medicines management within the prisons.

Lloyds Pharmacy are responsible for employing sufficient staff to cover the needs of the dispensing contract. They currently employ 1 full time and 1 part time pharmacist, 2 full time pharmacy technicians and 2 delivery drivers.

Reversal Colorectal Surgery: Waiting Time

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the average waiting time for reversal colorectal surgery in each Health and Social Care Trust area in (i) 2009; and (ii) 2011.

(AQW 7433/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department collects waiting times for inpatient admission on the basis of the number of patients waiting and the length of time they have been waiting at a point in time.

Presented in the table below are the average waiting times for reversal colorectal surgery at each Health and Social Care Trust at 30th September 2009 and at 30th September 2011 (the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available).

HSC Trust	Waiting time position at 30th September 2009		Waiting time position at 30th September 2011	
	Total number waiting	Average waiting time	Total number waiting	Average waiting time
Belfast	2	9 weeks	3	21 weeks
Northern	1	5 weeks	5	34 weeks
South Eastern	2	6 weeks	3	19 weeks
Southern	1	8 weeks	5	10 weeks
Western	2	15 weeks	4	37 weeks
Northern Ireland	8	9 weeks	20	25 weeks

Source: DHSSPS Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

The tables also show the numbers of patients waiting at each date at each HSC Trust. This illustrates that, at particular points in time, the waiting list is made up of very small numbers of patients, and there is the potential that this may skew the average.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7458/11-15)

Mr Poots: Neither my Department nor any of its ALBs has designed any mobile phone applications for use by members of the public, and no such applications are currently being designed or developed.

Altnagelvin Area Hospital: Booking Line

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff are employed to operate the booking line at Altnagelvin Area Hospital; and whether there has been a change in the number of staff or hours of employment in the last 12 months.

(AQW 7465/11-15)

Mr Poots: Number of staff employed to operate the booking line at Altnagelvin Area Hospital

Date	Headcount	WTE
February 2011	15	14.91
February 2012	16	15.91

Source: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Notes:

- 1 WTE = Whole-time Equivalent.
- 2 Western HSC Trust reported that they are doing a higher number of additional sessions this year which was generating a higher volume of calls.

Complementary and Alternative Medicines

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 4315/11-15, whether the complementary and alternative therapies provided in the Complementary and Alternative Medicines pilot scheme demonstrated value for money, compared to conventional treatment for musculoskeletal and mental health problems.

(AQW 7481/11-15)

Mr Poots: I understand the Complementary and Alternate Medicines (CAM) Pilot Project funded by the Department in 2007/2008 aimed to treat patients with acute or chronic conditions who were referred by their GP. While the evaluation of the pilot demonstrated positive support from patient recipients it was not designed to investigate the effectiveness of CAM therapies, either individually, or in comparison to one another, or in comparison to conventional treatment, or over time. It was not a clinical trial or a research study.

In the light of the constrained budgetary environment faced by my Department I need to focus my resources on sustaining existing frontline health and social care services. As a result it is not possible to allocate any funding for CAM services during the current spending period.

Dental Services: Children

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given that Northern Ireland is one of the worst performing regions in Europe for child dental health, whether he can offer an assurance that every child will have access to comprehensive and timely Health Service dental services by the end of the Programme for Government period.

(AQW 7525/11-15)

Mr Poots: Access to health service dentistry is very good across the Province. There are now more dentists in Northern Ireland than ever before and Northern Ireland currently enjoys its highest ever rate for children registered with dental practitioners.

The General Dental Services budget is expected to be under significant pressures in the next few years. My Department and the Health and Social Care Board have developed several savings proposals to help address the pressures whilst maintaining a core of services under the health service to protect and maintain the oral health of the population here. These are currently the subject of consultation with the British Dental Association (BDA).

My Department also continues to work with the Health and Social Care Board and the BDA to put in place new dental contracts which should provide a sustainable service to patients; a predictable remuneration package for the dental profession; and a more controlled method of managing the General Dental Services budget.

Ophthalmologist Appointments: Waiting Time

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what was the average waiting time for an appointment with an ophthalmologist in each Health and Social Care Trust area, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7529/11-15)

Mr Poots: From the quarter ending June 2008 there were substantial changes in how data on waiting times for a first outpatient appointment were collected, with aggregate weekly time bands replacing a series of three monthly time bands. Therefore, to allow comparison, information is provided for the last four years.

While it is not possible to calculate an average waiting time from data collected in aggregate time bands, it is possible to calculate the median time band, a similar statistical measure.

The median waiting times for a first outpatient appointment with a consultant in the Ophthalmology specialty in each HSC Trust at 30th September 2011, the most recent quarter for which official statistics are available and the comparable position in the previous three years, are shown in the table below.

Median waiting time, in aggregate weekly time bands¹, for a first outpatient appointment in the Ophthalmology specialty

HSC Trust	Waiting Time Position @			
	30th Sep 2008	30th Sep 2009	30th Sep 2010	30th Sep 2011
Belfast	0-6 weeks	0-6 weeks	6-9 weeks	6-9 weeks
Northern ²	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Eastern	0-6 weeks	0-6 weeks	9-13 weeks	6-9 weeks
Southern	0-6 weeks	0-6 weeks	9-13 weeks	13-21 weeks
Western	0-6 weeks	0-6 weeks	9-13 weeks	13-21 weeks

Source: Departmental Return CH3

0-6 weeks: Waiting no longer than 6 weeks

6-9 weeks: Greater than 6 weeks but waiting no longer than 9 weeks

9-13 weeks: Greater than 9 weeks but waiting no longer than 13 weeks

13-21 weeks: Greater than 13 weeks but waiting no longer than 21 weeks

²The Northern HSC Trust does not provide outpatient services in the Ophthalmology specialty.

Tristel: Health Problems

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 6801/11-15, to detail (i) the health and safety concerns of staff in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area; (ii) how many complaints have been received about Tristel; and (iii) the problems with this product that have been identified.

(AQW 7590/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) A number of staff raised concerns regarding health problems as a result of exposure to this bleach-based product. These are summarised below:
- Skin problems manifesting with red skin which has a scalded appearance most often over forearms and face;
 - Eye irritation;
 - Irritation of nasal linings with lesions;
 - Chest tightness and worsening of existing asthma and in one case new asthma presenting.

Despite changes to usage protocols and training, further problems continued.

- (ii) The total number of staff complaining of problems was 101. These staff were reported to occupational health who collated information and eventually advised against the continued use of Tristel fusion. While the majority of complaints were of a less serious nature, a number of staff and in particular those with respiratory symptoms were a cause for concern. In order to establish the specific pattern of the health issues, a case-note audit of all reported adverse reactions was undertaken. This was shared with the employment medical adviser at the Health and Safety Executive.
- (iii) In addition to the issues outlined at (i), there were a number of specific direct hazards normally caused by practice issues and storage problems, for example, burst sachets spraying into eyes, product left on surfaces and a build up of fumes when the product is made up in confined spaces.

Business Services Transformation Programme: Consultation Document

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the incorrect contact email address printed on the Business Services Transformation Programme consultation document, what action his Department is taking to rectify this error.

(AQW 7596/11-15)

Mr Poots: There was no 'incorrect' email address printed in the Business Services Transformation Programme (BSTP) consultation document. There have been two different addresses in use, each of which will correctly channel the public's responses to the BSTP Project Team.

I understand that, quite separately, on Friday 27th January the HSC's ICT infrastructure suffered intermittent outage. That fault, since rectified, may have resulted in some emailed responses being bounced back to the senders. I regret any inconvenience caused by that occurrence, but comments will now get through. The public consultation does not end until Wednesday 29 February.

Cyberknife Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been refused a referral for cyberknife stereotactic body radiotherapy in the last year.

(AQW 7629/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information on the number of patients who have been refused a referral for CyberKnife stereotactic body radiotherapy is not collected centrally. Identification of the number of such patients can only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

However, I have been advised by the Health and Social Care Board that during the calendar year 2011, they received requests from consultants within the HSC in Northern Ireland for funding approval to send a total of 53 patients to a specialist provider of stereotactic radiotherapy in another part of the United Kingdom. Of these, one request related specifically to the CyberKnife method of stereotactic radiotherapy.

All 53 patients were transferred for treatment, but in the case of the request relating specifically to the CyberKnife method, the HSCB requires additional information for what would now be a retrospective funding. There were no instances where a referral was not approved.

Cyberknife Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many patients have been referred to another part of the UK for cyberknife stereotactic body radiotherapy in the last year.

(AQW 7632/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have been advised by the Health and Social Care Board that during the calendar year 2011, they received requests from consultants within the HSC in Northern Ireland for funding approval to send a total of 53 patients to a specialist provider of stereotactic radiotherapy in another part of the United Kingdom. Of these, one request related specifically to the CyberKnife method of stereotactic radiotherapy.

All 53 patients were transferred for treatment, but in the case of the request relating specifically to the CyberKnife method, the HSCB requires additional information for what would now be a retrospective funding. There were no instances where a referral was not approved.

Cyberknife Stereotactic Body Radiotherapy

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what discussions he has had with the UK Health Secretary in relation to patients from Northern Ireland being referred to hospitals in Great Britain for cyberknife stereotactic body radiotherapy; and (ii) what criteria is used to determine any such referral.

(AQW 7666/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) I have not had any discussions with the UK Health Secretary in relation to patients from Northern Ireland being referred to hospitals in Great Britain for cyberknife stereotactic body radiotherapy. Stereotactic radiotherapy is not currently commissioned in Northern Ireland. Referrals for such treatment would therefore be considered under the process the HSC Board uses for the approval of Individual Funding Requests (IFRs) or Extra Contractual Referrals to providers outside Northern Ireland.
- (ii) The criteria used to determine a referral are as follows:
 - The patient's clinical condition requires specialised care that could only be sustained for a large catchment population and cannot be provided for a small geographic area such as Northern Ireland.
 - The patient's clinician wishes to seek a second opinion from a provider outside Northern Ireland because of complexities of the patient's condition or circumstances.
 - The treatment is available locally but the patient has some exceptional reason which renders their case different from the vast majority of other patients with the same condition and which therefore justifies a referral for care or treatment outside Northern Ireland.

New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of whether the commitments to the on-going outcomes in the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Strategy (Phase 2) will be realised within the current funding allocation.

(AQW 7678/11-15)

Mr Poots: Alcohol and drug misuse have been significant public health and social issues over the last number of years, and continue to be a key priority for my Department.

On the 26th January 2012, I launched the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2 (NSD), which is a cross-sectoral strategy to reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse. This Department allocates approximately £8 million to its implementation each year, and additional funding is provided through the mental health budget for the provision of treatment and support services. The NSD seeks to direct action across five pillars: prevention and early intervention; harm reduction; treatment and support; criminal justice; and monitoring, evaluation and research.

I want to ensure that the strategy is implemented as fully and effectively as possible, and I believe that this can be delivered within the current funding allocation. However, if issues arise (such as new emerging drugs of concern) it may be necessary to revisit the funding allocation and/or the Public Health Agency may need to prioritise the delivery of certain outcomes in line with the priorities within the NSD Phase 2.

It should be noted that DHSSPS cannot effectively address this issue in isolation. The NSD Phase 2 commits other Government Departments and other sectors to recognise this issue and to allocate time, effort and resources towards our efforts to tackle it.

Bamford Review: Recommendations

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department has taken to implement the recommendations of the Bamford Review.

(AQW 7680/11-15)

Mr Poots: The cross-Departmental Bamford Action Plan 2009-2011, published in October 2009, has been the vehicle for taking forward implementation of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability. This Action Plan has now come to an end. An evaluation of the 2009-2011 Plan is being finalised and I hope to publish this evaluation shortly. The evaluation indicates that, overall, 80% of actions committed to were achieved.

Work is also progressing on the development of the Bamford Action Plan 2012-2015 which I plan to issue for public consultation later in the year.

Department of Justice

Prisons: Strip-searching

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether it is legislation that dictates the necessity for strip-searching in prisons; and whether strip-searches are employed in other UK prisons as well as Roe House, HMP Maghaberry.

(AQW 6898/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Prison Act Northern Ireland (1953) is the legislative authority for the making of Prison Rules. The Prison and Young Offenders Centres Rules

(Northern Ireland) 1995 set out the powers in relation to searching, including full body searching, which is employed in all three establishments in Northern Ireland and all other UK prisons.

Knives: PSNI Confiscation

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many illegal knives were confiscated by the PSNI in each of the last three years; (ii) to detail the number of convictions for (a) being armed with an offensive weapon with intent to commit an offence; (b) possessing an article with a blade or a point in a public place; and (c) possessing an article with a blade or a point on school premises, in each of the last three years; and (iii) whether he has any plans to legislate further on knife crime or the sale of knives.

(AQW 6977/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- I. Two knife amnesties were held during May/June and November/December 2006 resulting in approximately 1500 potentially lethal weapons being disposed of.
- II. The table below gives the number of convictions for knife offences for the calendar years 2006 – 2008.

Number of convictions for certain knife and offensive weapon offences: 2006-2008

Offence	2006	2007	2008
Armed with offensive weapon with intent to commit offence	3	8	8
Possessing article with blade or point in public place	24	45	54
Possessing article with blade or point on school premises	3	0	0
Total	30	53	62

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included. Data for 2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2008 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

III. The Justice Act 2011 finalised a new knife crime sentencing package which increased the penalties available for a range of offences around possession of knives and other offensive weapons. This followed an increase in 2007 in the age at which knives can be purchased from 16 to 18 years of age. Maximum penalties, including the illegal sale of knives, have now been standardised to include up to 12 months' imprisonment where the case has been heard in a magistrates' court and four years' in the Crown Court.

As the Assembly has legislated within the last year, I have no plans at this stage for further legislation, but I continue to monitor the levels of knife crime in Northern Ireland and to keep legislative and amnesty options under review.

Prison Arts Foundation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how much his Department has contributed to the Prison Arts Foundation in each of the last five years; and which other organisations or agencies fund this facility.

(AQW 6978/11-15)

Mr Ford: Table A below sets out the amounts paid by my Department to the Prison Arts Foundation in each of the last five years.

Table A

Financial Year	Cost to PBNI	Cost to NIPS	Cost to YJA	Total
2007/08		£217,035	£9,513	£226,548
2008/09	£10,000	£321,250		£331,250
2009/10	£10,000	£311,503		£321,503
2010/11	£10,000	£304,793		£314,793
2011/12 (to date)	£8,000	£156,179		£164,179

PAF deliver a number of services, ranging from arts and creative writing to teaching of essential skills, providing a link between vocational training and education to engage those with current or past custodial sentences in the rehabilitative process.

The Prison Arts Foundation also receives funding from the Arts Council NI and from other organisations on an ad-hoc basis for a number of agreed programmes and projects of work.

Sexual Offences Prevention Order: Stuart Townsend

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that Stuart Townsend breached his Sexual Offences Prevention Order (SOPO) on several occasions whilst he was a student at Belfast Metropolitan College and again at his home, an offence for which he had received a suspended sentence, and then breached the Order again whilst a student at the North West Regional College, to detail the monitoring to which he was subject under his SOPO; and for his assessment of the effectiveness of SOPOs.

(AQW 6999/11-15)

Mr Ford: I cannot give details on any individual case.

A sexual offences prevention order (SOPO) is ordered by the court when it appears necessary for the purpose of protecting the public from serious sexual harm. Breach of the order is a criminal offence with a maximum sentence of five years. I am satisfied that the SOPO provisions play an important part in the management of risk jointly undertaken by the agencies under the public protection arrangements (PPANI). I am also satisfied that the police diligently enforce the orders.

A SOPO can only contain prohibitions on the offender's behaviour. I have recently consulted on changes to the law to allow for other positive conditions to be included. Legislative proposals have been drafted and will be presented to the Assembly in due course.

Security Clearance: PSNI/MoD Sites

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the process by which contractors apply for security clearance to carry out work on PSNI and Ministry of Defence sites; (ii) the expected timescales for clearance to be approved; and (iii) any potential issues which may hold up an application.

(AQW 7056/11-15)

Mr Ford: As Justice Minister I have no role either in policy or practice in relation to security clearance processes for the PSNI or the Ministry of Defence. PSNI security vetting is an operational matter for the Chief Constable and as I am committed to respecting his operational independence it would be inappropriate for me to comment. You may therefore wish to direct your query to his office. In relation to the Ministry of Defence vetting processes, as this relates to a non-devolved function for which I have no remit, I am also unable to comment.

Rehabilitation Courses: Sex Offenders

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6267/11-15, whether a refusal to co-operate with rehabilitation courses, whilst serving a custodial sentence, is taken into consideration when a prisoner is being released back into the community and appropriate monitoring is being put in place, particularly in relation to sex offenders.

(AQW 7059/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Justice system has a wide range of interventions and rehabilitation courses available to prisoners.

If a prisoner with a Determinate Custodial Sentence refuses to undertake a course or other intervention stipulated by the sentencing court or recommended by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) and/or the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) following assessment while in custody, this non co-operation may result in additional conditions being placed on that prisoner's licence (if a period on licence forms part of the sentence). These additional conditions may require the prisoner to undertake and complete courses or other interventions during the period of time they spend on licence in the community.

If a prisoner with an Indeterminate or an Extended Custodial Sentence refuses to co-operate with courses and interventions stipulated by the sentencing court or recommended by NIPS and/or PBNI following assessment while in custody, the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland (PCNI) may decide that such an individual may have to complete these courses and interventions prior to consideration of release. However, such decisions are matters entirely for the PCNI.

Prisoners given sentences absent of a requirement to spend a period of time in the community on licence will be released from prison at their custody expiry date regardless of whether they have completed any recommended interventions and/or rehabilitation courses.

Prisoner Assessment Unit: Investigation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6107/11-15, (i) on what date was the Prisoner Assessment Unit investigation concluded; (ii) whether the investigation report has been compiled; and (iii) if the report will be published.

(AQW 7062/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Investigation into the Prisoner Assessment Unit (PAU) was completed on 15 July 2011 and the investigation report has been compiled. As stated in my answer to AQW 6107/11-15 no date has yet been fixed for the publication of the report.

Sexual Offences Prevention Order: Barry Johnston

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW6188/11-15, and in particular to the remark that 'the offender chose to reoffend', for his assessment of appropriate, robust and stringent monitoring by various agencies allowing action to be taken to prevent reoffending, rather than an Order in itself preventing reoffending.

(AQW 7063/11-15)

Mr Ford: Once an offender has finished his sentence, including any period of supervision which formed part of the sentence or of licence conditions imposed on release from custody, the agencies no longer have any further custodial or supervisory powers. In the case of a sex offender subject to the statutory notification provisions, the police will enforce those provisions and have certain powers of entry and search in order to do so.

A Sexual Offences Prevention Order is made by the court when it appears necessary for the purpose of protecting the public from serious sexual harm. It places prohibitions on the offender's behaviour and provides the basis for legal action by the police to enforce the order.

The multi agency PPANI arrangements allow for cooperation by a number of agencies on risk assessment and management within the bounds of what is legally possible under the available statutory provisions.

Lawyers: Mileage Claims

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6318/11-15 and AQW 6260/11-15, given the three-year total of £9.02 million paid from legal aid for lawyers' travel costs, and the acceptance that some court users will have to travel greater

distances, for his assessment of the proposal to close some courthouses which may lead to increased mileage claims from lawyers that will have to be paid out of legal aid.

(AQW 7070/11-15)

Mr Ford: On balance, the Department does not anticipate any significant additional costs to legal aid due to increased mileage claims.

When conducting criminal business in the Magistrates' Courts, solicitors are only entitled to claim mileage allowance for travel to courthouses other than their local courthouse. Therefore, if any courthouse is required to close, the next nearest courthouse will become the local courthouse for payment purposes, and no additional mileage allowance will be payable.

The situation for barristers conducting criminal business in the Magistrates' Courts is different in that barristers are only paid travel costs if they travel more than 20 miles outside Belfast. With regard to the consequences of the proposed closures, Newtownards and Bangor are within the 20 mile limit from Belfast and therefore barristers are not entitled to travel costs to these venues. Antrim is considerably closer to Belfast than Magherafelt while Londonderry and Ballymena are only ten miles and eight miles further away from Belfast than Limavady and Larne respectively. Additionally, the use of barristers in cases in the Magistrates' Courts is not normally authorised for payment out of the legal aid fund.

For civil business, solicitors are entitled to travel costs to any courthouse (barristers are still entitled to travel payments for travel outside the 20 mile limit from Belfast), and therefore it is accepted that there may be some additional cost in this regard. However, most of the business conducted in the courthouses identified as potentially for closure is Magistrates' Courts criminal business.

Antisocial Behaviour: Student Areas

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what schemes or initiatives his Department is planning to introduce to combat anti-social behaviour in areas of Belfast with a large student population, such as the Holylands.

(AQW 7105/11-15)

Mr Ford: The new Community Safety Strategy 'Building Safer, Shared and Confident Communities' will set the strategic direction over the next five years for reducing crime, anti-social behaviour and fear of crime in Northern Ireland.

You will be aware from the recent Assembly debate on anti-social behaviour that in Northern Ireland we have adopted a multi-agency partnership approach to tackling anti-social behaviour such as that experienced in Belfast. This approach recognises the fact that anti-social behaviour can encompass a wide range of behaviour such as excessive noise, littering and rowdy behaviour.

This multi-agency approach is reflected in the membership of the Belfast City Council's Holyland Interagency Group which includes representatives from Government Departments, including my own, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, universities and colleges. This inter-agency group has developed an implementation plan which consists of strategic and operational actions under the themes of alcohol, policing, student accommodation and physical infrastructure, student behaviour and management and monitoring to address concerns of residents.

Initiatives taken forward by my Department in conjunction with the Holyland Interagency Group include CCTV, community safety wardens and Get Home Safe.

Finally, new powers which my Department made provision for in the Justice Act 2011, for Fixed Penalty Notices, will come into force in April. These notices will give police additional powers to deal with a range of incidents including indecent behaviour, being drunk in a public place and disorderly behaviour in a public place.

Maghaberry Prison: Attempted Escape from Custody

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6103/11-15, (i) for what the prisoner was sentenced; (ii) how long is his sentence; and (iii) whether he has previously attempted to escape or has assaulted staff.

(AQW 7179/11-15)

Mr Ford:

- (i) The prisoner was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder.
- (ii) The tariff for this offence has been set at 30 years.
- (iii) He has never previously attempted to escape and has no record of having assaulted any member of staff.

Legal Aid: Un-notified Public Procession

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to the 17 people who appeared at Armagh Magistrates Court and were charged with taking part in an un-notified public procession, to detail (i) how many (a) have been granted Legal Aid; (b) solicitor firms are on record; and (c) counsel have been instructed; (ii) the total cost of the cases to date; and (iii) the estimated final cost of the cases.

(AQW 7181/11-15)

Mr Ford: Of the 17 defendants who appeared at Armagh Magistrates' Court, eight were granted a criminal legal aid certificate and a total of five firms of solicitors were engaged to represent those legally aided defendants at the Magistrates' Court.

The legal aid certificates issued do not authorise the use of counsel.

To date, claims have been received and paid in respect of advice given under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act to ten of the defendants. A total of seven firms of solicitors were engaged to give PACE advice. The total fees paid to date amount to £1,136.65, including VAT.

The case is still ongoing therefore no claims for payment in respect of the proceedings at the Magistrates' Court have been received. The cases have been listed as a contest. It is anticipated the fees when paid will be approximately £3,200.00 including VAT.

Forensic Science Northern Ireland: Backlog

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update on the back-log in the Forensics Science Unit; (ii) whether the back-log is contributing to the delays in the justice system which were criticised in the latest Criminal Justice Inspectorate Report; and (iii) what action he intends to take in relation to this matter.

(AQW 7183/11-15)

Mr Ford: One of my priorities is to deliver a fairer, faster justice system and I am committed to speeding up justice. Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) produce approximately 9000 reports per annum. Currently, 167 reports are outstanding, of which four are required by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) to progress prosecutions. FSNI is working closely with the PPS to minimise this number of outstanding reports.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in his Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7205/11-15)

Mr Ford: As the Department of Justice was created in April 2010 figures can only be provided for the 2010/11 period. The table below provides a breakdown of full-time equivalent staff within the Department of Justice and its arm's length bodies who carried out trade union duties, broken down by trade union, where figures are available.

NI Public Service Alliance (NIPSA)	National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO)	Prison Officers Association (POA)
4.08	0.73	3

PSNI: Civilian Staff Equal Pay Entitlement

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Justice to provide details of the ongoing dispute over PSNI civilian staff back pay entitlement, including when back payments are likely to be made.

(AQW 7211/11-15)

Mr Ford: Advice from the Department of Finance and Personnel is that the settlement reached between DFP and NIPSA in respect of equal pay did not extend to police staff. Pay and grading delegation was granted to the Northern Ireland Office (including police support staff) in 1996, therefore no liability exists in respect of equal pay when comparing PSNI support staff and civil servants. No payments can be made without the demonstration of liability.

A number of cases for breach of contract have been lodged in the County Court by members of police staff.

Sexual Offences Prevention Order: Barry Johnston

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6188/11-15, why the various agencies did not consider that there was adequate evidence to suggest a need to disclose the identity of a convicted sex offender in order to protect the public, particularly given that he had failed to co-operate with any rehabilitation courses that he was offered whilst in custody.

(AQW 7237/11-15)

Mr Ford: The question of whether or not to disclose information about an offender is a standing part of the risk management process. Disclosure is unlawful unless there is evidence to suggest it is necessary in order to protect the public. In this case the agencies did not have evidence which would have necessitated a decision to disclose information.

Robert Black: Eligibility for Remission

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6506/11-15, whether Robert Black will serve only half of his 25 years sentence under the 50 percent remission policy.

(AQW 7238/11-15)

Mr Ford: Robert Black received a life sentence under the provisions of the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001, not a determinate sentence. His tariff of 25 years does not attract remission.

Maghaberry Prison: Attempted Escape from Custody

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6103/11-15, how many staff escorted the prisoner in question; and how many were (i) male; and (ii) female.

(AQW 7288/11-15)

Mr Ford: A total of three staff escorted the prisoner in question of whom two were male and one female.

'Avoidable Delay: A Progress Report'

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Criminal Justice Inspection report 'Avoidable Delay: A Progress Report' which criticised delays in court cases, whether he will abolish Preliminary Enquiries at Magistrates Courts, in cases which are automatically indictable, and have them proceed to Crown Court after the initial first stage appearance.

(AQW 7298/11-15)

Mr Ford: On 19 January, I launched a public consultation on proposals to reform the committal process as part of a series of measures to reduce the burden on victims and to speed up the justice system. As part of this consultation I have asked for views on more fundamental reform of the committal stage, including the possibility of direct transfer of cases to the Crown Court. Should consultation responses indicate support for removing the need to hold Preliminary Enquiries in indictable cases, I would clearly be required to consider this in my response.

This is an important piece of work and I would encourage everyone to give us their views. The consultation process will run until 27 April 2012 and the consultation paper is available from the Department of Justice website: <http://www.dojni.gov.uk/index/public-consultations/current-consultations/consultation-on-reform-of-committal-proceedings.htm>.

Bench Warrants: Outstanding

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many Bench Warrants, including European Arrest Warrants, which were issued by Northern Ireland courts, are currently outstanding; and how many of these were issued (i) between one and five years ago; (ii) between five and ten years ago; (iii) between ten and fifteen years ago; (iv) between fifteen and twenty years ago; and (v) more than twenty years ago.

(AQW 7300/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below sets out the number of warrants¹ outstanding for the stated periods.

Warrant Age	Number Outstanding
Less than 1 year	808
1 to 5 years	1,810
5 to 10 years	1,700
10 to 15 years	818
15 to 20 years	139
Over 20 years	63
Total	5,338

1 Includes outstanding Arrest Warrants (Magistrates' Court and Youth Court), Bench Warrants (Crown Court) and European Arrest Warrants as of 25 January 2012.

Human Trafficking

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice to outline the research his Department has carried out into (i) the numbers of people affected by human trafficking; (ii) the identifiable hot-spots for human trafficking; and (iii) the gateways into the country used by the traffickers.

(AQW 7324/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice publishes the Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment (www.octf.gov.uk) which gives figures on the number of victims of human trafficking who have been recovered, an overview of the threat at the current time and examples of recent operational activity by law enforcement agencies. The broader issues raised in the Question are considered by the Organised Crime Task Force Immigration and Human Trafficking sub-group which examines periodic reports by the Higher Police Analyst for the Police Service on a variety of issues about this crime type, including those highlighted.

Prostitution: Involvement in Northern Ireland

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice what research his Department has carried out into the number of people involved in prostitution; and to detail the number of people involved, broken down by (i) constituency; and (ii) city.

(AQW 7325/11-15)

Mr Ford: In January 2011, the Department published a research paper investigating the issues for women in Northern Ireland involved in prostitution and exploring best practice elsewhere. While the research paper focused on women involved in prostitution, it recognised that men can also become involved in prostitution.

The paper noted that prostitution was occurring in towns throughout Northern Ireland and that there were approximately 40-100 women involved in prostitution at any one time. Given the covert nature of prostitution, the paper was not able to establish the precise numbers of those involved in prostitution in Northern Ireland or to break these down to cover each constituency or city.

In October 2011 the Department held a conference to build on the findings of the research paper, attended by 45 delegates from a range of relevant organisations across Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, England and Scotland. The conference covered four themes:

- Preventing people from entering prostitution;
- Tackling demand for those involved in prostitution;
- Helping those involved in prostitution who want to exit to do so and supporting those who do not wish to exit; and
- Eliminating trafficking for sexual exploitation.

The Department has since hosted meetings with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust on this topic and is now developing a programme of action, building on the findings of the research paper and the outcome of the conference.

The Department is also working with the PSNI and the Belfast Trust to carry out research into men who use prostitutes.

Prison Service: Use of Private Investigators

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice whether the Prison Service has ever used private investigators to investigate any of its employees.

(AQW 7354/11-15)

Mr Ford: Yes, the Northern Ireland Prison Service has used private investigators to investigate employees.

Irish Language

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice what action he has taken, or plans to take, to facilitate the use and promotion of the Irish language within his Department.

(AQW 7372/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department has adopted the Code of Courtesy for the use of Irish in official business. This Code complies with the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (The Charter). The Code of Courtesy is designed to assist staff in fulfilling the Department's obligations under the Charter.

Summons Process: Delays

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the delay in processing cases caused by the delivery of Public Prosecution Service summonses by post, given that they then require an acknowledgement to be submitted to the relevant court; and whether this process could be expedited by sending the summonses by recorded delivery.

(AQW 7375/11-15)

Mr Ford: The recent deterioration in the performance of summons cases is a cause for concern. My officials are working with the independent Public Prosecution Service, which is responsible for the summons process, and with others across the justice system to examine the reasons for this and to consider ways in which performance could be improved. As part of this work, we will consider whether the use of recorded mail as evidence of service could improve the effectiveness of postal summonses.

Car Insurance Claims: Legal Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how the cost of legal cases involving car insurance claims compares to the cost of such cases in England and Wales.

(AQW 7418/11-15)

Mr Ford: The majority of personal injury cases arising from road traffic accidents are dealt with in the County Court in Northern Ireland. Costs payable to solicitors and barristers for proceedings issued in the County Court are on a fixed scale prescribed in the County Court Rules. The Rules are made by the County Court Rules Committee and allowed by me. These scales have not increased since 2007.

I understand the scales are currently under consideration by the Rules Committee. I will wish to ensure that any adjustment to the scales prescribed represent fair, reasonable and proportionate remuneration.

In the High Court costs which are not agreed by the parties or between a solicitor and client are assessed by the Taxing Master who decides what constitutes fair and reasonable remuneration for the work conducted.

There are significant differences between how road traffic claims (like other civil matters) are handled in Northern Ireland compared to England and Wales, therefore a direct comparison of legal costs is not straightforward. The Civil Procedure Rules, which govern the procedure for civil courts in England and Wales, provide for the operation of scale costs in limited circumstances. Fast track trial costs are designed only to facilitate the trial of straightforward cases. Fixed costs apply to road traffic accident, personal injury and vehicle damage only claims which settle prior to proceedings being issued but which do not exceed £10,000 in damages. As noted above, scale costs in the County Court apply to all types of cases and prescribe the costs to be paid irrespective of when the case is disposed.

In England and Wales, it would appear that the majority of legal costs in civil cases are based on an hourly rate with a success fee added. Lord Justice Jackson in his report "Review of Civil Litigation Costs" recognised the advantages to the fixing of costs as it gives all parties certainty as to the costs they may recover or incur.

Car Insurance Claims: Legal Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what steps are being taken to reduce the legal costs associated with car insurance cases. (AQW 7420/11-15)

Mr Ford: The County Court deals with the majority of personal injury cases in Northern Ireland. I have already indicated my intention to increase the jurisdiction of the County Court from £15,000 to £30,000. This will enable more lower value claims to be processed through this efficient and accessible court tier.

Costs payable to solicitors and barristers for proceedings in the County Court are prescribed in the County Court Rules. The Rules are made by the County Court Rules Committee and allowed by me. These scales have not increased since 2007. I understand the scales are currently under consideration by the Rules Committee following a public consultation exercise. Any adjustment to scale costs must be allowed by my Department and I will wish to ensure that the amounts prescribed represent fair, reasonable and proportionate remuneration.

In the High Court costs which are not agreed by the parties or between a solicitor and client are assessed by the Taxing Master who decides what constitutes fair and reasonable remuneration for the work conducted.

The Access to Justice Report made a number of recommendations regarding the civil justice system, including personal injury litigation. The consultation on the Report has now closed and my officials are considering carefully the responses.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders: South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders applied for by (i) the PSNI; (ii) local Councils; and (iii) the Housing Executive in the South Belfast constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7423/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Anti-Social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 provides for the making of an anti-social behaviour order against a person by a magistrates' court on application by a relevant authority, or by the court before which a person is convicted of a criminal offence.

The relevant authorities have advised that, in the South Belfast constituency, the PSNI applied for one ASBO in each of 2009 and 2011: both were issued.

The Anti-social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 stipulates that an order shall have effect for a period of not less than two years.

Based on information supplied by the relevant authorities for the period 2005- 2010, the average length of time for a full anti-social behaviour order in Northern Ireland is 2 years 2 months, with the vast majority having the minimum 2 year duration.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders: South Belfast

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice how many Anti-Social Behaviour Orders were issued in the South Belfast constituency, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7424/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Anti-Social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 provides for the making of an anti-social behaviour order against a person by a magistrates' court on application by a relevant authority, or by the court before which a person is convicted of a criminal offence.

The relevant authorities have advised that, in the South Belfast constituency, the PSNI applied for one ASBO in each of 2009 and 2011: both were issued.

The Anti-social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 stipulates that an order shall have effect for a period of not less than two years.

Based on information supplied by the relevant authorities for the period 2005- 2010, the average length of time for a full anti-social behaviour order in Northern Ireland is 2 years 2 months, with the vast majority having the minimum 2 year duration.

Anti-Social Behaviour Orders: Average Duration

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice to detail the average length of time for an Anti-Social Behaviour Order to be issued. (AQW 7425/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Anti-Social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 provides for the making of an anti-social behaviour order against a person by a magistrates' court on application by a relevant authority, or by the court before which a person is convicted of a criminal offence.

The relevant authorities have advised that, in the South Belfast constituency, the PSNI applied for one ASBO in each of 2009 and 2011: both were issued.

The Anti-social Behaviour (Northern Ireland) Order 2004 stipulates that an order shall have effect for a period of not less than two years.

Based on information supplied by the relevant authorities for the period 2005- 2010, the average length of time for a full anti-social behaviour order in Northern Ireland is 2 years 2 months, with the vast majority having the minimum 2 year duration.

Legal Aid: UVF Supergrass Trial

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice (i) how much has been spent to date on legal aid for the 17 defendants in the 'UVF Supergrass' trial to date; and for an estimate of the final legal aid costs; and (ii) how much has been spent to date in legal costs by the Public Prosecution Service in this case, and for an estimate of the final legal costs. (AQW 7436/11-15)

Mr Ford: To date, a total of £157,037.01 (including VAT of £23,704.61 and disbursements of £111.63) has been paid in respect of the legal representation of the defendants in the Magistrates' Court. It is estimated that a further potential £3,500.00 including VAT may yet be claimed and paid for this part of the proceedings.

The total Crown Court fees paid to date is £10,305.60 (including VAT of £1,717.60) in respect of Counsel and interim fees to one firm of solicitors totalling £64,441.54 (including VAT of £9,000.00 and disbursements of £10,441.54).

This case has not yet concluded in the Crown Court and the claims have not yet been submitted. As the case was certified as a Very High Cost Case, the final fees will be assessed by the Taxing Master and therefore it is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of the final legal aid bill.

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) is an independent organisation and any questions regarding its legal costs should be directed to the PPS.

Bench Warrants: Outstanding

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 3013/11-15, to detail the five longest outstanding bench warrants, including the period of time each warrant is outstanding and the nature of the offences. (AQW 7467/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below details the five longest outstanding warrants which are Arrest Warrants issued by a Magistrates' Court:

Court Division	Date Warrant Issued	Offence
Armagh & South Down	29/09/1981	Burglary (2 charges)
Armagh & South Down	23/10/1981	No Insurance
Armagh & South Down	06/04/1982	Obtaining Property by Deception (2 charges)
Armagh & South Down	14/05/1985	Theft
Londonderry	08/05/1986	Theft

Department for Regional Development

Capital Spend Projects

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail his Department's proposed capital spend projects, for each of the next three financial years, including the projected timescales and the costs for each project. (AQW 6868/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): AQW 6869/11-15 provides details of my Department's total capital budget for 2011-15.

My Department has several hundred projects in progress or under development during each of the next 3 years. The following table lists those projects which have a projected cost greater than £5m, providing details of the budgeted spend across the next 3 years, (2012-15) and the estimated completion date.

The table also includes details of capital programmes within which a number of smaller projects are being taken forward.

	2012-13 £m	2013-14 £m	2014-15 £m	Total Project Cost £m	Estimated Completion Date
Roads (including EU Structural Funds)					
A5 Western Transport Corridor *	143.0	285.0	210.0	650 - 850	2016
A8 Belfast to Larne*	46.0	51.0	12.0	110 - 120	2016
Other Strategic Road Improvements*	11.1	7.2	67.8		Ongoing
Structural Maintenance	25.5	29.4	55.0		Ongoing
Local Transport and Safety Measures	7.0	9.9	19.0		Ongoing
Street Lighting, Plant and Equipment	3.0	3.0	15.7		Ongoing
Total Roads	235.6	385.5	379.5		
Transport					
New Trains 2	0.9	0.1		114.0	2012
Adelaide Train Maintenance Facility	1.8			27.8	2012
New Trains 2 Platform Extension	1.0			7.9	2012
Class 3000 Overhaul	1.6	2.8	2.5	13.7	2015
Coleraine to Derry Track Safety Improvement Works	2.6			7.7	2012
Coleraine to Derry Track Renewal	23.0			27.0	2013 (Phase1)
Coleraine to Derry Track Renewal		1.5	18.0	20.0	2015 (Phase 2)
Metro/Goldline Fleet Replacement	0.2			15.0	2012
Building Services Upgrade Programme	1.6		1.4	5.5	2016
Other Rail Safety and Infrastructure Projects	9.7	7.0	9.9		Ongoing
Other Bus Infrastructure Projects	1.0				Ongoing
Sustainable Transport	3.5	0.5	11.8		Ongoing
Belfast Rapid Transit	0.8	1.5	10.0	100.0	2017
Total Transport	47.7	13.4	53.6		
Water and Sewerage					
Water Infrastructure	49.7	46.5	50.5		Ongoing
Water Non-infrastructure	25.6	27.2	39.5		Ongoing
Sewerage Infrastructure	26.8	23.5	21.5		Ongoing
Sewerage Non-infrastructure	48.2	56.2	70.5		Ongoing
Total Water and Sewerage	150.3	153.4	182.0		

The information provided above reflects current plans and may be subject to change.

The several hundred Roads Service schemes being undertaken mean that it is not possible to specify these individually. However, a list of these projects broken down by council area can be found at:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

*At the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary Meeting held on Friday 18 November 2011, it was noted that provision of further funding by the Irish Government, for progression of the A5 and A8 projects, is being deferred and that, in this regard, the Irish Government will provide £25 million per annum in 2015 and 2016 towards the project.

A new funding and implementation plan is now being prepared for the two projects, for agreement at the next NSMC Transport meeting, with endorsement at the next NSMC Plenary meeting. This process will, undoubtedly, affect the funding available to the Department for Regional Development and, therefore potentially, delivery of the Strategic Road Improvements Programme.

When the funding is confirmed, I intend to review the spending priorities across my Department.

DRD provides funding for Northern Ireland Water's (NIW) capital works programme. The majority of projects are due for completion during the current Budget period. The investment levels and project numbers for 2013/14 and 2014/15 are indicative and will be determined by the Utility Regulator through its next regulatory price control process for water (PC13).

The budget for NIW shown in the table above is slightly higher than the published Budget 2010 capital allocation because NIW receive additional capital contributions from sources such as fees for new connections.

Comber Greenway: Bridge over the Ballyrainey Road

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the proposed bridge over the Ballyrainey Road of the Comber Greenway; and any plans his Department has to assist with the scheme.

(AQW 6892/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that following a meeting with Sustrans and users of the Comber Greenway in July 2011, I agreed to secure funding, subject to a satisfactory business case being made for Active Travel funding.

The case presented was successful and £75,000 has been allocated from Roads Service funds to assist with the costs of provision and erection of the bridge.

The design and contract procurement has been completed by Roads Service and work is scheduled to commence on site on 20 February, with a proposed completion date of 30 March 2012.

Bus Shelters: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development how many bus shelters have been erected in North Down in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6907/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that 14 bus shelters have been provided in North Down during the last five years. The table below provides a year on year break down of this figure:

Year	2011	2010	2009	2008	2007	Total
No. of Bus Shelters	0	2	2	2	8	14

I should also advise the Member that local Councils can also provide bus shelters; however, my Department has no information to indicate if any bus shelters have been provided by North Down Council.

Water Charges: Meters

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development what assessment he has made of the health risks associated with the use of smart meters; and whether he has taken these risks into account in his decision to roll-out the use of smart meters for water charges.

(AQW 6937/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have not taken such a decision. Whilst I have policy responsibility for water and sewerage, the Water and Sewerage Services (NI) Order 2006 makes Northern Ireland Water (NIW) responsible for operational matters such as the provision of water meters.

I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that it does not use smart meters for billing purposes and has no current plans to do so. In the circumstances it has not been necessary to make an assessment of the health risks associated with the use of smart meters.

Disabled Parking Bays

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will consider reviewing the criteria for eligibility to a disabled car parking bay, that would allow a carer or a family member of a resident who has a disability, to apply to have a disabled parking bay.

(AQW 6948/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that disabled parking bays are only provided for those who would benefit most from their provision and are therefore normally only provided for disabled drivers. They may, however, be provided for disabled passengers where the passenger cannot be left alone, for example, where a child is under 16 and the driver is a permanent resident at the applicant's address. Where the passenger is over 16, the applicant is required to provide evidence from a Consultant Doctor, of the need for attendance.

The inclusion of the attendance element is a fairly recent addition to the policy and therefore I have no further plans to change the current approach at this time.

Coach Parking Facilities: Omagh

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development what proposals his Department has to provide dedicated coach parking facilities for private tour bus operators in, or near, the centre of Omagh town.

(AQW 6952/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is not responsible for the provision of dedicated coach parking facilities for tourist coaches in Omagh. Consequently, it has no plans to provide any dedicated coach parking facilities in Omagh.

Roads Service officials further advise that local councils may provide off-street coach parking as part of their tourism strategy, or arrange with Translink and other operators to use their facilities. I am advised that in some towns existing bus stops are utilised for this purpose.

Notwithstanding, these arrangements, I can advise that Roads Service officials in Western Division would be content to discuss the provision of pick up/set down facilities for coaches close to Omagh town centre. I understand that an official will make contact with you soon to arrange a convenient date.

Puffin Crossings: Ballymoney/Ballymena/Ballycastle

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development when his Department will introduce the new Puffin crossings in (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballymena; and (iii) Ballycastle.

(AQW 6974/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no plans, at present, to install any additional pedestrian crossings, such as the new style Puffin crossing, in the Ballymoney area.

Roads Service officials further advise that although there are no new sites being considered at present in Ballymena town, a new Puffin crossing has just been installed in Main Street, Ahoghill, and work will commence shortly on the upgrading of an existing zebra crossing to a Puffin crossing in Main Street, Portglenone. Work on this crossing will be completed before the end of March 2012.

In addition, I can inform the Member that Roads Service is upgrading the existing zebra crossing to a Puffin crossing in Ann Street, Ballycastle. Work is due to commence early in February 2012.

A4: Overtaking Lanes

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development what work is planned to increase the number of overtaking lanes on the A4 road.

(AQW 6980/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that five 2+1 carriageway improvements have been provided on the A4 Enniskillen to Ballygawley route in recent years. However, changes to road design standards in 2008, particularly relating to the limiting of junctions and accesses, have made the provision of further 2+1 overtaking lanes very difficult. There are very few, if any, stretches of the A4 route, that have no adjoining junctions, private accesses, or field accesses, to allow the provision of a length of 2+1 carriageway.

On a more positive note, I can advise that a review of the effectiveness of the 2+1 overtaking lane constructed on the A4 at Annaghilla, as part of the A4 dualling contract, is underway and I understand that there is potential to convert a section of this eastbound overtaking lane to provide westbound overtaking. This would, in effect, create an additional overtaking lane to complement the present arrangement.

Bottled Water: Scottish Government Supply

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the quantity of bottled water received from the Scottish Government during the 2010/2011 freeze; (ii) the stocks of water that are still in storage; and (iii) the sell by or use by date of these products.

(AQW 6984/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that the number of bottles of water received from the Scottish Government during the 2010/11 freeze thaw incident, the stocks of this water currently in storage and the best before date of this water, is as detailed in the table below:

Quantity of Bottles Received	Bottles Remaining in Storage	Best Before Date
190,080 x 1.5 litre	21,648 11,088	End January 2012 End May 2012
87,360 x 2 litre	1,440 960 1,440 56,640	End June 2012 End July 2012 End November 2012 End December 2012
Total bottles 277,440 Total litres 459,840	Total bottles 93,216 Total litres 170,064	

Roads: Adopted in Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development to list all the (i) unadopted roads; (ii) roads that have been adopted in the last six months; and (iii) roads that are to be adopted within the next six months, in the Upper Bann Constituency.

(AQW 7026/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that in the Upper Bann constituency, the list of unadopted roads, determined under the Private Streets Order is as follows;

- B2 - Old Railway View, Leitrim Stages 4 & 5.
- B5 - Scarva Heights, Scarva.
- B11a - Chestnut Brae, Gilford Stage 2.
- B15 - Jubilee Rd, Dromore.
- B16b - Barban Mews, Dromore.
- B17 - Windy Ridge, Banbridge.
- B18 - The Slopes, Rathfriland.
- B19 - The Demense, Dromore.
- B21 - Iveagh Manor, Banbridge.
- B26 - Oakdale/Oakridge/Oaklodge, Banbridge.
- B27a - Kinallen Manor, Kinallen.
- B28 - Moorlands, Banbridge.
- B29 - Wallace Park, Dromore.
- B32 - Drumaran View, Gilford.
- B36 - Lotus Green, Banbridge.
- B40 - Cambric Court, Dromore.
- B41 - Kane Terrace, Kinallen.
- B42 - Dolmen Park, Leitrim.
- B47 - Rowanvale, Banbridge Stage 6.
- B53 - Main Street, Scarva.
- B55a - Thorn Heights, Banbridge Stage 7.
- B59 - Rathview, Banbridge.
- B62 - Bannview Mews, Banbridge.
- B68 - Summerhill, Banbridge.
- B70 - Cloverdale, Blackscull.
- B70a - Clover Valley, Blackscull.
- B72 - Fox Ridge, Rathfriland.
- B76 - Old Bleach Green, Banbridge.
- B77 - Bishopshill, Dromore.
- B78 - Linenfields, Lenaderg, Banbridge.
- B81 - Limewood, Banbridge.
- B82 - Quillyburn Manor, Dromore.
- B85 - Drumlin Grange, Moneyslane.
- B86 - Rockvale, Waringsford.
- B88 - Woodside Park, Loughbrickland.
- B89 - Princes Gate, Dromore.
- B90 - Milebush Manor, Dromore.
- B92 - Gowan Meadows, Banbridge.
- B93 - Roes Hill, Lawrencetown.
- B94 - Oak Grove, Banbridge.
- B95 - Laurel Mews, Dromore.
- B97 - Old Mill, Waringsford.
- B98 - Old School Court, Kinallen.
- B100 - Quillyburn Lane, Dromore.
- B102 - Quillyburn Industrial Estate, Dromore.
- B103 - 80 Stramore Rd, Gilford.
- B106 - Brookfield Meadows, Banbridge.
- B107 - Ashbridge Manor, Kinallen.
- B109 - 12 Townsend Street, Banbridge.
- B112 - Beechgrove, Dromore.
- B118 - Millvale Close, Annalone.
- B119 - Gowanvale Drive, Banbridge.
- B121 - 2 Ballydown Rd, Banbridge.
- B142 - Rathfriland Street, Loughbrickland.
- B145 - 10 Mourne View Terrace, Moneyslane.
- C1 - Millennium Way, Lurgan
- C2 - The Hollows, Lurgan
- C19A - Old Portadown Road , Lurgan
- C28 - Silverwood Court, Lurgan
- C30 - Castle Lane Mews, Lurgan
- C33 - Off Rectory Park, Lurgan
- C35 - Kiln Road -5 Houses, Lurgan
- C37 - Shimna Walk/Pollock Mews, Lurgan
- C38 - Derrymacash Cottages , Lurgan
- C40 - Birchdale Manor, Lurgan
- C44 - Ardmore Road , Lurgan
- C46 - Knockramer Meadows , Lurgan
- C49A - Raughlan Meadows, Lurgan
- C53A - Kiln Lodge, Lurgan
- C54 - Silverwood Leaves, Lurgan
- C58 - Kilvergan Heights, Lurgan
- C74 - Bann Close, Lurgan

- C89 - Lilburn Hall, Lurgan
- C99 - Ashford Grange, Lurgan
- C102 - Beechfield Avenue, Lurgan
- C106 - Silverwood Green, Lurgan
- C111 - Hillcrest , Lurgan
- C112 - Glen Park, Lurgan
- C114 - Shannaghmore Park, Lurgan
- C120 - Rectory Park, Lurgan
- C121 - Deerings Wood, Lurgan
- C123A - Willow Common, Lurgan
- C124 - Bowens Lane, Lurgan
- C129 - River Glade Manor, Lurgan
- C130A - Belvedere, Lurgan
- C133 - Ennis Close, Lurgan
- C140 - Derryloiste Meadows, Lurgan
- C151 - Toberhewny Lodge, Lurgan
- C152 - Charles Baron Lodge, Lurgan
- C164 - Foxes Glen, Lurgan
- C169 - Woodvale Gate, Lurgan
- C185 - James St/Market St, Lurgan
- C191 - Bowens Lane, Lurgan
- C193 - Boconnell Lodge, Lurgan
- C201 - Prospect Way, Lurgan
- C226 - Carrickvale Manor, Lurgan
- C230 - Lake Street, Lurgan
- C245 - Derry Park Lane, Lurgan
- C35 - Dwellings at Drumcree Rd, Portadown
- C3A - Development at Drumcree Rd, Portadown
- C5 - Selshion Hall, Portadown
- C7 - Carnreagh, Drumnaggon Rd, Portadown
- C9 - Mahon Industrial Estate, Portadown
- C12 - Lynedale Manor, Portadown
- C13 - Kernan Hill, Portadown
- C17 - Obins St/Park Rd, Portadown
- C21 - Timakeel Manor, Portadown
- C22A - Ballyhannon Lodge, Portadown
- C29 - Breagh Lodge, Portadown
- C43A - Ashgrove Manor, Portadown
- C52 - Seagoe Road, Portadown
- C68 - Swallowfield Court, Portadown
- C72 - Bocombra Manor, Portadown
- C88 - Mahon Court, Portadown
- C90 - Breagh Road, Portadown
- C93 - Orchard Meadows, Portadown
- C107 - Rear 19 Gilford Road, Portadown
- C110 - Loughgall Road Roundabout, Portadown
- C116 - Ashgrove Road, Portadown
- C135 - Obin Street, Corcrair, Portadown
- C147 - College Manor, Portadown
- C154 - Bocombra Hill, Portadown
- C159 - Ballyoran Manor, Portadown
- C168 - Ashford, Drumcree Rd, Portadown
- C174A - Ballynacor Meadows, Portadown
- C174 - Ballynacor Manor, Portadown
- C175 - Keelmount Mews, Portadown
- C90 - Development at Breagh Road, Portadown
- C189 - Development at Dungannon Road, Portadown
- C197 - Selshion Mews, Portadown
- C204 - Lisnisky Lodge, Old Lurgan Rd, Portadown
- C213 - Ripley Terrace, Portadown
- C220 - Development at Dungannon Road, Portadown
- C229 - Lisnagrilly Hall, Long Lane, Portadown
- C232 - Bannfoot Village Development, Portadown
- C239 - Development at Tandragee Rd, Portadown
- C239A - Development at Tandragee Rd, Portadown
- C243 - Development at Killycomaine, Portadown
- C248 - Development at Old Lurgan Rd/Lisnisky Lane, Portadown
- C260 - The Old Rectory, Loughgall Rd, Portadown
- C157 - Development at Cloncarrish Rd, The Birches
- C172 - Coney Island View, The Birches
- C217 - Development at Robinsontown, The Birches
- C14 - Bluestone Hall, Craigavon
- C39 - Balteagh Road, Craigavon
- C63 - Lismore Manor, Craigavon
- C80 - Limefield Rise, Craigavon
- C83 - Hillcrest Manor, Craigavon
- C98 - Carrigart Manor, Craigavon
- C105 - Drumgor Road, Craigavon
- C109 - Larkfield Meadows, Craigavon
- C126 - leary Road, Craigavon
- C134 - Cedar Wood, Bleary, Craigavon
- C144 - Ballinamoney Heights, Craigavon
- C145 - Old Fort Lodge, Craigavon
- C167 - Carrigart Crescent, Craigavon
- C194 - Craigavon Leisure Centre, Craigavon
- C214 - Development at Marlborough Retail Park, Craigavon
- C92 - Ballynadrone Meadows, Steps Rd, Magheralin
- C94 - Broomhill Grove, Magheralin
- C216 - Lurgan Road, Magheralin
- C238 - Broomhill Court Yard, Magheralin
- C249 - Development at Steps Road, Magheralin
- C170 - Moss View, Moss Rd, Waringstown
- C171 - Waringhall Place, Waringstown
- C218 - Brae Manor, Waringstown
- C8 - Monree Hill, Donaghcloney
- C62A - Winona Manor, Donaghcloney
- C87 - Lagan Lodge, Donaghcloney
- C100 - Monree Court, Donaghcloney
- C153 - Laurelvale Grove, Donaghcloney
- C156 - Strawhill, Donaghcloney
- C34 - Beechfield Hall, Dollingstown
- C203 - Taughrane Lodge, Dollingstown

Roads Service officials further advise that the roads in this constituency that have been adopted in the last six months are:

- ADB212 - Carn Valley , Rathfriland , Stages 3,4,5
- ADB291 - Limewood, Banbridge, Stages 1 & 2
- ADB292 - Riverview Court, Banbridge Stage 1
- ADB293 - Bishopshill, Dromore Stages 1,2,3
- ADC620 - The Granary, Waringstown
- ADC621 - River Glade Court, Lurgan
- ADC521 - Windsor Lodge, Waringstown Stages 6-8
- ADC622 - Ardmore Road, Lurgan
- ADC623 - Cornakinnegar Road, Lurgan
- ADC624 - Charles Baron Lodge, Lurgan Stages 1 & 2
- ADC625 - Ballyoran Manor, Portadown Stages 1 & 2
- ADC617 - Lagan View Manor, Donaghcloney
- ADC328 - Chasewood, Portadown
- ADC328 - Chasewood Close, Portadown
- ADC626 - Killycomaine, Portadown
- ADC576 - Grace Manor, Portadown
- ADC627 - Mill Hill, Waringstown

In addition, I can confirm that the roads in the Upper Bann constituency scheduled for adoption in the next six months are as follows:

- B27a - Kinallen Manor
- B51 - Brookdale
- B92 - Gowan Meadows
- B21 - Iveagh Manor, Banbridge
- C58 - Kilvergan Heights, Lurgan
- C111 - Hillcrest, Lurgan
- C28 - Silverwood Court, Lurgan
- C106 - Silverwood Green, Lurgan
- C164 - Foxes Green, Lurgan
- C226 - Carrickvale Manor, Lurgan
- C5 - Selshion Hall, Portadown
- C18 - Kernan Hill Manor, Portadown (stages 18 & 20)
- C110 - Loughgall Road roundabout, Portadown
- C189 - Litters Filling Station Portadown
- C197 - Obin Street, Portadown
- C172 - Coney Island View, Maghery
- C194 - Craigavon Leisure Centre
- C171 - Waringhall Place, Waringstown
- C100 - Monree Court, Donaghcloney
- C156 - Strawhill, Donaghcloney
- C34 - Beechfield Hall, Dollingstown

Millennium Way, Lurgan

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the completion of Millennium Way, Lurgan. (AQW 7033/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the route selection and preliminary design of the Millennium Way scheme in Lurgan has been completed. A planning application for the renewal of the Planning Approval for the scheme has also been recently submitted to Planning Service, with a view to completing the detailed design and advancing the Vesting Order should resources allow.

I should also explain that the limited funding available for capital improvements has been fully committed to a programme of major improvement schemes on the strategic road network. Furthermore, Budget 2010 and the reduction in the Executive's capital funding, means that there continues to be sizeable pressures on the capital budget within my Department.

Difficult choices will have to be made over the next four years to deliver the best services and infrastructure in water, sewerage, roads, and public transport. I therefore intend to consider the proposed investment across my Department and explore opportunities for bringing forward schemes, such as Millennium Way. I would point out, however, that the Regional Development Strategy, quite understandably gives preference to the needs of the Strategic Road Network.

Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport: Transportation Links

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he is taking to improve the links to (i) Belfast International Airport; and (ii) George Best Belfast City Airport in the near future and in the long term. (AQW 7039/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department recognises the importance of infrastructure connections to our airports in facilitating economic competitiveness, our tourist and leisure industry and the travelling public. The strategic relevance of these connections over the longer term will be considered within the review of the Regional Transportation Strategy, which will prioritise transportation investment in the period after 2015.

The Investment Delivery Plan for Roads outlines the Strategic Road Improvements envisaged over the ten year period 2008-2018. This includes schemes that will improve accessibility for passengers travelling to Belfast International Airport from across Northern Ireland and from the Republic of Ireland. For example, the recently completed scheme between Beech Hill and Cloghogue, at Newry, has completed the dualling of the A1 from Sprucefield to the border.

Accessibility to both airports, through Belfast, has also been significantly improved following completion of the M1/Westlink and M2 works. Major dualling schemes for substantial sections of the A6 between Londonderry and Randalstown, and for the A26 between Coleraine and Ballymena are also being developed and progressed through statutory processes.

On a smaller scale, the Investment Delivery Plan for Roads envisages the construction of a number of 2+1 carriageway widening schemes on the A26 Nutts Corner to M1 Moira road. These projects, along with the various traffic management schemes that are proposed along this route, should enhance safety and improve journey times.

Although it has not been possible to include an upgrade of the link from the M2 to Belfast International Airport in the Investment Delivery Plan for Roads, this proposal will be assessed along with other potential schemes, for inclusion in future programmes.

The Investment Delivery Plan for Roads will be reviewed as part of the evolution of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland, which will consider spending beyond our current budget period.

With regard to George Best Belfast City Airport, Roads Service is continuing to develop proposals for the A2 Sydenham Bypass Improvement Scheme. The proposed scheme will widen a 2.5km length between Bridge End and Knocknagoney from dual 2-lane carriageway to a dual 3-lane carriageway. However, it is not envisaged that the scheme will proceed to procurement during the current budget period of 2011-15.

There are no plans at present to extend rail links to Belfast International Airport or to realign the existing Belfast to Bangor railway line and create a new station closer to George Best Belfast City Airport. Although these matters are kept under review, given the pressures on the railway capital budget and other priority railway projects resources for such projects have not been identified within the period of the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

Translink continuously monitors usage on its bus services to Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport in order to ensure that there is adequate public transport provision in place.

Ports and Airports: Transportation Links

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development what EU legislation on transport links with ports and airports is likely to be introduced over the next four years.

(AQW 7040/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The European Commission published proposals for a regulation on guidelines for the development of the Trans-European Transport Network and for a Connecting Europe Facility on 19 October 2011. The draft regulations propose a number of issues with regards to ports and airports, including provision of intermodal connections. These regulations will be subject to agreement by the European Parliament and Council through ordinary legislative procedure. As drafted, they would have limited implications for public transport links to our ports and airports.

Airports: Infrastructure Improvements

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he is considering setting up a dedicated group to look at ways to improve all the infrastructure to airports.

(AQW 7041/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am not minded to set up a dedicated group for this purpose and consider that the existing arrangements, whereby officials meet with the relevant airport authorities to consider infrastructure improvements, as being adequate.

Roads: Private Housing Developments

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the number of incomplete roads in private housing developments that are yet to be completed as a result of the developer being in financial difficulties; and what action his Department is taking in relation to this matter.

(AQW 7050/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that while it is not aware of the financial status of all developers at any given time, it estimates that in the last three years, the completion of approximately 120 new roads in private housing developments have been deferred due to the developers' financial circumstances.

Roads Service officials further advise that where there is undue delay in completing new roads in housing developments, including cases where the developer is in financial difficulties, Roads Service takes action under Article 11 of the Private Streets Order. This action requires the developer to carry out the necessary work. If the developer does not comply, Roads Service can complete the works and recover costs from the road bonds. In the last three years, Roads Service has served 227 Article 11 notices. Of these, 71 have progressed to enforcement stage.

To pursue completion of new roads in private housing developments, Roads Service will continue to liaise with developers, in addition to using Article 11 notices and appropriate enforcement, as provided for under the Private Streets legislation.

A48: Newtownards Road/Bailie Terrace

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the plans to improve road safety at the A48 Newtownards Road/Bailie Terrace junction in the Cotton area of North Down.

(AQW 7051/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has undertaken a technical assessment of the A48 Newtownards Road / Bailie Terrace junction. The results of the assessment indicate that this junction is worthy of further technical consideration and a number of design options are currently being explored.

Public Transport: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Regional Development what initiatives his Department is planning to encourage car users in North Down to use public transport.

(AQW 7053/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's plans for North Down are included in the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan. The Plan provides for, and encourages, greater use of public transport and includes proposals for improved bus and rail services, Park and Ride and Rapid Transit.

My Department is providing funding to allow Translink to purchase 20 new trains, the first of which are already in service. Some of these trains will be deployed on the Belfast to Bangor line in order to increase the frequency and capacity of services on the line. My Department continues to fund the purchase of new modern buses. These will be used across Northern Ireland and will bring benefits to the North Down area.

My Department is also developing a new pilot Rapid Transit system in Belfast. One of the proposed Rapid Transit routes will link East Belfast to the city centre and will include a Park and Ride facility in the Dundonald area. It is anticipated that some car users from North Down will use this facility.

The Travelwise initiative run by my Department continues to promote sustainable modes of transport in all sectors across the North including more use of public transport, car sharing, walking and cycling.

Information about the range of Travelwise initiatives can be found at www.travelwiseni.com.

A4: Park and Ride Provision

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development what further works are planned to improve the existing park and ride provision on the A4.

(AQW 7064/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Following recently completed work there are now 100 spaces at the Ballygawley Roundabout at the junction of the A4 and A5 key corridors. My Department's Roads Service has advised that there are currently no further works planned to improve the existing Park & Ride/Park & Share provision on the A4. Although there are no definitive future plans, my Department's Roads Service and Translink continue to keep locations under consideration with a view to developing Park and Ride options, which will be dependent on successful completion of statutory processes and availability of finance.

Road Service: Ballyvaden Depot

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the reasons behind the decision to transfer equipment back to Brookeborough's Road Service depot that had previously been moved from that depot to Ballyvaden depot; (ii) whether the changes that needed to be made to the Ballyvaden depot had received planning permission; and (iii) how much the movement of equipment from one depot to another, and back again, cost his Department.

(AQW 7066/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it was aware of the requirement to improve the sight line at the entrance to Ballyvaden depot and this was being progressed with Planning Service, Lands Branch and the landowner. Unfortunately an issue arose on 11 January 2012, in relation to the acquisition of the land, and it was necessary to postpone the transfer from Brookeborough depot until this was resolved. This issue has now been resolved.

With regard to the changes needed at Ballyvaden depot, I understand that Roads Service had been liaising with Planning Service throughout and, although planning permission had not actually been obtained, it was anticipated that it would be forthcoming.

The cost to remove and return equipment to Brookeborough depot, including staff time, is estimated at approximately £1,600 with a further £1,500 to be paid in respect of the cancellation of pre-arranged work on 12 January 2012.

Translink/Ulsterbus: Customer Satisfaction

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the latest available customer satisfaction levels for (i) Translink; and (ii) Ulsterbus, broken down by district.

(AQW 7073/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The performance of Ulsterbus, Metro and NI Railways(Translink) is independently monitored against the commitments in the Passenger Charter. The Passenger Charter is agreed between my Department, Translink and the Consumer Council and is based on twice yearly surveys. Customer Performance Ratings which establish customers' opinions of the services provided is part of this process.

The most recent independent monitoring results cover the period Spring 2011. Relevant statistics are attached, showing Customer Performance Index results for Metro, Ulsterbus and NI Railways over time and including the most recent survey. Customer satisfaction levels are not broken down by District. However there is an analysis of Customer Satisfaction ratings for Ulsterbus depots and NIR stations which is attached. There is no comparable information for Metro, as its depots are not passenger facilities.

Customer Performance Index (CPI) is an amalgam of perceived performance on key service attributes factored against the relative importance of these attributes. The five groups of results included in the CPI are Punctuality, Value for Money, Helpfulness, Passenger Comfort and Cleanliness. CPI means that results can be easily benchmarked and they can be interpreted at a glance. CPI is not a national/international standard although other public transport monitors would derive an overall satisfaction value and also satisfaction with specific aspects of service.

Recalibration of CPI ratings takes place to acknowledge aspects of service that have changed in terms of relative importance to passengers over time.

I have placed a copy of graphs showing CPI performance, rating per individual customer performance and customer satisfaction with Ulsterbus stations in the Assembly Library.

Roads, Pedestrian and Cycle Network: Investment

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the total amount of expenditure on (i) roads; and (ii) dedicated cycle paths in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7075/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service expenditure on the road, pedestrian and cycle network includes capital investment as well as maintenance costs.

As I advised the Member in my reply to AQW 7074/11-15, Roads Service has not provided any dedicated cycling paths, however, it has provided cycling paths that are shared between pedestrians and cyclists. I am also advised that such expenditure is categorised as 'cycling measures' and that information on costs associated with the maintenance of these cycling paths is not recorded separately.

The amount of expenditure on roads and cycling measures, in the last five financial years, is detailed in the table below:

Expenditure on roads and cycling measures £'000

	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Total Roads Service Capital and Maintenance Expenditure	260,104	219,876	222,042	246,416	198,333
Cycling Measures	1,151	1,056	1,360	981	311

I can also advise that information on completed and proposed cycle path schemes, for the current financial year, can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtypesresults.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

Car Parking: Lurgan

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to increase car parking capacity at the (i) Lurgan M1 park and ride; and (ii) William Street train station, Lurgan.

(AQW 7076/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Lurgan Rail Station's Park and Ride facility was extended in August 2006 to a capacity of 153 plus 5 disabled spaces. Additional car parking facilities were also extended at the Wesley Place car park near the train station when its capacity was increased by 69 spaces to 240. This will be of benefit to those travelling by train in the Lurgan area. The M1 Park and Ride at Lough Road currently has 105 spaces and is utilised well.

At present, there are no plans to further increase capacity at either Lurgan M1 Park and Ride at Lough Road, or the train station at William Street in Lurgan. However, should opportunities arise to extend parking facilities that can further promote sustainable transport choices, they will be considered by both NI Railways/Translink and my Department's Roads Service.

Construction Industry: Investment

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister for Regional Development what action he has taken to support and underpin the construction industry; and what progress he has made on the establishment of a taskforce for the construction industry.

(AQW 7108/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department recognises the benefits to be obtained from infrastructure investment. I am conscious that it is an essential component for jobs and future prosperity, both in the short term through construction employment, and in the longer term as it facilitates economic growth which is key to our future competitiveness.

Communication is vital in this regard and to that end I recently attended the twelfth meeting of the Assembly's All Party Construction Industry Group, along with a number of my Ministerial Colleagues, at the invitation of its Chairman, Patsy McGlone. The meeting was convened to allow engagement between the construction industry and Ministers on the problems facing the industry. The consensus from those in attendance was that the All Party Working Group was the appropriate forum for future engagement with the representatives from the industry.

With regard to the establishment of a taskforce for the construction industry, I would advise the Member that the Department of Finance and Personnel, in its role as sponsor of the construction industry, would normally take the lead in such initiatives. Whilst my Department would be willing to participate in such a working group, in the meantime, my officials will continue to work in partnership with the construction industry, through the established channel of the Construction Industry Forum for Northern Ireland, to help achieve our draft Programme for Government commitments.

Utility Companies: Reinstatement Standards

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Regional Development what action can be taken against utility companies whose employees alter streets and roads and do not replace like with like.

(AQW 7112/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it will notify a utility company where it has not carried out a reinstatement to the required standards. It then carries out follow up inspections, at the utility company's expense, until such time as the defect has been remedied.

Roads Service can also prosecute utility companies for failing to carry out proper reinstatements, but generally only does so in cases where the failure has been particularly severe, or it has identified persistently poor reinstatement performance by an individual utility company and all other approaches have failed to secure the necessary improvement.

Road Bonds

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline any steps he is taking to ensure that Road Bonds are recovered, and used to complete unfinished and unadopted private roads in cases where the developer has ceased to trade.

(AQW 7145/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that in cases where housing developers have ceased trading, it will liaise with the responsible parties to seek completion of unfinished roads. If necessary, enforcement action is taken, with road bond monies being accessed and used to complete unfinished street works.

When complete, the road is adopted into public ownership and maintained by Roads Service.

Road Bonds

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the total value of Road Bonds that are being held; (ii) in how many cases the financial backers of the developers have honoured the Road Bonds; (iii) anything in statute that prevents a bank, that is funding a developer, from holding a Road Bond and considering itself a preferential creditor, if the developer were to cease to trade.

(AQW 7146/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the total value of Road Bonds held to the end of the current financial year, 2011/12, is £112,626,205.

Roads Service officials further advise that, with the exception of one case, all bonds/sureties have been honoured.

In respect of the third part of the Member's question, Departmental Solicitor's Office within the Department of Finance and Personnel, has advised that the legal position of an insolvent developer is governed by the terms of the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, as amended by the Insolvency (Northern Ireland) Order 2005.

Parking Tickets: Banbridge/Lurgan/Portadown

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Regional Development how many parking tickets were issued in (i) Banbridge; (ii) Lurgan; and (iii) Portadown during December 2011.

(AQW 7169/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) issued in Banbridge, Lurgan, and Portadown in December 2011 are provided in the table below:

Location	Banbridge	Lurgan	Portadown
Number of PCNs Issued	121	143	222

Public Sewer Network

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) the current rules governing the provision of public sewer facilities for groups of rural houses, including the thresholds for inclusion; (ii) the financial assistance available for this provision; (iii) when the level of financial assistance was last reviewed; and (iv) for his assessment of whether the current arrangements are adequate.

(AQW 7201/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Extensions to the public sewer network may be requisitioned under Article 154 of the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 by owners and occupiers of existing and proposed premises serving a notice on NIW.

Applications received by NIW are assessed under a technical and economic appraisal study. Where a viable technical solution is available to service the premises, NIW makes a reasonable cost allowance of £2,322 for each new build dwelling with planning approval and £4,000 for each existing dwelling constructed prior to 1 January 2000. Where the estimated cost of the scheme exceeds the allowance, applicants can pay the requisition charge to cover the shortfall. For a group of houses, the total allowance available is the sum of the individual allowances.

The level of the reasonable cost allowance was reviewed and consulted upon in 2006/07. The reasonable cost allowance is higher than elsewhere in the UK.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in his Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7206/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The information available for my Department and its arm's length bodies is shown in the table below:

	2000/01		2005/06		2010/11	
	Number of staff with recorded facility time for trade union duties	Trade Union	Number of staff with recorded facility time for trade union duties	Trade Union	Number of staff with recorded facility time for trade union duties	Trade Union
DRD	9*	NIPSA	13*	NIPSA	6 3 9	TGWU GMB NIPSA
NI Water (created on 1 April 2007)	Not applicable		Not applicable		21 6	UNITE GMB
Translink	Not available		Not available		55 84 17 19	GMB UNITE SIPTU TSSA

* Figures for these years only available for non-industrial staff in DRD Core and Roads Service.

Buses: Bullying Complaints

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development how many complaints of bullying on buses Translink has received in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7228/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The following are incidents on Translink services over the period in question, which have been recorded and specifically identified by them as in the category of bullying.

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
0	2	1	1	3

Motorways: Speed Limit

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has given any consideration to increasing the speed limit on motorways to 80 mph; and for his assessment of the benefits of such an increase.

(AQW 7241/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has powers to set speed limits under Article 38 of Part IV of The Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The Department for Transport's proposal to increase speed limits on motorways to 80 mph will be subject to public consultation and, if approved, will only apply to motorways and some high class dual carriageways in England and Wales.

My officials have investigated this proposal and have also had discussions with their road authority counterparts in Great Britain and Ireland. The free flow speed surveys have indicated an average speed of 65 mph on motorways and 55 mph on dual carriageways. This would appear to indicate that excess speed on these types of roads in Northern Ireland is not really an issue and with the relatively small length of motorway here, there would be negligible impact on journey times. I understand that the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales will also resist attempts to raise the speed limit within their territories as they also have concerns about their roads being unfit to drive comfortably at higher speeds, especially at junctions.

Research undertaken for the Department for Transport in England has indicated that if the proposed increase of the speed limit to 80 mph was implemented, it would result in an annual increase of 18 fatalities and 64 serious injuries, while the severity of collisions would also increase. In addition, with increased speeds resulting in higher fuel consumption, there would be a considerable rise in noxious gas emissions.

I would therefore conclude that I would not support a rise in motorway and high class dual carriageway speed limits to 80 mph.

Bus Service: Enniskillen and Derry

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on a direct bus route between Enniskillen and Derry.

(AQW 7245/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A meeting with representatives from Translink, the Rural Community Transport Partnerships from Fermanagh and parts of Tyrone and my Department was held on 6 February 2012. At that meeting it was agreed in principle that a bus service between Enniskillen and Londonderry, operated by Translink and supported from the Rural Transport Fund, would be introduced as a pilot scheme.

A key objective of the service would be to improve accessibility for people in Fermanagh and parts of Tyrone getting to appointments in Altnagelvin hospital. Therefore where the detail of the route has to be determined, it was felt that any service should include pick up facilities at towns and villages along the route.

The reason for introducing a service as a pilot scheme, which would operate for up to six months, is that the information regarding useage would inform any decision on how to meet the demand for such a service going forward.

The next stage is to liaise with the Western Health & Social Care Trust to determine, from the information they can provide in regard to hospital appointments scheduled when best to provide the service. It will also be established if certain days/times during the week can be allocated by the Trust for appointments for people from the Fermanagh area, this would facilitate better transport planning in regard to when and how often the service will operate.

Given the above and based upon the advice of Translink and the Partnerships, I would envisage that the pilot scheme would commence in September 2012.

A4/N16: Upgrade

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development if he would consider raising the potential upgrading of the existing A4/N16 at the next meeting of the North South Ministerial Council, when it meets in Transport Sectoral Format.

(AQW 7247/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the upgrade of the existing A4/N16 was discussed at the recent Cross Border Steering Group Meeting, which was attended by senior officials from Roads Service, the National Roads Authority and the Irish Department of Transport. It was accepted that significant progress would not be possible under the current Budget settlements in both jurisdictions.

The upgrade of the A4/N16 was also been discussed on the fringes of a recent North South Ministerial Council Transport Sector Meeting.

Looking to the future, design and development of the A4 Enniskillen Southern Bypass continues to progress and a proposal for a bypass of Fivemiletown is also currently included in the Investment Delivery Plan for Roads. I would anticipate that the ten year Strategic Road Improvement Programme will be reviewed in due course, when a new Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland has been agreed.

Bus and Rail Transport: North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what investments are planned for bus and rail transport in North Down in each of the next three years.

(AQW 7253/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink has advised that the following investments are planned for bus and rail transport in North Down in each of the next three years:

Projects	2012/13 £000s	2013/14 £000s	2014/15 £000s
Bangor Integrated Station			
Refurbishment of Public Toilets	40	0	0
Improvements to Rear Path and Fencing	30	0	0
Installation of Barriers	10	0	0
Bangor Railway Line Sea Defences Improvements	0	0	10
Other projects being completed across the public transport networks which will have some impact in the North Down Constituency			
Building Services Upgrade Programme	1,599	321	1,877
School Bus Signage & Lighting	240	160	0
Overhaul of the Class 3000 Trains (Phase 1)	1,613	2,779	2,469
Provision of an Interim Sandite Vehicle	81	19	0
Hazardous Tree Survey - Network Wide	68	0	0
Customer Information System Programme	0	39	37
Bridge Refurbishment & Strengthening Programme	0	402	402
Embankments & Cuttings Programme	0	201	201
Hand Held Ticketing Terminals Replacement	959	1,918	0

My Department is providing funding to Translink to purchase 20 new trains some of which will be deployed in the North Down area.

Roads: Investment in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development what investment in roads in the North Down area is planned for each of the next three years.

(AQW 7255/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it is currently preparing a programme of carriageway resurfacing and footway reconstruction schemes in North Down, however, the detailed budgets for each of the next three years have not yet been agreed.

When finalised, details of future works programmes will be presented to the Council in the Spring and Autumn Council Reports. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

Bike Hire Scheme for Belfast

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his Department's role and level of involvement in the proposed Public Bike Hire Scheme for Belfast; and to detail the funding that his Department has provided for the development of the scheme over each of the last three years.

(AQW 7279/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: A partnership project was established in 2010 involving Belfast City Council, my Department and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to investigate the feasibility of introducing a public bike hire scheme in Belfast. In August 2010, following a successful tender, Grant Thornton were appointed by the partnership to complete an outline business case. The final report which has now been received by the partners concludes that an opportunity exists for the introduction of a bike hire scheme in Belfast.

Officials from my Department and Belfast City Council have been considering the report with a view to agreeing the most appropriate way forward. The development of the outline business case was funded by the SIB and no funding has been made available from my Department to date.

Roads: Oil Spillages

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps are planned to record the number of oil spillages on roads arising out the transportation of fuel products; and what action is planned to ensure that health and safety procedures are enhanced.

(AQW 7308/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it currently has no plans to record the number of oil spillages on roads arising out of the transportation of fuel products.

Roads Service policy and procedures relating to its response to fuel spillages are aimed at ensuring the safety of road users and to prevent fuel from entering watercourses, or causing other environmental damage.

Treatment of fuel spillages is undertaken by trained personnel in accordance with advice from manufactures and/or other statutory organisations, such as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency, as required.

Roads Service policies and procedures are continually reviewed to ensure that all operations are carried out in line with current health and safety procedures.

I would also remind the Member that Roads Service has plans in place to deal with roads related incidents, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and respond immediately to the initial calls.

Park and Ride Facilities: North Antrim

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department plans to increase the number of park and ride parking spaces in North Antrim.

(AQW 7393/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department continues to review the availability of Park and Ride facilities in North Antrim and where appropriate we will seek to increase capacity.

My Department's Roads Service has advised that the proposed A26 Glarryford to A44 Drones Road junction dualling scheme includes the provision of a 50-100 space Park and Ride/Share facility. The progress of the scheme scheduling will be dependent on satisfactory progression through the statutory procedures, the procurement process and the availability of finance.

In addition Translink has advised that there are 35 additional spaces being provided at Ballymoney Rail Station with completion in August 2012.

Should opportunities arise to extend parking facilities that can further promote sustainable transport choices, then they will be considered by my Department.

Water Leakage

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the current level of water leakage; and what plans are in place to reduce the leakage.

(AQW 7406/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that audited leakage levels are calculated on a 12 month rolling average and reported on a financial year basis. The outturn figure for 2010/11 was 177 megalitres per day and NIW is currently on profile to meet the 2011/12 target of 171 megalitres per day set by the Regulator.

NIW will continue to implement its leakage reduction strategy which involves effective leakage management, upgrading the water infrastructure and targeting resources to detect and repair leaks. It aims to reduce leakage to a level of 168 megalitres per day by the end of March 2013.

Buses: Fire on Derry to Belfast Goldline Service

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the cause the recent fire on the Derry-Belfast Goldline bus; and what steps have been taken to reduce the risk of further incidents of fires on buses.

(AQW 7451/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: This is an operational matter for Translink. However it has advised me that the recent engine compartment fire on fleet number 2008, a double-deck Goldline coach, was caused by a fractured fuel return pipe on the engine fuel injector pump.

As a precautionary measure, Translink issued a general technical instruction bulletin relating to the maintenance of fuel systems to all staff who work on this type of vehicle.

In addition a complete fleet check of fuel system pipes on this vehicle type has been carried out by Translink. They report that no other problems have been detected as a result of these checks.

A25: Seven Sisters

Ms Ruane asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department intends to carry out road improvements on the Seven Sisters stretch of road on the A25.

(AQW 7475/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it currently has no plans to improve the stretch of road known as the Seven Sisters on the B8. However, in light of a recent collision on this road, I have asked my officials to liaise with the PSNI to determine whether any additional road safety measures are required at this location. I have also asked Roads Service to carry out a review of previous assessments to identify any potential areas for improvements along the B8 road from Newry to Hilltown.

Park and Ride Facilities: East Antrim

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development how many railway passengers have used the park and ride facilities in East Antrim in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7483/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Park & Ride facilities are provided at a number of railway stations from Whiteabbey through to Larne, with a total of 559 parking spaces now available.

Translink advises that it does not keep information on how many railway passengers have used these facilities in East Antrim in each of the last 5 years. Instead snap-shot surveys of the utilisation of the facilities are undertaken every 3 years to provide a trend line.

Capacity and utilisation figures for Rail Park and Ride spaces in East Antrim are set out in the table below:

Site	2008 Capacity (spaces)	2008 Typical Utilisation %	2011 Capacity (spaces)	2011 Typical Utilisation %
Whitehead Railway Station	50	90	49	94
Greenisland Railway Station	13	100	79	62
Whiteabbey Railway Station	16	156	75	67
Carrickfergus Railway Station	120	108	294	60
Larne Railway Station	68	88	62	56

Bicycle Usage

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he is aware of any countries in Europe with a lower percentage of trips made by bicycle than Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7663/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department established an Active Travel Forum during March 2010 with the principal aim of drawing up a high level strategy for active travel, setting out the framework to help people choose more sustainable and active transport modes, including walking and cycling for shorter everyday journeys and linked to public transport for longer trips.

As part of this strategy officials from my Department carried out research on main mode of transport in Europe and USA. This indicated that there are two European countries with a lower percentage of trips made by bicycle than Northern Ireland. These are Malta (0%) and Cyprus (0.3%). Further details can be found by visiting:

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_312_en.pdf

Department for Social Development

Rent: Average Housing Association Charge

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average rent charged by each housing association for non-specialist housing.

(AQW 6888/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): In relation to the average rent charged by Housing Associations I have detailed this information in Annex A.

ANNEX A**All rents reflect three bedroom general family, new build.**

Housing Association	Average Rent
Abbeyfield	*N/A
Alpha	79.13
Apex	75.69
Ark	70.71
Belfast Community	74.71
Broadway	*N/A
Clanmil	67.28
Connswater	86.57
Covenanter	*N/A
Craigowen	*N/A
Dungannon	76.20
Filor	70.02
Flax	77.89
Fold	74.87
Gosford	75.60
Grove	70.49
Habinteg	73.88
Harmony Homes	68.34
Hearth	*N/A
Helm	79.72
Newington	75.48
Ni Co-Ownership	N/A
Oaklee	77.97
Open Door	*N/A
Rural	74.65
Shac	*N/A
South Ulster	84.79
St Matthews	69.90
Triangle	79.41
Trinity	74.26
Ulidia	80.65
Wesley	*N/A

(*N/A) Housing Association does not have any properties in this category.

Housing Executive: North Belfast Office

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) number; and (ii) religious background of staff currently employed in the Housing Executive's district office in North Belfast.

(AQW 6934/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the religious background of the staff: -

Roman Catholic	Protestant	Not known
83	17	4

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in his Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7020/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department does not hold the information required to answer parts (i), (ii) and (iii) of the question in relation to trade union representatives in the Department for Social Development.

With regard to the Department's three arms-length bodies, both Ilex and the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland have stated that they had no staff carrying out trade union duties during trade union facility time in the years 2000/01; 2005/06; and 2010/11. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has advised that it does not hold the information required to answer parts (i), (ii) and (iii) of the question.

Housing: Repossession

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many houses have been repossessed in each of the last four years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 7043/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department does not hold the information requested. The Department of Justice has also advised me that the information is not available in the format requested but has provided the following information.

Orders made in respect of mortgages include possession, declaration, sale and possession; dismiss action, suspended possession and other orders, for example, stay of eviction.

A plaintiff begins an action for an order for possession of property. The court, following a judicial hearing, may grant an order for possession. This entitles the plaintiff to apply to have the defendant evicted. However, even where an order for eviction is issued the parties can still negotiate a compromise to prevent eviction. Not all writs and originating summonses lead to eviction or repossession.

The table below details possession. Possession is when the court orders the defendant to deliver possession of the property to the plaintiff within a specified time. If the defendant fails to comply with the court order the plaintiff may proceed to apply to the Enforcement of Judgements Office to repossess the property and give possession of it to the plaintiff.

Orders Made [1] in respect of mortgages – by Constituency

Constituency	Possession			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Belfast East	30	39	45	59
Belfast North	31	57	96	120
Belfast South	24	39	61	75
Belfast West	44	67	86	77
East Antrim	34	62	87	100
East Londonderry	27	64	91	124
Fermanagh and South Tyrone	46	75	81	117
Foyle	61	91	125	123
Lagan Valley	31	59	86	95
Mid Ulster	41	69	85	109
Newry and Armagh	45	81	111	118
North Antrim	47	63	65	114
North Down	31	69	87	86

Possession				
Constituency	2007	2008	2009	2010
South Antrim	42	73	96	134
South Down	49	66	80	103
Strangford	32	63	78	72
Upper Bann	41	81	128	129
West Tyrone	31	55	98	108
Postcode Missing [2]	24	20	26	9
Total	711	1193	1612	1872

- 1 More than one order can be made per case so these figures do not necessarily equal the number of cases disposed of.
- 2 It is not a mandatory requirement to provide a postcode. The software used by DOJ to determine constituency is based on postcode and, where that has not been provided with the case papers, it cannot then identify the constituency and these instances are recorded as 'postcode missing'.

Mortgage Debt Advice Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has considered establishing a mortgage relief scheme, as part of the Programme for Government, to assist in alleviating the difficulties faced by a large number of home owners. (AQW 7046/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A large number of people here experience difficulty meeting mortgage payments. As a result, my Department funds a contracted Mortgage Debt Advice Service, operated by the Housing Rights Service. This service provides advice and is preventing people here from becoming homeless as a consequence of housing related debt. I have recently awarded additional money due to increased demand for the service. I have previously expressed my support for the introduction of a Mortgage Rescue Scheme in the Assembly but believe that it would either help only a small proportion of those facing repossession or would be extremely expensive to operate. I am conscious that, when allocating money, the Executive must weigh-up other needs, such as those presented by education and health.

Social Security Benefits: Uptake

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development how many households in the 2010/11 financial year received benefits in excess of £26,000. (AQW 7048/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Of approximately 340,000 households in receipt of social security benefit in 2010/11, paid by the Social Security Agency, early analysis indicates that more than 99% of households are in receipt of less than £500 per week in social security benefits.

Benefit Fraud

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost of benefit fraud to his Department in each of the last three years. (AQW 7083/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The most recently published information is set out in the tables below. Table 1 shows the estimated cost of benefit fraud for benefits administered by the Social Security Agency. Table 2 shows the estimated cost of Housing Benefit fraud. The estimated levels of benefit fraud are shown in terms of losses and also expressed as a percentage of benefit expenditure.

Table 1 - Social Security Benefits – estimated cost of Benefit Fraud.

2008			2009			2010		
Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud %
£3789	£12.6	0.3	£4176	£17.2	0.4	£4352	£20.5	0.5

Table 2 - Housing Benefit - estimated cost of Benefit Fraud

2008			2009			2010		
Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud %	Benefit Expend £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud £m	Estimated Benefit Fraud %
£467.9	£3.0	0.6	£538.5	£5.0	0.9	£606.8	£1.7	0.3

Co-ownership Scheme: Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the co-ownership budget for the 2012/13 financial year. (AQW 7085/11-15)

Mr McCausland: £25 million has been allocated to the Co-ownership scheme for the 2012/13 financial year.

Housing Executive: Assistance with Repairs and Extension Grants

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications for assistance with repairs and extension grants the Housing Executive has received from home owners in each of the last three years. (AQW 7088/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the number of formal applications received by the Housing Executive in each of the last three years: -

Year	2000/09	2009/10	2010/11
Total	5,660	3,007	2,724

These figures do not include those Preliminary Enquiries which were made to the Housing Executive regarding grant aid for which formal applications were not subsequently received.

Incapacity Benefit/Employment and Support Allowance: Entitlement

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many claimants have lost their entitlement to (i) Incapacity Benefit; and (ii) Employment and Support Allowance, in each of the last three years. (AQW 7093/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A customer's entitlement to Incapacity Benefit or Employment and Support Allowance will cease when they no longer satisfy the conditions of entitlement to that benefit. This can occur when the Department establishes that the conditions of entitlement are no longer met or when the customer's circumstances change and entitlement ceases.

The table below shows the total number of claims where entitlement, to Incapacity Benefit or Employment and Support Allowance, has ceased in each of the last three years. For some customers benefit entitlement may have ceased on more than one occasion.

Year	Incapacity Benefit*	Employment and Support Allowance*
Apr 09 to Mar 10	15,663	12,827
Apr 10 to Mar 11	9,027	17,672
Apr 11 to Dec 11	7,982	14,807

*The figures provided have been derived from scans of the Department's Matching Intelligence Database Analysis and General Matching Service systems and include cases where a customer has been found fit for work, has failed to attend a medical assessment or has not provided the required information. The figures also include claims where entitlement has ceased following changes in a customer's circumstances including when a customer returns to work, claims an alternative benefit or the death of a customer.

The figures include a number of claims where the customer was not receiving payment of Incapacity Benefit but a weekly National Insurance credit.

Disability Living Allowance: Entitlement

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many claimants have lost their entitlement to Disability Living Allowance in each of the last three years. (AQW 7094/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested. However, Table 1 below details the number of customers who lost their entitlement to Disability Living Allowance on application of a renewal claim, in each of the last three years; and

Table 1 - Disability Living Allowance - Renewal Claim Disallowed

Year	Number of renewal claims disallowed
2008/09	3,277
2009/10	2,523
2010/11	2,522

Table 2 below details the number of customers who had their rate of entitlement to Disability Living Allowance maintained, reduced or disallowed following a supersession* of their award, in each of the last the last three years. Table 2 - Disability Living Allowance- Supersessions rejected

Year	Number of supersessions where the rate of entitlement was maintained, reduced or disallowed
2008/09	4,092
2009/10	4,201
2010/11	3,953

* A supersession is when a change has occurred in a customer's circumstances, outside the one month disputes period, subsequent to the date the original decision was made.

Medical Notes: Charges for Release

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he intends to take to limit the charges imposed by doctors for releasing medical notes for appeal tribunals.

(AQW 7117/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Ownership of medical notes lies with the appellant's doctor. If the doctor refuses a request for the release of these notes for an appeal tribunal, the appellant may request them via a Freedom of Information enquiry and the associated fee will be imposed. My Department has no control over the fee charged.

Work Capability Assessment

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many people, in each constituency, have failed the Work Capability Assessment since ATOS Origin began conducting the assessment; and how many people, in each constituency, have appealed the decision.

(AQW 7147/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department's management information system does not differentiate between customers, by constituency, who have undertaken a Work Capability Assessment conducted by Atos Healthcare and those who participated in a Work Capability Assessment before Atos Healthcare took over on 20 June 2011.

The decision on whether or not a customer is to be disallowed benefit following a Work Capability Assessment is the responsibility of a Social Security Decision Maker.

Smoke Alarms and Carbon Monoxide Alarms

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development whether it is a legal requirement for private landlords to install smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms in their premises.

(AQW 7150/11-15)

Mr McCausland: All landlords of Houses In Multiple Occupation, which are governed by "The Housing (Management of Houses In Multiple Occupation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993, are legally required to ensure working smoke alarms in their properties.

In addition, since June 1994 landlords of other private rented properties are required by Building Regulations to have smoke alarms fitted in all newly built properties, although there is no legal requirement for private landlords to install smoke alarms in properties built before that date.

The Departmental of Finance and Personnel has recently consulted on a proposal to require the installation of carbon monoxide detectors/ alarms in all dwellings where a new or replacement combustion appliance is installed. A final decision on this proposal has not yet been taken by that Department.

Youth Work: Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of funding his Department allocated to summer intervention youth work in the Upper Bann area, in each of the last three years (i) in total; and (ii) in each council area.

(AQW 7167/11-15)

Mr McCausland: While the Department for Social Development has not allocated any funding to specific summer intervention youth work in Upper Bann, it has, through its Neighbourhood Renewal and Areas at Risk programmes, funded a number of youth projects many of which operate all year round. The level of funding allocated to these programmes is as follows:

District Council Area	Funding Allocated		
	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Banbridge	Nil	£2,116.67	£3,466.66
Craigavon	£72,014.00	£100,032.00	£168,469.58
Total	£72,014.00	£102,148.67	£171,936.24

Homeless People

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently homeless and sleeping on the street.

(AQW 7173/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In Northern Ireland the propensity to rough sleep is confined largely to Belfast and to a much lesser extent Londonderry. By applying the Department for Communities & Local Government's (DCLG) guidance on counting rough sleepers fewer than 10 individuals rough sleep in Belfast on a given night. There are, however, up to 100 individuals who could sleep rough regularly if appropriate services were not provided.

In Londonderry the problem is largely confined to street drinking, although again, without appropriate services, there is the capacity for this to become a rough sleeping problem. Currently there are very isolated incidences of rough sleeping. Appropriate services can vary, based on the geographical circumstances; however there are core services that are common to all locations, street outreach support services, access to crisis accommodation, comprehensive assessment and the development of a continuum of services from crisis accommodation to move on services through to resettlement.

Land for Sale

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how much land his Department plans to sell in the 2012/13 financial year.

(AQW 7174/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The current Urban Regeneration and Community Development Group budget for the sale of land in the 2012/13 financial year is £5m.

Social Security Benefits: Uptake

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of his Department's efforts to ensure that all people who are entitled to benefits are claiming them.

(AQW 7175/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Promoting benefit uptake is a key priority for my Department and the Social Security Agency has taken a proactive approach to increasing uptake. Since 2005 a number of new and innovative approaches have been taken in addition to on-going promotional activity, which has resulted in 400,000 people being offered benefit entitlement assessments which has generated an additional £37.6 million in annual benefit and arrears for over 11,000 people across Northern Ireland. The return on investment being achieved is 1:8 ie £1 spent has generated £8 in new and additional benefits and arrears.

In 2011/12 significant additional investment has been made in benefit uptake, taking the annual spend to in excess of £1.3m across 4 complementary approaches:

- 25,000 people, selected from existing customer data, have received a personal invitation to have a full benefits assessment through a contracted partner in the independent advice sector.
- A promotional outreach to older people approach at council and community level involving trusted partners such as community and older peoples' groups, GPs, pharmacies and church/faith based groups. Entitlement checks are delivered by telephone with home visits offered to those who require assistance with making a claim.
- The "Make the Call" advertising campaign - a television, radio, press and outdoor advertising campaign aimed at older people. Over 10,000 calls have been received to date and ongoing monitoring indicates that 40% of callers have potential entitlement.
- A £375,000 Innovation Fund for Increasing Benefit Uptake has funded 7 projects led by the community and voluntary sector partners to test new and innovative ways of reaching people with potential unclaimed benefit entitlement.

Early evaluation of the 2011/12 programme is underway and outcomes for 3 of the 4 approaches will be reported in June 2012. The outcomes from the Innovation Fund for Increasing Benefit Uptake will be known in March 2013.

The Agency is also working increasingly across government to optimise opportunities for increasing uptake of a wide range of benefits, services and supports. This work includes sharing data to aid targeting where legal gateways exist. It also includes joint delivery of uptake activities with Departments and Agencies. These include, Land and Property Services and Northern Ireland Housing Executive on housing benefit and rates relief, Department for Rural Development in relation to rural poverty and the Public Health Agency on assisting those with neurological health conditions.

A wide range of general services are also in place to make people aware of their potential entitlement to benefit. These include the production of specific publications, some in minority ethnic languages; NI Direct website; an online Benefits Adviser Service; general assistance with information available through our network of local and centralised offices.

Work Capability Assessment: Concerns

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what action he has taken to address concerns about the Work Capability Assessments that are carried out by ATOS Healthcare for people on Employment and Support Allowance.
(AQW 7176/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Social Security Agency has a dedicated Medical Support Services Contract Management Team that monitors the performance of Atos Healthcare. The Work Capability Assessment medical assessments for Employment and Support Allowance are subject to monthly audits. The audit results are reported to the Social Security Agency's Health Assessment Advisor who is responsible for reviewing the quality and consistency of medical assessments. In the event that there are any concerns about the quality of the assessments, they are addressed directly with Atos Healthcare.

Belfast City Centre: Regeneration

Mr F McCann asked the Minister for Social Development what action he has taken to end the policy on the sequencing of developments in Belfast City Centre.
(AQW 7177/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department's policy of sequencing retail-led regeneration in Belfast City Centre is designed to ensure that the expansion of retail floor space is planned and implemented at a pace which the retail market can absorb while extending consumer choice. This policy has served Belfast well by securing the £400m private sector investment at Victoria Square, despite the difficult trading conditions in the retail sector, and moving forward the Royal Exchange project through planning in order to be ready to take advantage of the upturn in the retail sector when this arrives.

Social Fund: Research Study

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Social Development whether he intends to carry out an analysis, during the Social Fund Reform, of the wide disparity in success rates for Crisis Loans, whereby Londonderry and Strabane had 95 percent success, while Ballymoney and Banbridge has less than 60 percent success.
(AQW 7212/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In order to help shape the future design of discretionary support to replace the existing system of Community Care Grants and Crisis Loans for living expenses and items, the Social Fund Research study is considering both the strengths and weaknesses of the current provision. In order that future customers receive as consistent a service as possible, I will be considering the factors which contribute to the variation in the percentage number of successful applicants.

Welfare Reform Bill: Disability Groups

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development what action his Department is taking to ensure that people with learning disabilities understand the changes proposed by the Welfare Reform Bill.
(AQW 7223/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Officials have been engaging with Customer Representative Groups to explain the changes proposed by the Welfare Reform Bill. In particular, the Personal Independence Payment project have established a specific forum for Disability Groups and members of the Voluntary and Community Sector. Two successful meetings have been held to date which are the first in an extensive programme of planned engagement to inform the future delivery arrangements for this new benefit.

In addition, individual disability organisations have been offered the opportunity to avail of one to one meetings to address a wider cross section of individuals within the organisation concerned. Mencap was the first to take up this opportunity and others are pending.

I have also recently launched a 15 week public consultation on the assessment criteria for the Personal Independence Payment. I am keen to ensure that people here and their representatives have the opportunity to provide input to the development of the assessment criteria and to determine whether further changes are required to reflect individual needs.

Social Security Benefits: Uptake

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many households per constituency have been in receipt of (i) less than, and inclusive of, £26,000; and (ii) in excess of £26,000 from social security benefits over the last four years.

(AQW 7225/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Of approximately 340,000 households in receipt of social security benefit in 2010/11, paid by the Social Security Agency, early analysis indicates that more than 99% of households are in receipt of less than £500 per week in social security benefits. This weekly amount equates to a net yearly income of £26,000 per year. It is not possible to provide breakdowns by constituency as geographical indicators are not available.

Work Capability Assessment: Annual Costs

Mr McCartney asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the annual cost of carrying out Work Capability Assessments to date; (ii) the annual cost of carrying out appeals against assessments to date; (iii) whether the assessments are carried out by qualified doctors; and (iv) whether it is a requirement to have a medical qualification to carry out the assessments.

(AQW 7244/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) It is not possible to provide an overall cost of administering the Work Capability Assessment process within the Social Security Agency as it is an integral but not specific activity within the entire claims process. The Agency costing and financial systems do not capture the cost of administering the end to end Work Capability Assessment process.
- (ii) The Agency does not gather information in respect of appeals against specific aspects of the claims process. It is therefore not possible to provide the annual cost of carrying out appeals against Work Capability Assessments.
- (iii) Medical assessments in relation to the Work Capability Assessment are carried out by Healthcare Professionals who may be a registered medical practitioner or a registered nurse.
- (iv) The Healthcare Professionals who carry out the assessments are required to be medically qualified or hold a nursing qualification.

Housing Benefit: Average Claims

Ms Lo asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average level of Housing Benefit for people in housing association accommodation.

(AQW 7269/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not categorise tenants of Housing Association properties separately from other private Housing benefit claimants.

However, the Housing Executive estimates that benefit spend for Housing Associations makes up approximately 23% of the total Private Housing Benefit spend, which would amount to an estimated £80,884,042 for 2010/11, with a caseload of 22,299, giving an estimated average weekly award of £69.75.

Disability Living Allowance: Effect of Welfare Reform Bill

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many people who are, or were, in receipt of Disability Living Allowance have had their benefit (a) reduced; or (b) withdrawn, after assessment under welfare reform; and (ii) of these, how many people have indicated that they wish to appeal the decision.

(AQW 7320/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The provisions in the Welfare Reform Bill, currently progressing through the Westminster Parliament, which impact on Disability Living Allowance will not come into force until 2013. Therefore no customer in receipt of Disability Living Allowance has had their benefit reduced or withdrawn as a result of assessment under welfare reform.

Ballysally Estate, Coleraine: Derelict Homes

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development (i) what action he intends to take to ensure that derelict homes on the Ballysally Estate, Coleraine, are demolished or refurbished; and (ii) when he expects the work to commence.

(AQW 7327/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Tackling the issue of empty homes not only provides the opportunity to make more housing available for those in housing need, but it can also help reduce blight and regenerate communities. Nearly 100 existing homes that were long term voids in Antrim, North Belfast and Downpatrick have already been identified to bring back into use and more will follow, including some in Ballysally.

In Ballysally Estate there are a total of 20 properties currently steeled up. The majority of these (18) are owned by SHAC Housing Association while the Housing Executive has secured two following severe fire damage.

Plans are already underway by SHAC (who are currently being managed by Oaklee Housing Association) to bring their housing back into use on a phased basis. Phase 1 will start this summer with three voids refurbished alongside upgrades to seven adjacent occupied properties. Work to bring the remaining homes back into use will be programmed following that.

Tenants who Deal Drugs: Sanctions

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development whether he intends to review the tenancy agreements of tenants who have convictions for drug dealing on housing estates in Limavady.

(AQW 7328/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive is aware of the recent arrests made in Limavady and is liaising closely with the PSNI on the matter. The Housing Executive does review the tenancy of any individual engaged in serious anti social behaviour in, or in the locality of, one of its properties. It also reviews the tenancy of any tenant convicted of serious criminal activity in or around the locality of his or her dwelling. In this instance, those arrested have not yet appeared in court and there have been no convictions yet. Until the legal position is clarified in the courts, the Housing Executive would not be in a position to use its enforcement powers.

Housing Rights Service: Remit

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the remit of the Housing Rights Service.

(AQW 7330/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The remit of Housing Rights Service covers the following:

- Providing a housing advice line
- Undertaking advocacy and legal representation work on behalf of people with housing problems
- Providing dedicated debt advisers to advise and represent families threatened with repossession
- Delivering skills and knowledge based training on housing and related issues
- Producing information resource materials on housing law and practice in Northern Ireland
- Providing client based comment to influence the development of relevant public policy and legislation
- Providing a public information website on housing and related issues in Northern Ireland (www.housingadviceNI.org)
- Providing a specialist housing advice service within the prisons in NI, and
- Supporting (in partnership with Citizens Advice and Advice NI) generalist advice agencies to deliver quality housing in their local communities (through the Community Housing Advice Project)

Housing Rights Service: Funding

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how much funding has been allocated to the Housing Rights Service in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7331/11-15)

Mr McCausland: All funding allocated to Housing Rights Service by my Department in the last five years is detailed in Annex A.

ANEX A

Financial Year	2007/2008	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Amount £	736,000.00	760,878.00	782,852.00	822,878.00	767,178.65

Housing: Waiting List in Magherafelt/Cookstown

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people on the housing waiting list for the (a) Magherafelt; and (b) Cookstown district council areas, broken down by the towns/settlements within these areas.

(AQW 7353/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive cannot break the district waiting list into towns/settlements within the areas in question. However, the table below provides details of the waiting list in those areas by Common landlord Area.

NIHE District	Common Landlord Area	Applicants
Magherafelt	Ballymaguigan/St. Treas	4
	Bellaghy	20
	Carmean	1
	Castledawson	40

NIHE District	Common Landlord Area	Applicants
Magherafelt	Clady Magherafelt	10
	Culnady	3
	Curran	2
	Desertmartin	1
	Draperstown	51
	Fallahogey	1
	Gulladuff	6
	Innisrush	1
	Kilross	2
	Knockloughrim	7
	Lisnamuck	1
	Maghera	96
	Magherafelt	225
	Magherafelt Rural Area	4
	Moneyneaney	4
	Swatragh	16
	Tamlaght	2
	Tobermore	12
	Upperlands	5
	Cookstown	Finnobar, Coagh	11
Tynure, Lissan/Dunman		2
Ardboe/Moortown/Ballinderry		24
Ballyronan		4
Cookstown North		164
Cookstown South		147
Dunamore/Orritor		1
Labourers Cottages		2
Moneymore		13
Pomeroy		11
Rock		2
Sandholes		1
Stewartstown		22
Tullyhogue		11
Total		929

Local Housing Allowance: Omagh/Strabane

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Social Development how many people, aged between 25 and 34, have been affected by the changes to Local Housing Allowance payments in the (i) Omagh; and (ii) Strabane areas.

(AQW 7415/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive carried out an exercise in November 2011 to identify the number of Housing Benefit claimants who would be affected by the changes to Local Housing Allowance for persons aged between 25 and 34 years and wrote to those affected to advise them of the forthcoming changes. From the list of cases identified there were 155 claimants affected in Omagh and 175 in Strabane.

Mortgage Debt Advice Service

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have availed of his Department's mortgage debt advice since its establishment, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 7441/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Mortgage Debt Advice Service contract commenced on 14 June 2011. Since then, 794 people have used the service. 662 clients provided postal addresses; the table below details the breakdown of the number and percentage of these clients, experiencing mortgage difficulties, contacting the service for advice up to 31 January 2012.

Parliamentary Constituency	Number of service users, 14 June 2011 to 31 January 2012	%
North Belfast	28	4.2
South Belfast	29	4.4
East Belfast	17	2.5
West Belfast	91	13.7
South Antrim	60	9.1
North Antrim	26	3.9
East Antrim	37	5.6
Newry & Armagh	42	6.3
Strangford	44	6.6
South Down	23	3.5
North Down	53	8
Lagan	29	4.4
Upper Bann	28	4.2
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	37	5.6
West Tyrone	21	3.1
Mid Ulster	29	4.4
East Londonderry	31	4.7
Foyle	37	5.6

Pension Age: Women

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the savings that might be made by delaying 6,800 women from receiving the pension, if the first acceleration is enacted to increase the pension age to 65 by 2018.

(AQW 7442/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Equalising women's State Pension age with men's at 65 by November 2018 would result in an estimated reduction in expenditure on pensioner benefits of £57m over the 2016/17, 2017/18 and 2018/19 tax years. Expenditure on working-age benefits would increase by an estimated £10m.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7459/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Department, including its agencies, does not have any mobile phone applications deployed at present. However, the Housing Executive are currently developing a version of their "Report a Repair" application which is currently available for use on the Housing Executive website, for use by the public on smaller devices including mobile phones.

Social Security Benefit: Uptake

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently receiving at least one social security benefit. (AQW 7474/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below shows the number of people in receipt of at least one main social security benefit at August 2011. Customers have been assigned to only one Client Group.

Client Group	Number of claimants
Children	14,610
Working Age	263,090
Pension Age	305,310
Total	583,010

Data source MIDAS scans August 2011

Green New Deal

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what action his Department has taken to progress the Green New Deal since receiving the Green New Deal business plan; and to detail his Department's forward work programme on the Green New Deal. (AQW 7523/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A Cross Departmental Group which is chaired by my Department and includes representatives from DETI, DARD and DFP are currently examining the options for the delivery of the £12m that has been set aside for the Green New Deal programme over the next 3 years. The Cross Departmental Group have developed a full economic appraisal to determine the most cost effective way of spending the £12m, ensuring that the maximum benefit is realised from the expenditure.

The different options that have been examined for the delivery of the programme, which includes the Green New Deal Group's business proposal option, have been assessed on the basis of what they propose to deliver in the context of improving energy efficiency in domestic properties, any associated benefits or costs and any associated risk around the potential to deliver the proposal including where those risks may lie.

The full economic appraisal will be presented shortly to my Ministerial colleagues of the Cross Departmental Group for approval following which it will proceed through the normal DFP process to approve funding. When the economic appraisal has been approved a detailed forward work programme will be developed for the preferred option within the appraisal.

Capital to Revenue Expenditure

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development whether his departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to his capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7551/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The overall ratio of capital to revenue expenditure for the Department over the next 3 years is illustrated by the following table:

	2012-13 £m	2013-14 £m	2014-15 £m
Revenue	525.5	537.4	523.4
Capital	127.1	104.6	120.3
Ratio of Capital:Revenue	24.2%	19.5%	23.0%

Disability Living Allowance: Appeal Tribunal

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Social Development (i) when Disability Living Allowance appeal panels were instructed to review all aspects of an appellant's claim and not just the section(s) which are in dispute; and (ii) whether this might cause a claimant not to appeal.

(AQW 7552/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) The Appeal Tribunal is an independent judicial body. Therefore neither the tribunal, nor the tribunal members, fall within the responsibility of the Minister. The responsibility for tribunals falls within the statutory function of the President of Appeal Tribunals, Mr Conall MacLynn. The President can be contacted directly at Office of the President of Appeal Tribunals, 6th Floor Cleaver House, 3 Donegall Square North, Belfast BT1 5GA.
- (ii) The option to appeal against any Social Security Benefit decision is a matter for the claimant.

Eco-village: Enniskillen

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the development of an eco-village in Enniskillen.
(AQW 7576/11-15)

Mr McCausland: An outline planning application for 200 housing units has been submitted for the Grosvenor Barracks site and is currently being assessed by Planning Service.

Clanmil Housing Association has refurbished the 10 existing former MoD houses at Ballaghmore Heights and have all now been allocated to tenants. The Association has also submitted a planning application for a further 16 units on the adjacent undeveloped land.

Gambling Legislation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development when he intends to bring forward a Bill to update the existing gambling legislation.

(AQW 7670/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I would refer the Member to the answer to question AQW 3842/ 11-15, put down by Peter Weir, Member for North Down.

The answer is contained in the Written Answers Booklet for week ending 4 November 2011.

Boiler Replacement Scheme: Uptake in Mid Ulster

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of successful applications for the Boiler Replacement Scheme to date in the Mid-Ulster constituency.

(AQW 7702/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not collate this information by parliamentary constituency.

The Mid Ulster parliamentary constituency comprises the Housing Executive district office areas of Magherafelt and Cookstown. It also comprises part of the Dungannon district office area.

99 eligible households have been given approval to start boiler replacement works broken down by district area as follows:

	Magherafelt	Cookstown	Dungannon
Eligible applications	31	12	56

The scheme will close on 31 March and therefore I would urge anyone still waiting for work to be carried out in their home to make contact with their preferred installer urgently to ensure the work is completed as soon as possible.

Pension Age: Women

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many females in the Foyle constituency will be affected by the acceleration of the changes to the state pension age.

(AQW 7838/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Pensions Bill currently before the Assembly proposes a number of changes to existing legislation relating to State Pension age – the equalisation of Women's State Pension age with men's at 65 by November 2018 instead of April 2020 and the phased increase in State Pension age for both men and women to 66 between December 2018 and October 2020 rather than between April 2024 and April 2026.

An estimated 400 women in the Foyle Parliamentary Constituency may be affected by the new timetable for equalisation of State Pension age. A further 4,800 may be affected by the proposed increase to age 66 between December 2018 and October 2020.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Visitors

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the groups from Fermanagh and South Tyrone that have visited Parliament Buildings since 2007; (ii) how this number compares with the number of visitors from other constituencies; and (iii) what action the Commission is taking to improve engagement within Fermanagh and South Tyrone.

(AQW 7068/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): In accordance with the Assembly's strategic objective to ensure that its work is accessible to all and communicated widely, the Outreach and Education Service has developed a number of programmes and resources.

Engagement by the Outreach and Education Service is not based on specific constituencies, however the Commission is aware that distance from Parliament Buildings can hinder public engagement with the business of the Assembly. Consequently, for those unable to visit Parliament Buildings, a number of additional programmes and resources have been developed, including web-based resources.

Public engagement with the business of the Assembly is promoted in a variety of ways as outlined below.

Education Service

The Education Service provides educational programmes and resources to support teaching and learning about the Assembly and encourages the participation of young people in the democratic process.

Table 1 below indicates the total number of groups and individuals visiting Parliament Buildings from each constituency between May 2007 and January 2012. It can be seen that 97 groups (3,064 visitors) from Fermanagh and South Tyrone visited Parliament Buildings during this period.

Table 1

Constituency	No. of groups (Ave.= 100)	No. of participants (Ave. = 3,228)
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	97	3,064
East Antrim	96	3,210
East Belfast	160	4,796
East Londonderry	71	2,442
Foyle	92	3,070
Lagan Valley	121	3,879
Mid Ulster	101	3,542
Newry and Armagh	171	5,837
North Antrim	101	3,442
North Belfast	64	1,669
North Down	45	1,537
South Antrim	66	1,767
South Belfast	119	3,667
South Down	126	4,064
Strangford	68	2,257
Upper Bann	124	4,325
West Belfast	111	3,337
West Tyrone	64	2,200
Outside NI	252	6,984

The Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency ranks 10th out of the 18 constituencies in terms of the number of groups visiting Parliament Buildings to participate in the Education Service Programme. Comparatively more groups from Fermanagh and South Tyrone visit than groups from several constituencies in closer proximity to Parliament Buildings.

A number of measures to improve engagement with schools that are more geographically remote from Parliament Buildings have been introduced. For example a video conferencing facility is now available in Parliament Buildings, allowing schools and other education bodies to engage with the Assembly without leaving their locality. The Education Service is also working with C2K (responsible for Information Technology in schools) to pilot an online teaching resource that will further promote linkages to schools where distance is a barrier. In addition, the Education Service launched its new website in October 2011, designed to promote engagement with the Assembly regardless of proximity to Parliament Buildings.

Since 2010, an outreach programme has been available to all schools. The Education Service delivers the programme within the school, providing an opportunity for Members from the relevant constituency to meet with young people, hear their views and answer their questions.

Table 2 below shows the schools from Fermanagh and South Tyrone which have taken part in the outreach programme:

Table 2

Date	School
18 May 2010	St. Comghall's College, Lisnaskea
18 May 2010	St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Castlederg
19 May 2010	St Joseph's Primary School Ederney
20 May 2010	St Martin's Primary School, Garrison
20 May 2010	St John the Baptist Primary School, Roscor
26 November 2010	St Comghall's College, Lisnaskea
26 November	St Eugene's College, Rosslea
30 March 2011	St Joseph's, Donaghmore
1 April 2011	St Michael's College, Enniskillen

Research by the Assembly Youth Panel involved holding regional meetings to hear the views of young people on the establishment of a Youth Assembly. Young people from Fermanagh gave their views on a Youth Assembly at two meetings in the Lakeland Youth Centre on 13 November 2010 and 3 December 2010.

Functions and Tours

The Events Office provides Members with an events co-ordination, management and planning service, ensuring successful undertaking of events in a manner reflecting the dignity of Parliament Buildings.

Table 3 below shows the number of visitors to Parliament Buildings by constituency for functions or tours between May 2007 and the end of January 2012. The majority of the functions and many tours within Parliament Buildings are directly sponsored by Members themselves.

The average number of visitors per constituency is 1716. The Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency has the lowest number of visitors to Parliament Buildings for functions and tours of any of the 18 constituencies during the period May 2007 and the end of January 2012.

Table 3

Constituency	No. of Visitors
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	552 (Ave. = 1,716)
East Antrim	596
East Belfast	3,602
East Londonderry/East Derry	865
Foyle	966
Lagan Valley	1,989
Mid Ulster	944
Newry & Armagh	1,807
North Antrim	2,308
North Belfast	861
North Down	1,537
South Antrim	1,562
South Belfast	5,290
South Down	1,718
Strangford	2,668
Upper Bann	1,737

Constituency	No. of Visitors
West Belfast	847
West Tyrone	1,046

Table 4 below shows specific groups from Fermanagh and South Tyrone which have visited Parliament Buildings since May 2007.

Table 4

Date	Name of Group	No. in Group
11 May 2007	Fermanagh Shadow Youth Council	25
17 May 2007	Newtownbutler Women's Union	50
14 June 2007	Fermanagh Herald	10
7 July 2007	Northern Ladies Fishing Group	15
18 August 2007	1st Sion Mills Scout Group	16
12 November 2007	Portora Royal School	15
23 November 2007	Erne West DUP Branch	50
9 June 2009	Ballinamallard RBP	30
1 July 2009	Fermanagh Cardiac Support Group	14
3 October 2009	Lisbellaw Orange Lodge	50
18 January 2010	Club Tyrone	50
19 June 2010	Dungannon Disabled Christian Fellowship Group	60
31 January 2011	Ballinamallard Group	15
22 March 2011	Kesh Enterprises	16
23 March 2011	Glebe House	30
4 June 2011	Ballinamallard Mothers' Union	56
13 September 2011	Lisbellaw & Longford Historical Society	30
7 July 2011	National Trust, Fermanagh	20

Community Outreach

The Outreach and Education Service also provides an outreach service to representatives from statutory agencies, voluntary and community groups and business groups to explain how the Assembly works and to encourage involvement and engagement.

The Outreach Service, in conjunction with NICVA, has carried out a number of training events to build the capacity of individuals and groups in the community and voluntary sector looking to engage with the Assembly and MLAs. Since 2009 this programme has worked with over 300 people, 39 of whom are based in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and four of the sessions were held in the Aisleen Centre in Enniskillen.

In April 2009 the Assembly 'roadshow' visited Enniskillen and there were approximately 60 attendees. A question and answer session took place at the event with five MLAs in attendance.

On 23 February 2012 the Outreach team will be facilitating an event with the Community Development Health Network which is targeted at individuals working in the Western Health Trust, including those that work in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. The Community Outreach team is also planning to host a "Get Involved Conference" in Enniskillen later this year.

The 2009 Public Attitude Survey identified that "distance is a barrier to visiting Parliament Buildings". Whilst there is no apparent disparity in the number of educational groups visiting Parliament Buildings, there is an obvious disparity in the number of groups participating in functions and tours in Parliament Buildings. Whilst the onus for encouraging groups to visit Parliament Buildings rests primarily with individual Members, the Commission is always looking for new ways to engage as widely as possible and would be happy to receive any suggestions that you might wish to make.

The Head of Outreach and Education is Peter Hall. Peter will contact you shortly to gauge your thoughts on how to further improve engagement of the public in the Fermanagh & South Tyrone constituency with the business of the Assembly.

Website: Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr Swann asked the Assembly Commission to detail (i) the cost of the Assembly's new website, from design to going live; (ii) whether the subscription service was part of the original design; (iii) why the subscription service is not yet operational; and (iv) when this service will be operational.

(AQW 7124/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission):

- (i) As published on the Assembly website on 12 December 2011 the total cost for research, design and build of the new website was £182,730.
- (ii) The subscription service was not a mandatory requirement of the website redevelopment project.
- (iii) The subscription service was not a mandatory requirement of the new website however this capability is part of the system that has been implemented. A decision was therefore taken to provide a subscription service on the new website. Due to the complexity of the website, and the necessary security considerations that need to be managed, it has taken longer than would normally be expected to implement the subscription service however officials are working very closely with the supplier to resolve this issue.
- (iv) Assembly officials anticipate that the issue with the subscription service will be resolved within the next few days, and that the service will be operational by 13th February 2012.

Trade Union Duties

Mr McCallister asked the Assembly Commission to detail the number of full-time equivalent staff, in its Department or its arm's-length bodies, who carried out trade union duties, during trade union facility time, in (i) 2000/01; (ii) 2005/06; and (iii) 2010/11, broken down by trade union.

(AQW 7207/11-15)

Mr Weir (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission does not retain information on day to day facility time arrangements for trade union activities for 2000/01 and 2005/06. However, during this period the Assembly Commission recognised the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) for consultation and negotiation purposes and reasonable provision was made for staff of the Commission to engage in trade union activities connected with consultation and negotiation on staffing matters.

During 2010/11, NIPSA remained the only trade union recognised by the Assembly Commission. In 2010/11, the Assembly Commission had on secondment one Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) member of staff to NIPSA to assist with the development of effective industrial relations. Under the terms of a Joint Agreement with NIPSA, the Commission also permits certain Officers of the local Branch of NIPSA to undertake reasonable trade union activities such as attendance at meetings and providing advice to trade union members. Such activities are not centrally recorded but are undertaken without adverse impact on business requirements.

Mobile Phone Application

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission whether it has considered developing a mobile phone application to keep members of the public updated on Assembly business.

(AQW 7302/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The IS Office is currently developing a mobile web application which will improve access to AIMS-based procedural data from a range of web-enabled mobile devices. We hope to trial this web application before the summer recess. At that time IS Office will be in touch with Members to give them the opportunity to provide feedback and comment on the service.

Assembly Chamber: Electronic Devices

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission what consideration has been given to allowing Members to carry out business electronically in the Assembly Chamber as well as by paper; and for an assessment of how this might improve attendance in the Chamber.

(AQW 7304/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Speaker wrote to the Chair of the Committee on Procedures on 4 October 2011 concerning the use of electronic devices in the Assembly Chamber. The Committee on Procedures subsequently considered the use of such devices in the Chamber at its meeting on 8 November 2011 and agreed to put it on its Forward Work Programme for 2012. The Committee is to consider research on the issue at its meeting on 27 February 2012.

There are currently no technical impediments restricting the use of electronic devices to enable members to carry out business electronically. However the use of a '3G' enabled device has the potential to interfere with the audio system used in the Chamber. Until the matter is formally considered the Speaker's Ruling on the use of mobile phones and other communication devices in the Chamber continues to apply.

It is not possible to assess how the use of such devices might improve attendance in the Chamber. In October 2011, the House of Commons agreed to the use of electronic devices in its Chamber. Figures are not held on attendance in the Chamber but there appears to have been no discernible impact on attendance.

Assembly Chamber: Electronic Devices

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission whether further consideration will be given to the use of laptops and computer tablets in the Assembly Chamber.

(AQW 7305/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The use of electronic devices such as laptops and computer tablets in the Chamber is on the Committee on Procedures' Forward Work Programme for 2012. The Committee is to consider research on the issue at its meeting on 27 February and may, in due course, bring a proposal on the matter to the Assembly.

Artwork: Inventory

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to AQW 6192/11-15, where each of the works of art described as being 'currently in offsite storage' is stored.

(AQW 7310/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): I can confirm that all of the works of art described as being "currently in offsite storage" are stored in a secure commercial storage facility at Mallusk in Newtownabbey.

I hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however should you require any supplementary information I would be very happy to assist with your enquiry.

Artwork: Inventory

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to AQW 6192/11-15, whether this represents the totality of the inventory of art works which the Commission inherited on coming to office; and, if not, what has become of the other art works.

(AQW 7311/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): I can confirm that, further to AQW 6192/11-15, the list provided represents the total art works inherited by the Assembly Commission.

I hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however should you require any supplementary information I would be very happy to assist with your enquiry.

Mahogany Table

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission where the mahogany table, upon which the Royal Assent to the Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland was signed, and which was formerly in the Great Hall, is now located.

(AQW 7312/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): I can confirm that the table purported to be the "Act of Union" table is in secure offsite storage at Mallusk.

I hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however should you require any supplementary information I would be very happy to assist with your enquiry.

Assembly Chamber: Electronic Devices

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission whether any assessment has been made of the impact on Members' work and response time to constituents due to the fact that electronic devices not being allowed to be used in the Assembly Chamber.

(AQW 7370/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): No assessment has been made of the impact on Members' work and response times to constituents arising from electronic devices not being allowed to be used in the Assembly Chamber.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 17 February 2012

Written Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Social Investment Fund: Moyle/Ballymoney

Mr McKay asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how their Department intends to ensure that the Social Investment Fund assists the most deprived communities in the Moyle and Ballymoney council areas.

(AQW 5488/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The public consultation process ended on 23 December 2011; the outcome of this will inform how the Social Investment Fund will operate and how specific areas and communities here will benefit.

Areas in need should benefit from a co-ordinated and strategic approach to issues of poverty and disadvantage which will see those communities determine the priorities in their areas and develop responses in partnership with Government, the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector.

Police Ombudsman: Recruitment Process

Mr Eastwood asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether the criteria that will be used to recruit the new Police Ombudsman has been determined; (ii) when the post will be advertised; and (iii) what involvement the Commissioner for Public Appointments has had in relation to the recruitment process for the Police Ombudsman.

(AQW 5637/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Criteria to be applied in the recruitment process for the office of Police Ombudsman have been determined. They were included in an information pack about the recruitment process and an application form which were provided to prospective applicants.

Advertisements inviting applications for the post were published in the press from 15 December 2011, with a closing date for applications of 20 January 2012.

The recruitment process will be subject to regulation by the Commissioner for Public Appointments, and our officials met with the Commissioner when planning the arrangements.

Strategic Support Fund: FAIR Application

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) when the Departmental Solicitor's Office received a request for guidance from the Community Relations Council, in relation to the Strategic Support Fund application by FAIR; and (ii) why there has been a delay in providing a response.

(AQW 6929/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: This question relates to the provision of legal advice by the Departmental Solicitor's Office to a Public Body. The provision of such advice is confidential and privileged. Therefore it is not appropriate for us to discuss or comment on such provision.

Planning Appeals Commission

Mr Lunn asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the rules applied by the Planning Appeals Commission if objections that are notified at an early stage are later withdrawn.

(AQW 7126/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, its Deputy Chief Commissioner has been asked to provide a response directly to you, and we understand that she has written to you in the following terms:

"If an objection(s) is withdrawn in an appeal or public inquiry, the Planning Appeals Commission's practice is to notify all parties who are directly involved in that particular appeal of the withdrawal. No further consideration is given to the

objection. This procedure is followed irrespective of the stage of processing reached. I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet with you to discuss the matter if that would be more suitable”.

After School Clubs: Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) how many after school clubs their Department has funded in the Upper Bann area, in each of the last three years; and (ii) the level of funding allocated to each club.

(AQW 7168/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: From 1 April 2011, in the absence of a lead department and while work progresses to develop the Childcare Strategy, OFMDFM has provided interim funding to support the PlayBoard After School Childcare Project. The PlayBoard Project administers funding to 48 after school projects, including two projects in the Upper Bann area, Kids United which received a grant of £13,889 and Zero-8-Teen which received a grant of £16,342

In the two preceding years, DHSSPS administered funding to the PlayBoard After School Childcare Project.

Ballykelly Army Base: Costs

Mr Campbell asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost, to date, of maintaining the former Ballykelly Army Base since its transfer from the Ministry of Defence in 2011.

(AQW 7435/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Shackleton Barracks at Ballykelly was fully transferred to the Executive on 7 October 2011, but under the transfer agreement between the Ministry of Defence and OFMDFM, costs have been incurred from 1 April 2011. The cost of maintaining the site up until 31 January 2012 is £410,975. This is broken down as follows:-

Security	£206,934
Utilities	£ 96,919
Maintenance/other costs	£107,122 (includes essential maintenance only)

Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the cost and the length of time it has taken the Planning Appeals Commission to complete its consideration of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan.

(AQW 7536/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Planning Appeals Commission is an independent tribunal Non-Departmental Public Body. Given its independent tribunal status, its Chief Commissioner has been asked to provide a response directly to you, and we understand that she has written to you in the following terms:

“The Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan was published by the Department [of the Environment] in November 2004 and is the most comprehensive Plan ever produced by the Department extending to six local government districts. It generated almost 4,300 objections which were categorised by the Department [of the Environment] into more than 7,200 elements. The Commission conducted a Public Inquiry to consider the objections to the Plan between April 2007 and the beginning of May 2008. This Inquiry was the most lengthy and complex in the history of the Commission. In addition, the Commission considered many written objections which were not heard at the Inquiry.

The Inquiry report has been provided to the Department [of the Environment] in stages. The report on strategic Retail matters was provided in January 2009 and the remainder of the Strategic Plan Framework in March 2011. The reports into site specific issues in Belfast, Lisburn and Castlereagh Districts were provided in July 2011, Lagan Valley Regional Park and North Down District in September 2011 and Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus Districts January 2012.

The total cost of the Commission’s report is estimated to be approximately £690,500. I would be happy to provide any further information you require arising out of this response or to meet you to discuss the matter if you would find that more suitable”.

After School Clubs: Funding

Mr Weir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many after school clubs their Department has funded in each of the last three years; and the level of funding allocated to each club.

(AQW 7580/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In 2011/12, OFMDFM provided £707,566 to PlayBoard to support 48 after school projects. Details of this funding, including PlayBoard’s administration and support costs, are set out in the table below:

After School Project	Funding for 2011/12 (£)
174 Trust ASC	13,128
An Droichead	11,165
Ardoyne ASC	8,066

After School Project	Funding for 2011/12 (£)
Ballymac	11,300
Beechmount ASC	15,864
Bloomfield PlayCare	6,262
Bluegrass ASC	6,299
Carrickmore	12,181
Carryduff ASC	13,961
Chinese Welfare	13,656
Club Utd	11,500
Draperstown / Ballinasreen ASC	16,680
Drumahoe ASC	16,056
Erne East Derry Gannon ASC	9,129
Erne East Donagh ASC	6,053
Fivemiletown ASC	8,594
Funtime ASC	9,986
Glenraig ASC	9,131
Glenullin ASC	12,576
Ionad Uibh Eanhach	13,577
Just Kids	17,302
Kesh ASC	7,330
Kids inn out of School	4,660
Kids United ASC	13,889
Kidsview Out of School Club	12,113
Kidz Lodge	9,323
Kilrea ASC	13,954
Laughterland OOSC	6,177
Lisbane ASC	6,455
Loughgiel OOSC	16,193
Nest / Claudy	10,225
Oakwood intergrated	8,680
Oasis ASC	9,000
Playboard Development Project	94,264
Playlinks Strangford ASC	14,576
Pomeroy ASC	16,294
Rascals	9,852
Rasharkin Women's Group	10,858
Short Strand	10,865
Sixmilecross	12,181
Skools Out Club	12,960

After School Project	Funding for 2011/12 (£)
South Armagh CCC	29,000
St Joseph's [Cool Kids]	10,578
St Vincent (Mountainview)	14,458
Strabane OOSC	12,965
Strathroy ASC	7,078
Tullymore ASC	12,324
Zero-8-Teen	16,342
PlayBoard Admin and Support Costs	62,506
Total	707,566

In the preceding two years, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) administered the funding of the PlayBoard After School Childcare Scheme. OFMDFM funding transfers to DHSSPS, in support of this Scheme, were a significant element of the overall funding package, as shown in the table below:

Funding for 2009/10 (£)	Funding for 2010/11 (£)
OFMDFM £786k	OFMDFM £577k
DHSSPS £80k	DE £100k
DETI £60k	DETI £60k
Total £926K	Total £737K

Revenue Expenditure

Mr Copeland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to their capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7615/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: While some revenue costs may be directly incurred as a result of capital expenditure, there is no direct correlation between the two categories of expenditure. Therefore, OFMDFM's revenue expenditure does not vary proportionately to capital budget allocations.

Childcare Fund: Allocations

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) how much of the £3 million allocated to the Childcare Fund has been spent, or allocated, in this financial year to date; and (ii) the level and purpose of the funding allocated to (a) each Department and its arm's length bodies; and (b) non-governmental organisations in this financial year.

(AQW 7673/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: A total of £322,000 has been allocated from the Executive's Childcare Fund in the current financial year in response to approved departmental bids for additional funding. This funding has been allocated as shown below:

Allocation from Childcare Fund	2011/12 (£)
The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety secured £250,000 from the Childcare Fund to expedite work undertaken by the Health and Social Care Board to reduce the backlog in the registration and inspections of childminding and daycare settings and to implement revised procedures to mitigate future delays.	250,000
The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister secured £20,000 from the Childcare Fund to enable PlayBoard to provide additional grant funding support to South Armagh Childcare Consortium. The additional grant funding will enable the Consortium to continue to develop towards financial sustainability.	20,000
The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure secured £52,000 from the Childcare Fund. This funding has been allocated to NI Screen to extend the after schools Film Club in extended service schools from 68 schools to 338 schools.	52,000
	£322,000

The remaining monies have been ringfenced into next year therefore ensuring that no funding from the £12 million total is lost.

Social Investment Fund: Drug and Alcohol Addiction

Mr Copeland asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether drug and alcohol addiction will be addressed as part of the Social Investment Fund.

(AQW 7712/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The proposed Strategic Objectives of the Social Investment Fund are to support communities to:

- build pathways to employment;
- tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation;
- increase community services; and
- address dereliction.

Delivery is intended to be through the development and delivery of strategic area plans which will be co-ordinated by locally established steering groups, representative of community and voluntary, business, political and statutory representatives.

Whilst drug and alcohol addiction may be considered under the strategic objective focused on tackling the systemic issues linked to deprivation, it will be for communities working with the statutory agencies and political representatives within the social investment zones to identify, prioritise and evidence needs and propose associated interventions for inclusion in the area plan.

Child Poverty

Mrs Dobson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the specific actions they are taking to address child poverty.

(AQO 1217/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Child Poverty Act 2010 required the Executive to lay a Child Poverty Strategy before the Assembly. The Act also places a statutory duty on all departments to describe the progress that they are making in contributing to meeting the target to eradicate child poverty by 2020.

To meet this statutory obligation, the Executive agreed the 'Improving Children's Life Chances' Strategy which was laid before the Assembly in March 2011. The Strategy sets out the priority action areas proposed by the Executive to address the issue of child poverty.

We continue to work with colleagues in other departments to finalise a draft action plan which will detail those key departmental initiatives and signature projects to progress the strategic priorities and priority action areas identified in the child poverty strategy.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Strategy

Mr Hussey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration.

(AQO 1219/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Party leaders agreed to the establishment of the cross party working group on the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration strategy in June 2011 and representatives from each of the five main parties were nominated.

The group held its first meeting on 27 September and continues to meet on a weekly basis. The working group received a presentation from the consultation analyst at the outset of the process and this helped inform the work plan of the group.

The current priority is to establish a political consensus and agree on the strategic direction against the issues raised by the consultation.

The cross party working group will continue to work over the coming weeks with a view to publishing the final strategy and an associated action plan very shortly.

Age Discrimination Legislation

Ms Ruane asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they are preparing any age discrimination legislation, other than the legislation to extend age discrimination to the provision of goods, facilities and services, as outlined in the Programme for Government.

(AQO 1221/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We have no plans to introduce any age discrimination legislation, other than that intended to extend age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services.

Social Investment Fund: Update

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Social Investment Fund.

(AQO 1222/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation, on the Social Investment Fund proposals, ended on 23 December 2011. During the consultation period, six public events were held, at which initial proposals were outlined and then discussed in detail. Attendance at these public events was high, with almost 240 participants.

Our officials also met with a number of key statutory bodies and other departments. This was with a view to ensuring that the Social Investment Fund complements other area based initiatives.

There has been a significant response to the consultation with over three hundred formal consultation responses received. We are currently considering those responses.

We hope to be in a position to publish a consultation report in the coming months. In parallel, we will develop and bring final proposals to the Executive, with a view to having the Fund fully operational as soon as possible.

Ethnic Minorities: Support and Funding

Mr D McIlveen asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if there is a long-term policy to assist immigrants who are facing destitution.

(AQO 1223/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: This Department remains committed to providing strategic support and funding to build capacity within our minority ethnic communities. A number of organisations which have been in receipt of funding from the 2011/12 Minority Ethnic Development Fund have been central in helping to address the hardships suffered by people without recourse to public funds.

The shared learning from this work is currently being considered along with the recommendations of the recent evaluation of the Minority Ethnic Development Fund. Together with the input of the Racial Equality Panel these findings will inform proposals for future funding in the sector and the development of the revised Racial Equality Strategy. The effective provision of support to assist those migrants who find themselves facing destitution will remain central to this work.

Social Investment Fund: Update

Ms P Bradley asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Social Investment Fund.

(AQO 1224/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The public consultation, on the Social Investment Fund proposals, ended on 23 December 2011. During the consultation period, six public events were held, at which initial proposals were outlined and then discussed in detail. Attendance at these public events was high, with almost 240 participants.

Our officials also met with a number of key statutory bodies and other departments. This was with a view to ensuring that the Social Investment Fund complements other area based initiatives.

There has been a significant response to the consultation with over three hundred formal consultation responses received. We are currently considering those responses.

We hope to be in a position to publish a consultation report in the coming months. In parallel, we will develop and bring final proposals to the Executive, with a view to having the Fund fully operational as soon as possible.

Department of Agriculture and Rural Development

Land Parcel Identification System

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (i) how much her Department has spent on producing the new farm maps; (ii) how accurate these new maps are; and (iii) what responsibility her Department will take should any Single Farm Payment discrepancies arise as a result of these maps.

(AQW 7286/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):

- (i) The re-mapping project will develop a new Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS) and so far has cost £ 9.695 m.
- (ii) The new LPIS maps will be based on the latest aerial photography available and will reflect the best information we have concerning land boundaries, as well as an assessment of ineligible items based upon this photography. It is possible that the current situation on the ground may have changed since the aerial photograph was taken. The guidance which will issue with the maps will make it clear that farmers need to examine them carefully and advise DARD of required adjustments so that their map can be amended. The accuracy will depend, therefore, on the age of the aerial photography upon which it is based and the completeness of the additional information coming from the farmer. If the farm business has been inspected, the accuracy of the map will reflect the detailed inspection results.
- (iii) The maps issued by DARD are to help farmers make accurate claims for area-based schemes and are based on the most up-to-date information available. While DARD makes every effort to ensure that these maps are as accurate as possible, there may be changes on the ground since the aerial photographs were taken. In addition, not every ineligible feature will

be clearly visible on the maps. Farmers have a responsibility to report these changes to DARD. Farmers know their land best and it is their responsibility to ensure that they do not claim for ineligible areas and that they submit accurate claims. It is most important that farmers do not rely on the maps alone in completing their claims.

Country Management Scheme: New Landowners

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if land is sold under the Country Management Scheme (CMS), will the scheme support the transfer to the new owner; (ii) if not, why that is the case; and (iii) whether she will consider changing this CMS policy to aid new and expanding farmers.

(AQW 7293/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department already has a policy for transferring agreements to new landowners in agri-environment schemes that are open for applications. Although after schemes have closed there are administrative difficulties in transferring agreements between owners, I have asked my officials to consider how we can facilitate such transfers in future.

Land Parcel Identification System

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development where the £800,000 easement resulted from in the Land Parcel Identification System project.

(AQW 7522/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The easement of £800,000 was necessary for 2 reasons.

Firstly, plans for the retrospective adjustment of SFP entitlements have not been finalised and the work will not now take place during this financial year. The projected staffing costs associated with this work have, therefore, been eased.

Secondly, the Positional Improvement (to ensure that the Land & Property Services (LPS) and DARD maps are more consistent with modern Global Positioning System (GPS) measurements and European Standards) aspect of the work which LPS is doing as part of the Land Parcel Identification System project did not progress as quickly as had been anticipated when the budget was set.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by her Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7538/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill:

- (i) At present there are no mobile phone applications that have been designed by my Department for use by the general public.
- (ii) My Department is currently working on the development of a mobile phone application that will allow registered APHIS on Line users to securely register births and deaths of cattle and view herd details.

Fishermen: County Down

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made towards ensuring that fishermen in Co. Down are not restricted in terms of fishing effort and licences as a result of the concordat that was drawn up by the Fisheries Ministers from the devolved institutions in the UK.

(AQW 7571/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Concordat does not put any restrictions on fishing effort and licenses. The purpose of the Concordat is to define the extent to which the four fisheries administrations can exercise local management of licensing and flexibility to administer fishing quotas.

Animal Cruelty

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps she is taking to address the abuse of animals.

(AQW 7621/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Welfare of Animals Act 2011 replaces the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 and is a major step forward in terms of protecting the welfare of both farmed and non-farmed animals.

I take the welfare of animals very seriously and I am committed to implementing this new legislation. The majority of the provisions contained in the 2011 Act came into operation on 11 July 2011, introducing a new duty of care for all vertebrate animals and new powers to take action to prevent animals from suffering as opposed to having to wait until suffering occurs. The PSNI also now has stronger powers to deal with animal fighting. The penalties for serious animal welfare offences have been increased and the new penalties for all animal welfare offences will become fully operational here on 2 April 2012.

The Act provides powers to regulate, through subordinate legislation, a wide range of activities involving animals. In the coming months I propose to introduce a range of subordinate legislation to protect the welfare of farmed animals and dogs in breeding establishments. We are also currently revising legislation regarding the welfare of animals at slaughter. My Department is also

preparing to publish codes of practice setting out the standards of care required for cattle, sheep, broiler chickens, dogs, cats, horses, rabbits and non-human primates.

My Department will continue to work to prevent cases of cruelty and neglect concerning farmed animals and from April 2012 Councils here will have a new role in the enforcement of welfare in respect of non-farmed animals. My Department is providing annual funding to help Councils implement their new role, starting with £404k funding this year to meet their requirements as they prepare for implementation. Next year, £780k funding is available, which increases by £20k for each of the remaining 2 years in this budget period.

Current/Capital Budget Allocations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether her departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to her capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7638/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: DARD's current expenditure budget allocations do not vary proportionately to its capital budget allocation.

Although current expenditure budget allocations do not vary proportionately to capital expenditure allocations, there may be associated ongoing current expenditure in respect of depreciation and running costs.

DARD's current and capital budget allocations are:

	2011/12 £m	2012/13 £m	2013/14 £m	2014/15 £m	Total £m
Current	213.0	223.3	212.9	211.5	860.8
Capital	21.2	19.5	22.6	29.7	93.0

Fishing: Gear Trials

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what assistance her Department is giving to the local fishing industry in arriving at a selective gear which is acceptable to the industry before July 2012.

(AQW 7677/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department is funding a gear trials project through the European Fisheries Fund which will be carried out in partnership with industry. The project team includes representatives from our 2 Producer Organisations, local net makers, AFBI scientists, and DARD policy officials.

The objective of these trials is to develop a nephrops fishing gear which is capable of reducing the cod by-catch to below 1.5%. A successful outcome will enable our vessels to fish the prawn quota in future unfettered by restrictions on the number of days they can spend at sea.

The project team has identified 5 different designs for highly selective gears for testing. The trials will take place on twin-rig and single rig vessels over a period of 20 days during February and March. The outcome of those gear trials will be reported to the Commission and its Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). STECF is responsible for assessing whether fishing gears are capable of achieving the objectives set in the Cod Recovery Plan.

Fishing: Selective Gear

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development if she will ensure that the views of the fishing industry are respected should a new selective gear, which is acceptable to the industry, not be arrived at by July 2012.

(AQW 7679/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The commitment made to the European Commission was that by July 2012 our prawn fleet would be using fishing gear that would enable them to be exempt from the effort control regime imposed by the cod plan. That means that the net must be capable of reducing the cod catch to below 1.5%. This is a challenging objective but I am not anticipating failure. I am optimistic that the experience and ingenuity of local fishermen can be used to come up with the very best solution - one that will contribute to the objectives of the Cod Plan but be suitable and readily used by our fleet.

Laying Hens Directive

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 6100/11-15, whether all egg producers had stopped using battery cages by the end of January 2012.

(AQW 7695/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Whilst a very small minority of egg producers had not completed the necessary changes by the end of January 2012, I am very pleased that as a result of my robust enforcement policy, together with the efforts of the industry, the north of Ireland is now fully compliant with the Laying Hens Directive. The European Commission has been advised of this.

Mill Street, Coleraine

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the work which commenced on 19 September 2011 at Mill Street Coleraine, and which is advertised at the location as being completed in 11 weeks, will be finished.

(AQW 7717/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am pleased to say that the specialist work in the adjoining Lodge Burn River has been completed and the associated traffic restrictions to Mill Street were lifted on 8th February 2012. Other construction work in the river is programmed to finish at the end of April 2012.

Animal Welfare Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, in light of the recent cases of animal cruelty, what plans she has to strengthen animal welfare legislation.

(AQW 7728/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Welfare of Animals Act 2011 replaces the Welfare of Animals Act 1972 and is a major step forward in terms of protecting the welfare of both farmed and non-farmed animals.

I take the welfare of animals very seriously and I am committed to implementing this new legislation. The majority of the provisions contained in the 2011 Act came into operation on 11 July 2011, introducing a new duty of care for all vertebrate animals and new powers to take action to prevent animals from suffering as opposed to having to wait until suffering occurs.

The 2011 Act provides powers to regulate, through subordinate legislation, a wide range of activities involving animals. In the coming months I propose to introduce a range of subordinate legislation to protect the welfare of farmed animals and dogs in breeding establishments. We are also currently revising legislation regarding the welfare of animals at slaughter. My Department is also preparing to publish codes of practice setting out the standards of care required for farmed animals, dogs, cats, horses, rabbits and non-human primates.

Animal Welfare Legislation

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development why the offence of 'conditions likely to cause suffering to animals' is not included in animal welfare legislation; and what plans she has to provide for this in the future.

(AQW 7729/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: It is already an offence under the Welfare of Animals Act 2011 if the actions of a person or the failure of that person to act causes an animal to suffer or is likely to cause suffering. The Act allows action to be taken if an animal is likely to suffer if its circumstances do not change; it is not necessary to wait until suffering has occurred. The powers in the Act significantly improve protection for the welfare of animals here. One of the key provisions of the Act is the introduction of a duty of care. This means that a person commits an offence if they do not take such steps as are reasonable in all circumstances to ensure that the needs of an animal for which they are responsible are met. These needs include a suitable environment and to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

Dog Attacks

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether incidents of dog attacks that are dealt with through a standard reporting system in all Councils.

(AQW 7731/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Under Article 52 of the Dogs Order 1983, each District Council is obliged to provide my Department with information relating to the operation of the Order including the number of licences issued, the number of stray dogs seized and the number of dog attacks investigated. Each Council provides a quarterly return to my Department using a standard proforma. The data is collated by my officials and an annual summary of this information is circulated to each Council.

The Dogs (Amendment) Act 2011 introduced a number of new provisions into the Dogs Order 1983 including new licence fees, compulsory microchipping and new powers for dog wardens. My Department has therefore been working with Councils to review the statistical information that the Councils provide in order to ensure a consistent approach. When this work has concluded, my Department will issue guidance to the Councils to ensure reporting consistency across all Council areas in relation to the information required.

Common Agricultural Policy: Reform

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what recent discussions she has had with her counterpart for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in London regarding the implications for farmers of the proposals to reform the Common Agricultural Policy.

(AQW 7735/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I have had a number of meetings on CAP reform with the Defra Ministers, Caroline Spelman MP and Jim Paice MP. This included meetings around the EU Agriculture and Fisheries Councils in October and November 2011 as well as a joint

meeting with the other devolved Ministers on 25 October 2011 and with the EU Agricultural Commissioner, Dacian Cioloș, on 14 November 2011. Further meetings on CAP reform are envisaged as the negotiations progress.

The discussions I have had so far have given me the opportunity to raise key issues of concern, including the move to a flat rate payments system, greening, the definition of an active farmer, the need for an increased share of the EU Pillar II budget and the overall complexity of the proposals put forward by the Commission.

Marine Organisms

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the total tonnage of marine organisms that are currently discarded by the trawl fleet annually; and for an estimate of the proportion of this discard that consists of bass, based on the data for bass bycatch.

(AQW 7747/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Absolute information on the total discards of marine organisms by DARD administered vessels using trawl nets is not available as fishermen are not required to record the fish that they discard. However my Department can supply discard estimates based on fleet sampling and observer data obtained by the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute. This is not available in the form requested at present but I will send the estimates to the Member by 31st March 2012.

Protection and Conservation of Sea Bass (NI) Regulations 2012

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, given that the objective of the draft Protection and Conservation of Sea Bass (NI) Regulations 2012 is to limit the mortality of bass, what consideration has been given to the suggestion that creating an exemption for trawled bass, which allows bass to enter the supply chain, may lead to the enforcement of the legislation being undermined; and whether the targeting of bass that may derive from trawl bycatch escalates, actual levels of bass mortality may increase.

(AQW 7749/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The objective of the draft Protection and Conservation of Sea Bass (NI) Regulations 2012 is to put in place regulations that will conserve sea bass stocks and prevent over exploitation either by recreational or commercial fishers. With regard to commercial fishing the regulations seek to prevent the establishment of an unregulated and targeted sea bass fishery. Exemption is being considered for those fishing methods where catch of bass would be unavoidable but no exemption is proposed for those commercial fishing methods that most threaten sea bass.

Consideration has been given to the effects on enforcement of allowing an exemption for trawl vessels that target species other than bass.

Differentiating legally caught and illegally caught bass by the time it gets into the supply chain would be difficult even if there were no commercial landings into our ports. Wild caught sea bass could still be imported from sustainable sources elsewhere and sea bass would still enter the food chain from fish farms.

However my Department believes that we have sufficient tools in the proposed Regulations and other legislation to prevent an unregulated commercial targeted bass fishery from developing. Over the next 12 months daily electronic catch recording and reporting, and satellite monitoring will be extended to all commercial vessels over 12 metres in length. This further improves confidence in catch reporting. Buyers and sellers of fish will also be required to submit sales notes electronically and this package of measures will improve traceability. Selling fish from a boat without a commercial licence has always been illegal and the improvements in catch, landing, and sales note recording and transmission will aid detection and traceability of all illegal fish sales including sea bass.

A by-catch exemption for commercial trawls of, for example 5% by weight of landings or daily catch, will not as you suggest lead to increased targeting of sea bass. Our white fish fleet is now very small and it targets mainly haddock and hake. It is also severely limited by Days at Sea restrictions. It would therefore not be commercially viable for such vessels to go out of their way to target bass if they could only retain a small percentage of the catch. As these vessels have to report catches electronically every 24 hours they would not be able to spread a large catch of bass over a trip lasting several days. The prawn fleet is the biggest sector of our fleet and again it would not be commercially viable for these vessels to target bass for if only a small part of the catch was to be retained. In addition you should be aware that during 2012 our whole prawn fleet will have to adopt highly selective fishing gear in order to conserve cod. This will also be of benefit to sea bass or any other by-catch species as most of these fish will be able to escape from the nets as well. The final group of vessels to which an exemption would apply are three pelagic trawlers that target mainly herring in the Irish Sea. These vessels normally fish for a relatively short period of the year and quickly take their herring quota. Once again it would not be commercially viable for these vessels to target bass under our proposals.

Finally, if as we all hope, sea bass spread into our waters and become more abundant over time, there may be a risk that the amount of bass caught in trawls could start to exceed any by-catch limit that is currently appropriate. In this scenario sea bass discards and mortality might increase as you suggest. If there is evidence that this is happening in future there would be opportunity to review the Regulations.

Animals: Microchip Implants

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, pursuant to AQW 3422/11-15, to detail the research which her Department consulted, in advance of introducing the NIA 20/09 Dogs (Amendment) Bill, which proves that microchip

implants in animals are safe; and what advice her Department has provided to vets on the health risks associated with microchip implants.

(AQW 7752/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Prior to the introduction of the Dogs (Amendment) Bill to the Assembly in May 2010, my Department reviewed a range of consultation responses, as well as research which looked at the health risks associated with microchip implants. A list of the research papers is set out below.

As set out in my answer to AQW 3422/11-15, while some of these studies suggest the possibility of a link between microchip implantation and the development of tumours in laboratory mice and rats, there is very little evidence of a similar link in dogs. There were 2 reports in the literature regarding microchip-associated tumours in dogs; however, the authors were unable to determine if the tumours were induced by the implanted microchip or as a response to vaccine administration at the same time.

My Department also considered figures on the number of adverse reactions to microchipping provided by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association. As set out in AQW 3422/11-15, these figures show that given the large number of microchipped pets, the incidence of reported adverse reactions is extremely low.

My Department has not issued advice to veterinarians on microchipping.

Research references:

Researcher	Title	Publication
Johnson, K.	Sarcomas induced in mice by subcutaneously implanted transponders. (1996).	Toxicologic Pathology. 33: 619 Abstract 198.
Tillmann, T. et al	Subcutaneous soft tissue tumours at the site of implanted microchips in mice. (1997).	Experimental and Toxicologic Pathology 49: 197-200.
Palmer, T.E. et al	Fibrosarcomas associated with passive integrated transponder implants. (1998)	Toxicologic Pathology 26: 170.
Blanchard, K.T. et al	Transponder-induced sarcoma in the heterozygous p 53+/- mouse. (1999).	Toxicologic Pathology 27 (5): 519-527.
Elcock, L.E. et al	Tumours in long term rat studies associated with microchip animal identification devices. (2001).	Experimental and Toxicologic Pathology 52: 483-491.
Le Calvez, S. et al	Subcutaneous microchip – associated tumours in mice. (2006).	Experimental and Toxicologic Pathology. 57: 255-265.
Murasagi, E. et al	Histological reactions to microchips in dogs. (2003).	The Veterinary Record. September 13, 2003: 328.
Vascellari, M. et al	Liposarcoma at the site of an implanted microchip in a dog. (2004).	The Veterinary Journal 2004, 168: 188-190
Vascellari, M. and Mutinella, F.	Fibrosarcoma with typical features of post-injection sarcoma at the site of a microchip implant in a dog. (2006).	Veterinary Pathology 43: 545-548.

Milk Prices

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action her Department is taking to ensure that dairy farmers get a better price for the milk they produce.

(AQW 7772/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The price that farmers receive for their milk is a commercial matter and therefore not something in which I can directly intervene. However I believe farmers should receive a fair price for the milk that they produce.

To maximise the financial return from milk production, I believe it is vital that the dairy industry follows a market-led strategy. In practice, this means that decisions on milk production should be taken by milk producers in the context of their input costs, market requirements and market returns (i.e. the milk price achievable). Therefore, to help farmers achieve better financial returns, my Department (through CAFRE and AFBI) funds education, training, technical support and research to help improve efficiency and competitiveness. In particular, good animal husbandry and grassland management skills will continue to be the solid foundation of any dairy farm and these must be updated to take account of best practice, new technologies and other developments.

To help improve returns, financial assistance is available to the dairy sector under the Regional Food Programme and Axis 1 of the Rural Development Programme. It also benefits indirectly from aid which continues to be provided under the EU School Milk Scheme and from promotional aid granted by the EU to the Dairy Council. In addition, a range of financial and non-financial support measures are available to dairy processing companies from Invest NI to help them remain competitive.

I am also working with the DETI Minister to put in place a Food Strategy Board, whose role will be to develop a longer term strategy for the agri-food sector which will of course include the dairy sector. This strategy will include challenging growth targets and, as such, its development will be important for planning future growth of the sector.

Single Farm Payments

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development when the remaining Single Farm Payments will be made. (AQW 7776/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: It is not possible to predict when the final application in any year will be completed because a small number are likely to take some years to bring to conclusion for reasons beyond the control of my Department. It is the case that we have a good track record in processing Single Farm Payments and endeavour to complete all claims at the earliest possible time. At 10 February 2012, some 34,627 (91.5%) of the 37,854 applications submitted under the 2011 scheme had been finalised and a total of £239 million paid out to farmers.

Many of the outstanding claims were the subject of an on-farm inspection in 2011, during which inspectors sought to ensure that ineligible areas were not included for payment. Almost all of the inspections identified land area differences effective from earlier years, often as far back as the 2005 Scheme year. As a consequence, the resultant assessments involving retrospective changes are complex and time consuming. Where such changes are identified at inspection, payment is likely to be later in the payment schedule.

Not all of the remaining cases may be due a payment because of ineligibility or the application of penalties under scheme rules.

EU regulations require Paying Agencies, including my Department, to pay out at least 95.24% of its available 2011 SFP budget by 30 June 2012 in order to avoid them incurring late payment penalties.

Líofa Initiative

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail (i) the rationale behind her decision to use departmental resources to promote the Loifa initiative; and (ii) the estimated (a) costs; (b) staff time that will be required; and (c) source of these additional costs.

(AQW 8009/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: As part of the commitment given to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, all public bodies here are required to encourage the use of Irish and Ulster-Scots. As a large public service provider, DARD is also expected to take some steps to raise awareness levels too. The DCAL Líofa initiative provides a vehicle for my Department to raise awareness of the Irish language and culture. I fully support this initiative. The Council of Europe Charter on Regional or Minority Languages is designed to protect and promote regional or minority languages. At present, the Charter obligations apply to each language differently, as Part II of the Charter applies to Irish and Ulster-Scots and Part III applies only to Irish.

There are currently no associated staff time or costs involved. My Equality Unit officials will be taking forward any agreed actions with DCAL in the future.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Regulation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what powers she has to limit or prevent hydraulic fracturing from taking place.

(AQW 8011/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: My Department has no role in regulating the process of gas exploration or extraction, other than that as a statutory consultee in the planning process.

Should planning permission be sought in future for hydraulic fracturing operations, it is likely that an Environmental Impact Assessment would be required as part of the planning process. My Department, as a consultee on any planning application, would want to ensure that any potential impact on agriculture and the rural environment was fully considered and addressed through the planning process.

I have strong reservations about the process of hydraulic fracturing and its potential impact on the environment on the island of Ireland.

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

Libraries: Opening Hours

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure from where, in her departmental budget, the additional £2.39 million to fund library opening hours will come; and whether any specific projects or funding will be withdrawn from elsewhere as a result.

(AQW 7511/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I have not yet made final decisions on the source of additional funding to be provided to Libraries. When I have done so and communicated my decisions to any affected business areas, I will answer your question in full.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by her Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed. **(AQW 7539/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: In October 2011 I launched a mobile application competition to boost tourism by showcasing Irish and Ulster-Scots culture. Both applications will provide information on local accommodation, restaurants and attractions relevant to the sites and activities profiled by the applications. The applications are due to be ready by the end of March 2012.

In 2010 Armagh Observatory and Planetarium collaborated with colleagues in Dublin and Blackrock Castle Observatory (Cork Institute of Technology) in developing 'Space Brains', a quiz application aimed at attracting young people towards astronomy and related sciences. This was awarded title of 'best Gaming App' in the Appys 2011 competition.

My Department, in association with Arts Council NI, in 2012/13 are planning to commission an application which will provide users with details of all public art commissions in the North. Sport NI is in the early stages of developing an application that will provide information on the Active8 eatwell Programme.

East-West Linkages

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what action her Department is taking to promote East-West linkages. **(AQW 7542/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, and associated arms length bodies (ALBs), promote East-West linkages in a wide range of areas.

Foras na Gaeilge and Bòrd na Gàidhlig in Scotland have responsibility for the Colmcille initiative which aims to foster support for the Gaelic language and to develop links between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland.

During the course of 2012, the Ulster-Scots Agency is planning to develop a specific initiative to address links between Ulster and Scotland in a structured way.

The Arts Council NI (ACNI) is working to coordinate a Literature Tourism Trail covering the north of Ireland and Scotland's Western region. ACNI, along with the Arts Councils of England, Scotland and Wales, contributes to a central Cross Border Touring Fund which enables the touring companies to tour outside their regions. As a result larger venues in the North have hosted performances by large scale companies such as Scottish Ballet and Opera North.

National Museums NI has a good working relationship with National Museums Scotland and the National Gallery Scotland, sharing expertise and collections and partnering in regards to exhibitions.

Sport NI in partnership with SportScotland, Sport England, Sport Wales and UK Sport have developed a new vehicle for widening access and increasing the participation and involvement in sport and physical activity by the under-represented individuals, groups and communities.

The Public Record Office of NI (PRONI) is planning to initiate a visit to their sister institution, the National Records of Scotland (NRS) in Edinburgh, to discuss areas of professional interest, including Digital Preservation for archives and the introduction of an Archive Accreditation scheme.

Furthermore, officials from my Department engage with their counterparts in Scotland on a range of issues, e.g. Salmon conservation, inland fisheries and Architecture. ALBs such as Libraries NI and Armagh Observatory have established links and regular contacts with their colleagues in Scotland encouraging joint research in their fields of expertise.

Current/Capital Budget Allocations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether her departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to her capital budget allocation. **(AQW 7639/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: Revenue expenditure does not vary proportionately with capital budget allocations. In some cases, capital expenditure will have direct consequences for future revenue budgets, e.g. where assets are created, there may be future depreciation and directly related running costs. In other cases, revenue expenditure will be incurred whether or not there are capital budget allocations, and this expenditure covers administration, running costs and revenue grants.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in her Department's Equality Unit. **(AQW 7662/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are currently 2.1 full time equivalent (FTE) staff employed in my Department's Equality Unit. Details of the grades of staff and salary ranges are contained in the table below.

Grade	FTE	Salary Range
DP	1	£34,163 - £38,893
SO	0.6	£27,115 - £30,520
EO2	0.5	£21,392 - £23,250

Civil Service: Posts

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many Civil Service posts existed in her Department at (i) Administrative Assistant; (ii) Administrative Officer; (iii) Executive Officer 2; (iv) Executive Officer 1; (v) Staff Officer; (vi) Deputy Principal; (vii) Grade 7; and (viii) Grade 6 levels, at the beginning of (a) 2007; and (b) 2012, broken down by local Council area. **(AQW 7692/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The information requested in respect of DCAL is contained in the tables below. The data provided reflects the position at 1 January 2007 and 1 January 2012 by local Council area, expressed as Full Time Equivalents (FTE).

Vacancies are recorded by grade level in the January 2012 table. Vacancy information by grade level is not available for January 2007 but the total reported vacancy level at that time was 49. The January 2007 table also includes 163 FTE staff employed in Ordnance Survey NI (OSNI) which was, at that time, an Executive Agency of DCAL. It transferred to Land and Property Services of DFP on 1 April 2008.

For completeness, the tables include Industrial and Senior Civil Service (SCS) posts.

DCAL Posts by Grade and District Council – 1 Jan 2007 (i)

District Council	Grade Level (includes grades analogous to General Service)									Total (ii)
	Industrial	AA	AO	E02 / E01	SO	DP	G6/G7	SCS	Vacancies	
Armagh	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0		1
Ballymoney	5	0	1	5	1	0	0	0		12
Belfast	0	39	64	132	67	51	27	7		387
Craigavon	0	0	0	7	0	0	0	0		7
Down	5	0	0	1	0	0	0	0		6
Fermanagh	5	0	0	2	2	0	0	0		9
Moyle	7	0	1	1	0	0	0	0		9
Omagh	0	1	0	4	0	0	0	0		5
Total	22	40	66	153	70	51	27	7	49	485

DCAL Posts by Grade and District Council – 1 Jan 2012 (iii)

District Council	Grade Level (includes grades analogous to General Service)								Total (iv)
	Industrial	AA	AO	E02 / E01	SO	DP	G7	SCS	
Ballymoney	5	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	8
Belfast	0	17.42	47.32	53.95	60.62	34.42	21.72	6(v)	241.45
Craigavon	0	1.27	3	3	1	0	0	0	8.27
Down	5	0	0.6	3	1	0	0	0	9.6
Fermanagh	6	0	0.5	4	0	0	0	0	10.5

District Council	Grade Level (includes grades analogous to General Service)								Total (iv)
	Industrial	AA	AO	E02 / E01	S0	DP	G7	SCS	
Moyle	7	0	1	4	1	0	0	0	13
Total (rounded)	23	19	53	70	64	34	22	6	291

- (i) Excludes temporary posts
- (ii) Excludes statisticians on loan from DFP's NI Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)
- (iii) Excludes temporary posts
- (iv) Excludes statisticians on loan from DFP's NI Statistics and Research Agency
- (v) Excludes 1 Grade 3 seconded to NI Policing Board

Cultra Station House

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether National Museums Northern Ireland has considered the purchase of Cultra Station House, as an historic listed building closely associated with the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. **(AQW 7737/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The current CSR budget allocation presents National Museums NI with significant financial challenges for the forthcoming three-year period.

National Museums NI has a number of capital and revenue priorities agreed with DCAL. The Cultra Station House has not previously been factored into budget discussions and is unlikely to displace existing priorities which will focus on the essential maintenance of the existing museum estate.

National Museums NI is part of a group consisting of local residents and businesses including the Holywood conservation group, local councillors and business people, who are looking at ways of working with future owners to preserve the historic nature of the building.

Cultra Station House

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she would support a feasibility study on the incorporation of Cultra Station House into the nearby Ulster Folk and Transport Museum. **(AQW 7738/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: This matter is operationally the responsibility of National Museums NI, who would be responsible in the first instance for undertaking any supporting feasibility study.

National Museums NI has a number of capital and revenue priorities agreed with DCAL. This building has not previously factored in these discussions and it is unlikely to displace existing priorities.

Cultra Station House

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether Cultra Station House was ever in the ownership of National Museums Northern Ireland or its predecessors. **(AQW 7739/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: Cultra Station House has never been in the ownership of National Museums NI or its predecessors.

Recruitment Agencies: Payments

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the amount paid to recruitment agencies for (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time posts in her Department, and its arm's-length bodies, in each of the last three years. **(AQW 7742/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the terms of the NICS Framework Agreement for the Provision of Temporary/Casual Workers, DCAL has recruited a number of temporary staff to cover various posts over the last 3 financial years. This included administrative cover, support staff, a librarian and more recently accountants.

The table below details annual costs for both DCAL and its Arms Length Bodies (ALB's) for this provision:

(i) Full Time

Source	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	Totals
DCAL	162,378.73	80,180.17	88,439.86	330,998.76
ALB'S	500,449.00	475,335.00	473,851.00	1,449,635.00
Total	662,827.73	555,515.17	562,290.86	1,780,633.76

(ii) Part Time

DCAL	-	-	-	-
ALB's Total	85,878.00	315,828.00	311,196.00	712,902.00
Total	85,878.00	315,828.00	311,196.00	712,902.00
Combined Totals	748,705.73	871,343.17	873,486.86	2,493,535.76

Salmon Stocks

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide details, including the agendas, of meetings she and her officials have had with her counterparts in the Republic of Ireland regarding the need to conserve salmon stocks.

(AQW 7754/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not met with my counterparts in the South of Ireland regarding conserving salmon stocks.

My Inland Fisheries Group technical staff based in the South and West area covering Tyrone and Fermanagh meet with Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) and Electricity Supply Board (ESB) staff on matters concerning Erne salmon management. The salmon issues discussed at these meetings concern the ongoing salmon stocking programme of the Erne system.

DCAL Inland Fisheries Group officials met Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) officials at Causeway Exchange in 2011 and discussed issues relating to policy and management of the wild Atlantic salmon fishery

Irish Volunteers: Centenary

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Irish Volunteers in 1913 and the involvement of Roger Casement.

(AQW 7870/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The forthcoming decade of centenaries provides all of us on this island with the opportunity to achieve a greater understanding of our past and how it shapes identities and relationships today. The key issue is not whether we remember these events but how we remember them.

The Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund have developed a set of principles to help organisations to remember the past in the context of an inclusive and accepting society. I endorse these principles.

The arts and cultural sectors can play a key role in how the stories of our past are told and shared with a wider audience.

I am therefore continuing discussions with the Community Relations Council and Heritage Lottery Fund to support the dissemination and use of these principles. To that end I have also met with my counterpart Minister Jimmy Deenihan who is chairing the Oireachtas Consultation Group on Centenary Commemorations.

As part of a comprehensive programme to explore the period 1912-1922 and its legacy, National Museums NI will consider marking the centenary of the 1916 trial and death of Roger Casement and the 1913 founding of the Irish Volunteers and his involvement with the organisation. However as the programme is at an early stage the content has not been finalised.

Roger Casement: Centenary

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to mark the centenary of the trial and death of Roger Casement who resided in Ballycastle, Co. Antrim.

(AQW 7871/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The forthcoming decade of centenaries provides all of us on this island with the opportunity to achieve a greater understanding of our past and how it shapes identities and relationships today. The key issue is not whether we remember these events but how we remember them.

The Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund have developed a set of principles to help organisations to remember the past in the context of an inclusive and accepting society. I endorse these principles.

The arts and cultural sectors can play a key role in how the stories of our past are told and shared with a wider audience.

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FAI: Affiliated International Teams

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what support her Department provides for soccer players and young people who play for the Football Association of Ireland affiliated international teams.

(AQW 7872/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for providing support for soccer players and young people who play for Football Association of Ireland (FAI) affiliated international teams rests with the FAI. Sport NI, which is responsible for the distribution of funding for sport in the north of Ireland, provides support to soccer players and young people through two funding programmes, Investing in Performance Sport and the Athlete Investment Programme. Funding under both of these programmes is provided through the recognised governing body for soccer in the north, the Irish Football Association. However, any soccer player or young person who benefits from such support may subsequently choose to play for FAI affiliated international teams.

Soccer Games: Ministerial Attendance

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail the soccer games she has attended since coming into office.

(AQW 7873/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since coming into office on 16 May 2011 I have attended 3 soccer matches as detailed below:

NI vs Faroe Islands	Wednesday 10 August 2011
NI vs Estonia	Friday 7 October 2011
ROI vs Estonia	Tuesday 15 November 2011

Salmon Capacity: Bushmills Research Station

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) what is the current salmon ranching capacity of the Bushmills Research Station; and (ii) whether there are any plans to extend the capacity of the station, and if so, by how much and what is the timescale.

(AQW 7911/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) The current DCAL Inland Fisheries Group business target is to produce 50,000 hatchery reared (ranching) salmon smolts annually.
- (ii) At this time the Department has no plans to increase the number of hatchery produced salmon smolts.

Ranunculus Fluitans

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether Ranunculus fluitans has been added to any waterway by her Department in the last 25 years; and if so, what was the rationale for its addition.

(AQW 7916/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DCAL has not added Ranunculus Fluitans to any waterway in the last 25 years.

Salmon Culls: Bushmills Research Station

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure (i) how many salmon have been killed at the Bushmills Research Station in each of the last five years; (ii) how they were disposed of; and (iii) how the financial return of their disposal was managed.

(AQW 7918/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) DCAL annually retains a sample of adult Atlantic salmon returning to the River Bush as they pass through the Bushmills Salmon Research Station. Only micro tagged fish are retained. These fish are stripped to provide ova for ongoing research and conservation programmes. The resulting kelts are culled and tags removed. Numbers of (fish) kelts culled for micro tags in last five years;

■ 2007 - 76	■ 2009 - 76	■ 2011 - 68
■ 2008 - 88	■ 2010 - 90	

- (ii) All dead fish are disposed of through a licensed animal by products disposal company in line with DARD fish health regulations.
- (iii) DCAL pays for the supply of the fish disposal service. There is no financial return or benefit to the Department.

Questions for Written Answer: Stationery Costs

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much her Department has spent on stationery costs in replying to Assembly Written Questions, including the price of the envelopes and paper used, in each of the last five years. **(AQW 7928/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not routinely estimate the cost of answering Assembly Questions and so the information requested is not available.

All-island Teams

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of how organising all-island teams helps to create greater international success for local sports people. **(AQW 7942/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The organisation of all-island teams is a matter for sports organisations and governing bodies. However, it is clear there are real benefits to organising sports on an all-island basis. One only has to look at the strength of Gaelic games, the international successes of the Irish Rugby and Cricket teams and the quality of the players from the north of Ireland on those teams to see what all Ireland organisation can and does deliver. Having a greater pool of top quality players to pick from can only improve the performance of our National Teams.

FAI: Affiliated International Teams

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department celebrates the success of local sports people who play for Football Association of Ireland affiliated international teams. **(AQW 7944/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The strategy for sport, Sport Matters, recognises the need for all sports stakeholders to publicly celebrate sporting success. I host an annual reception at Parliament Buildings for those local sports people who have achieved sporting excellence at either national or international level. This would include local sports people who play for Football Association of Ireland affiliated international teams should they achieve international success.

Ranunculus Fluitans

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether she is aware of the deliberate introduction of Ranunculus Fluitans to any waterway by any Government Department in the last 25 years. **(AQW 8006/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware of the deliberate introduction of Ranunculus Fluitans to any waterway in the DCAL jurisdiction by any Government Department in the last 25 years.

US/Ireland Alliance: Annual Hollywood Event

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department and NI Screen will promote the local film industry at the US-Ireland Alliance Annual Hollywood event. **(AQW 8027/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and NI Screen do not plan to promote the local film industry at the US-Ireland Alliance Annual Hollywood event.

NI Screen:

- Has direct contact with the major US studios and mini majors.
- Leads trade missions to key events in the US for the North of Ireland's independent television companies.
- Provides support for ministerial visits to the industry in Los Angeles.
- Attends the annual Association of Film Commissioners International (AFCI) Locations Showcase in Los Angeles.

We believe these activities are more effective both in terms of results and value for money than the sponsorship of a single event.

British Isles Teams

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, pursuant to AQW 7942/11-15, for her assessment of how organising British Isles teams to compete in a range of sports would help create greater international success for local athletes. **(AQW 8127/11-15)**

Ms Ní Chuilín: The organisation of teams combining athletes from these islands is a matter for sports organisations and governing bodies in their different jurisdictions. I am not personally convinced that organising sport on this basis will give local athletes as many opportunities to gain experience at international level and attain international success as organisation on a more local or all Ireland basis has the potential to provide.

Department of Education

Teachers: Redundancies

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to issue guidance to teachers in relation to the funding that will be available to allow employing authorities to offer compensation of up to 90 weeks' salary for teachers made redundant by August 2012.

(AQW 6876/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): On 27 January the Department issued guidance to the Education and Library Boards and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools on the use of funding set aside to assist employing authorities to make cost reductions at school level through redundancies up to 31 August 2012. On the same date the Department wrote to the Chairpersons of the Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools to confirm the basis on which funding will be available in support of redundancies to effect cost reductions.

Employing Authorities wrote to controlled and maintained schools on 30/31 January 2012 advising of the compensation terms available to teachers made redundant at 31 August 2012. The Department wrote in similar terms to voluntary grammar and grant maintained integrated schools on 2 February 2012.

Preschool Education: Voluntary/Private Settings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in light of the Chief Inspector's Report 2008-2010, how his Department intends to improve standards in pre-school education in the voluntary/private sector.

(AQW 6914/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As both these questions are related I will answer together. All pre-school settings, both statutory and voluntary/private, have to provide an appropriate curriculum which follows the "Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education" (NICCEA 2006) and are open to inspection by the Education Training Inspectorate. All voluntary/private pre-school settings entering the Programme are also required to meet certain standards and requirements including the registration and inspection requirements of the Health and Social Care Trusts.

In addition to employing staff with relevant qualifications, those voluntary/private pre-school settings within the PSEEP are required to work with a qualified and experienced Early Years Specialist in a way which contributes to raising educational standards.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) will continue its rigorous programme of inspection across all types of pre-school settings, voluntary, private and statutory. The ETI will continue to offer support and guidance at the point of inspection and, through its reports, will highlight good practice and areas for improvement. ETI will also monitor areas for improvement with specific pre-school settings.

The ETI will continue to meet regularly with representatives of those organisations which support the voluntary/private pre-school sector (both English-medium and Irish-medium) to discuss key issues emerging from inspections and promote improvement.

DE has introduced a SEN capacity building programme in all DE-funded early years settings that aims to ensure that all settings are equipped with the necessary skills to manage successfully the needs of the majority of pupils with SEN and/or disability, with appropriate support. A number of pilots in early years settings are being rolled out across the 5 ELBs and will be fully operational from early 2012.

Preschool Education: Voluntary/Private Settings

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, in light of the Chief Inspector's Report 2008-2010, what action his Department has taken to improve the overall effectiveness of the voluntary/private sector.

(AQW 6915/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: As both these questions are related I will answer together. All pre-school settings, both statutory and voluntary/private, have to provide an appropriate curriculum which follows the "Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education" (NICCEA 2006) and are open to inspection by the Education Training Inspectorate. All voluntary/private pre-school settings entering the Programme are also required to meet certain standards and requirements including the registration and inspection requirements of the Health and Social Care Trusts.

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Preschool Education: Outcomes

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of what should be the educational outcomes from pre-school provision.

(AQW 6994/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Pre-School education aims to prepare the whole child - personally, socially, emotionally, cognitively and physically, thereby laying a firm foundation for future development and learning .

It should be guided by the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education (CCEA) document which aims to provide high quality learning and teaching experiences specifically for this age group. There is an emphasis on developing children's knowledge, skills and understanding through play, experiential learning (learning by doing) and by solving real life problems in both the indoor and outdoor environments through these areas of learning. This is age and stage appropriate and is delivered by high quality staff who have a sound knowledge, understanding and background in developmental theory and educational practice.

Early years intervention programmes can have a major positive impact at a personal level for the child and the family, and in the long term, reduce future costs in addressing any problems or issues that arise or are a result of missed opportunities to address problems early on.

Preschool Education: Inspections

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, for each of the last six academic years, in relation to pre-school inspections, to detail (i) the date of each inspection; (ii) the name of the facility; (iii) the number of children attending each facility on a (a) part-time; or (b) full-time basis; (iv) the grade achieved at inspection; (v) whether a follow-up inspection was required, and the grade achieved after the inspection; and (vi) whether, after inspection, each facility stayed in or opted out of the funded pre-school programme, broken down by (a) the private sector; (b) the voluntary sector; (c) statutory nursery units; and (d) statutory nursery schools.

(AQW 7069/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate costs.

Sure Start: North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Sure Start scheme in the North Down area.

(AQW 7319/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Current Sure Start policy is to provide services to at least the top 20% most disadvantaged wards and Super Output Areas per NIMDM. DE gave approval in June 2010 to the proposal to extend Ards Sure Start catchment area to include Harbour 1 and Conlig 3, locally identified as Harbour and Rathgill. These areas are located in Bangor and are the first locations within North Down to fall within the criteria for Sure Start. The introduction of Sure Start in this area is at a relatively early stage and efforts are being made to build on partnership working and on the capacity to deliver appropriate services.

The draft Early Years Strategy indicates the intention to expand Sure Start to cover the top 25% most disadvantaged wards, subject to the availability of resources. In this context, Dufferin and Whitehill wards in North Down fall within the top 25% most disadvantaged wards bracket and initial discussions have been held between the Health and Social Care Board and local community groups about local need and partnership working.

Schools: Audit Process

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education when he expects the schools audit process to be completed, given that the initial audit by the Education and Library Boards has been rejected.

(AQW 7329/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The audits did not fulfil the requirements as set out in the Terms of Reference, including reflecting the challenges schools face, particularly around the quality of education and financial stability.

The audits were completed and resubmitted to the Department on Monday 6th February. I have asked for proposals to address the position submitted by Wednesday 15th February.

Preschool Education: Places

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to address the issue of children missing out on early year places. (AQW 7396/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Draft Programme for Government includes a commitment to ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it. This is consistent with the aim of the Department's Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP).

In the 2011/2012 school year there are over 23,000 children in funded pre-school education provision and DE is currently working with Education and Library Boards to ensure an adequate number of funded pre-school places are available for September 2012 and in future years.

If necessary, additional capacity in the pre-school education sector may be achieved through several options such as the creation of new/additional statutory nursery units or by the allocation of additional funded places in voluntary and private pre-school settings participating in the PSEEP.

Primary Schools: Places in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of first preference applications for each primary school in the North Down constituency for the 2012/13 academic year; and (ii) the number of places available at each school. (AQW 7427/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The admissions process for places in primary schools in the 2012/13 academic year is currently ongoing. The South-Eastern Education and Library Board, which administers the admissions process for the North Down constituency, have advised me that they will not be in a position to provide the information requested until after the process is completed on 18 April 2012, when letters issue to parents advising them of the primary school for which their child has been accepted/not accepted. I will be pleased to provide the information to you after that date if that would be helpful.

Selection Tests

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many Year 7 pupils from the (i) maintained; and (ii) controlled sectors are taking unofficial selection tests in this academic year. (AQW 7449/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department does not collect this information given that these are unofficial selection tests and are operated contrary to Department of Education policy and guidance.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed. (AQW 7455/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Neither my Department, nor its arm's length bodies, have designed any mobile phone applications for use by members of the public and none are currently being developed.

Schools: Newbuilds

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail the costs of professional fees, including consultants and architects, for new builds for schools which have been planned but not yet built, in each of the last ten years. (AQW 7469/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The professional fees for the 52 major schemes previously announced for capital funding, but where construction work has not commenced, are detailed in the table below. The information provided covers all professional costs incurred since the commencement of planning up to 31 March 2011.

School Ref No	Scheme	All Spend on projects £000s
201-6068	Artigarvan PS, Strabane	112
203-6661	Arvalee / Cranny Spec School, Omagh	1
301-3315	BallyKelly PS, Limavady	169
321-0133	Ballymoney H.S	0
231-0015	Belmont Special School	3
124-0291	Colaiste Feirste, Belfast	320

School Ref No	Scheme	All Spend on projects £000s
223-0138	Dean Maguirc College, Carrickmore	92
221-0305	Devenish College	59
501-1575	Dromore Central PS.	258
201-0382	Ebrington PS, L'Derry	100
101-6485/ 111-0003	Glenwood PS./Edenderry N.S. Belfast	226
503-2585	Edendork PS	90
201-2245	Eglinton PS, L'Derry	148
201-6152	Enniskillen Model PS	128
242-0229	Foyle & Londonderry College	417
421-0046	Glastry College, Ballyhalbert	697
131-0017	Greenwood Assessment Centre	0
303-6562	Holy Family PS, Magherafelt	155
523-0278	HolyTrinity College, Cookstown	0
421-0086	Knockbreda HS, Belfast	1,189
431-6516	Knockevin Spec School, Downpatrick	323
231-6662	Limegrove / Glasvey Special School	6
123-0022	Little Flower Girls S.S, Belfast	153
242-0065	Loreto College, Omagh	43
541-0057	Lurgan College	434
142-0022	Methodist College, Belfast	221
131-0016	Mitchell House Special School	0
201-2261	New Buildings PS, L'Derry	92
206-6552	Omagh IPS 03/04	71
321-0207	Parkhall College, Antrim	1,022
541-0067	Portadown College	243
425-0024 & 401-1631	Priory College & Holywood PS	845
342-0058	Rainey Endowed, Magherafelt	0
101-0307	Springhill PS. Belfast	128
503-1387	St Bronagh's PS, Rostrevor	519
503-6435	St Clare's Abbey PS Newry	522
423-0107	St Columbanus College, Bangor	495
203-2737	St Columbkille's PS. Carrickmore	109
203-6116	St Conor's PS, Omagh	112
503-1340	St Joseph's Convent PS, Newry	172
542-0045	St Louis Grammar, Kilkeel	467
503-6043	St Mary's PS, Banbridge	61
523-0076	St Patrick's College, Banbridge	97

School Ref No	Scheme	All Spend on projects £000s
542-0268	St Patrick's G.S. Armagh	378
542-0304	St Pat's Boys/Girls Acad, Dgnon	614
203-1898	St Paul's PS. Irvinestown	26
503-1160	St Teresa's PS, Lurgan	170
101-6655	Strand / Sydenham PS.	549
101-0252	Strandtown PS, Belfast	308
503-1103	Tannaghmore PS, Lurgan	186
421-0029	The High School, Ballynahinch	385
142-0264	Victoria College, Belfast	223
	Totals	13,138

Teachers: Suspended

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of teachers currently suspended from (a) primary schools; and (b) post-primary schools; and (ii) the total cost of their salaries, superannuation, pensions and other deductions.

(AQW 7471/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At 2 February 2012, there are 8 teachers suspended from primary schools and 5 teachers suspended from post primary schools. The total cost of their salaries is £486,418.25 i.e. from the start of each suspension up to the latest payroll of January 2012. This cost is inclusive of the employers' national insurance and superannuation deductions.

Preschool Education: Places in North Down

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of first preference applications for each pre-school provider in the North Down constituency for the 2012/13 academic year; and (ii) the number of places available at each provider.

(AQW 7478/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The admissions process for places in pre-school education in the 2012/13 academic year is currently ongoing. The South-Eastern Education and Library Board, which administers the admissions process for the North Down constituency, have advised me that they will not be in a position to provide the information requested until after the process is completed on 1 June 2012, when final placement letters issue to parents. I will be pleased to provide the information to you after that date if that would be helpful.

Shared Education: Advisory Group

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education which groups are represented on the Advisory Group on Shared Education and when the membership details will be published.

(AQW 7490/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The group has not yet been established.

Age-weighted Pupil Unit

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to outline the rationale in changing the five percent cut to the Age Weighted Pupil Unit to nearly one percent.

(AQW 7501/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I refer the Member to my responses to AQW 6292/11-15, AQW 6293/11-15, and AQW 6294/11-15, which were tabled by Roy Beggs MLA and published in the Official Report on 27 January 2012. These detail how the additional funding secured for schools will be distributed using the Common Funding Formula, and how the estimated Age Weighted Pupil Unit has correspondingly changed as a result of the additional £120m (£30m/£15m/£75m) over the next three financial years.

Education Estate: Future Plans

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education how his Department uses the geographical information system to support the future planning of the education estate; and whether the information produced is available to the wider public.

(AQW 7502/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Geographical information system (GIS) mapping is available within the Department under licence and is used by officials to consider a range of issues, including planning of education provision.

Any significant change to the schools estate, such as a new school, school closure or amalgamation, requires the publication of a statutory Development Proposal to support that intent. When a proposal is made, it is assessed against the Department's policy framework, and, as an element of that assessment, geographical information system (GIS) mapping is utilised. The maps form part of the information on which I make decisions about Development Proposals. The supporting papers for these are not automatically published, but can be made available upon request.

As part of the work I have commissioned in relation to area based planning, plans will be drawn up the Education and Library Boards with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and other sectors. It is highly likely that GIS mapping will be used to inform their considerations. The contents of the area plans will be subject to public consultation in due course.

Teachers: Voluntary Severance Programme

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to detail how the £49.9 million set aside for the Voluntary Severance Programme in 2011/12 will be split between (i) teaching staff, (ii) non-teaching staff in schools; and (iii) staff in his Department's arm's-length bodies.

(AQW 7503/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The existing budget provision for voluntary severance/ redundancy costs over the budget period are £49.9m / £55.4m / £50.6m and £6.13m. These allocations have not been derived from a detailed forecast redundancy model but rather from a financial management decision to make provision in order to facilitate the reduction in the long term cost base of the education sector.

The number of redundancies in 2012 will be determined by Boards of Governors in light of pressures on school budgets.

Redundancies are a matter for each individual school/employer and the reasons for redundancies, in addition to budgetary constraint, may include school closures/amalgamations, falling enrolments or the curriculum needs of the school. The final decision for schools on how to live within their budget rests with the respective Principal and Board of Governors under the arrangements for Local Management of Schools. It is not possible to anticipate the individual decisions made across 1,200 schools.

Schools: Charges for Trips

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education to outline his Department's position on schools which charge pupils for school trips that occur during school hours.

(AQW 7507/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education Reform (N I) Order 1989 Article 128 (1) and (2) enshrines the right to a free education for pupils registered in grant-aided schools and establishes that activities organised wholly or primarily during normal teaching time should be made available to such pupils regardless of the ability or willingness of their parents to meet the cost. There are a few limited exceptions to this principle such as schools being permitted to require parents to pay charges for items such as board and lodging on residential trips, individual tuition in the playing of a musical instrument or optional extras provided outside school hours and which are not specifically required to meet the Board of Governors' statutory duty to deliver religious education or to deliver any component of a prescribed programme of study or of an approved public examination. Under article 131 of the Education Reform (N I) Order 1989, Boards of Governors of grant-aided schools are required to draw up and keep under review a statement of its policy in relation to the charging and remission arrangements which it proposes to make in respect of optional extras and board and lodging on residential trips.

Current/Capital Budget Allocations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education whether his departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to his capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7547/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The table below shows the percentage change year on year to my Department's resource and capital budgets across the Budget 2011-15 period and shows that funding between the 2 budgets does not vary proportionately.

	2011-12 £m	2012-13 £m	2013-14 £m	2014-15 £m
Resource Budget *	1,894.9	1,906.4	1,903.0	1,949.8
% change year on year	-1.0%	0.6%	-0.2%	2.5%
Capital Budget	114.7	103.4	107.7	183.4
% change year on year	-32.2%	-9.8%	4.2%	70.3%

* Includes additional funding of £30m / £15m / £75m for schools over the period 2012-13 to 2014-15 as announced on 12 January 2012.

Education and Skills Authority: EQIA

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6788/11-15, (i) what is the gender background of the staff in Rathgael who would transfer to the Education and Skills Authority; and (ii) in relation to the commitment that the development of a location strategy 'will include consideration of equality impacts', whether an Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out; and when this will occur, given that a high level draft location paper has been prepared.

(AQW 7556/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are 39 staff based in Rathgael House who deliver functions that will transfer to the Education and Skills Authority, of whom 31 are female and 8 are male. The draft location strategy will be subject to equality screening. If the screening indicates the need for an equality impact assessment, then this will be carried out.

Education and Skills Authority: Staff Relocation

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6787/11-15, given that there are no plans in place for the relocation of staff, (i) whether a high level draft location paper has been prepared (ii) whether this paper identifies a location(s) to which staff may be transferred; (iii) how many locations are under consideration; and (iv) how many staff might be relocated.

(AQW 7557/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Officials are working on a draft high level location strategy. It does not refer to specific locations. No decisions on the future location of staff transferring have been made.

Schools: Area Plans

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the timescale for the completion of the strategic area planning process to guide capital expenditure on new builds for schools; and (ii) how the schools involved will be kept up to date with progress.

(AQW 7558/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Terms of Reference which issued to the Education and Library Boards on 15 December 2011 outlined a timescale for the completion and submission of area plans. They are available in full at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/area-planning-terms-of-reference.htm>.

The Boards, working with CCMS and the other sectoral bodies in developing their plans, have been asked to complete their plans by March 2012 for post-primary schools and June for primary schools. However, in view of the scale and complexity of the issues involved, these timescales are indicative and subject to discussion with Boards.

It is important to understand that the completion of the area plans is not the final destination, and that implementation of them will be an ongoing process. I will expect the relevant school managing authorities to keep their schools updated on developments throughout the process.

Schools: Access for Inspectors

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to outline the legal position of school inspectors entering school premises.

(AQW 7561/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A school must be open at reasonable times for inspection.

The Education and Libraries (N I) Order 1986 Article 102 states that 'Every relevant establishment shall be open at all reasonable times to inspection.' The Act states that 'relative establishment' means among others, 'a school'.

December Monitoring Round

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Education how the additional monies re-allocated as a result of the December Monitoring Round will be used in terms of educational programmes.

(AQW 7572/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department successfully bid to the Department of Finance and Personnel for £3.7m to offset significant increases in utilities costs in both the education and youth sectors. This additional funding means that frontline services are protected.

Pupils: Dental Hygiene

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education (i) to outline the role of the education system in improving pupils' dental hygiene; and (ii) whether he intends to make any changes around this issue during the 2011-15 period.

(AQW 7575/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Public health policy, including the improvement of our oral health, is set by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS).

The education system plays an important role in improving pupils' dental hygiene by facilitating the provision of health care services, including dental inspections, and engaging with colleagues in the health and social care family in their schemes for improving oral health. These schemes focus, primarily, on fluoride toothpaste and are based, mainly, in the primary and pre-

school settings. I have been advised that the health and social care family intend to refine and improve these schemes and to continue to provide them in school settings.

In early years, the Sure Start scheme works with families with children aged 0 – 4 by supporting parents in caring for their children and promoting children's health and development. This includes plans and activities to promote oral health.

Within the school setting, the Curriculum provides pupils with opportunities to acquire skills to keep themselves healthy through the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding and Learning for Life and Work areas of learning. There are educational resources for schools which help children to understand the importance of maintaining good oral health.

Furthermore, eating healthily and drinking water can contribute to good oral health. Nutritional standards for school lunches and other food and drinks in schools have been in place since 2008 and all schools must ensure that pupils have easy access at all times to free, fresh drinking water.

In light of the provision already in place, I have no plans to make any changes.

Primary Schools: Grounds

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools are situated in grounds that are (i) greater than two hectares; and (ii) less than, and including, two hectares.

(AQW 7579/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are 66 primary schools that are situated in grounds that are greater than two hectares, and 780 primary schools that are situated in grounds that are less than and including two hectares.

Schools: Policy Announcements

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education whether his Department should communicate more directly with schools before policy announcements are made in the media.

(AQW 7598/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am committed to ensuring schools and other key stakeholders are kept appropriately informed of policy decisions as they are made. My Department works to ensure that policy decisions that affect schools are communicated directly to schools in a timely and appropriate manner. The approach will vary depending on the nature of each announcement and bearing in mind also the need to ensure that significant decisions are notified first to the Assembly itself.

Irish-medium Schools: Attendance

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Education, for relevant each district council area, to detail (i) the maximum capacity of each Irish-medium school; (ii) the number of pupils attending each Irish-medium school; and (iii) the number of pupils, per head of population, attending Irish-medium schools.

(AQW 7618/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information requested in the question is detailed in the tables below.

Table A.

Approved and actual enrolments at Irish medium primary schools, by Local Government District – 2011/12

Local Government District	School name	Approved enrolment		Actual enrolment	
		Nursery	Reception - Year 7	Nursery	Reception - Year 7
Antrim	Gaelscoil Ghleann Darach	0	71	0	66
Belfast	Bunscoil An Tseibhe Dhuibh	26	203	26	150
Belfast	Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain	0	174	0	114
Belfast	Bunscoil Mhic Reachtain	0	87	0	61
Belfast	Bunscoil Phobal Feirste	52	406	52	228
Belfast	Gaelscoil an Lonnain	0	71	0	41
Belfast	Gaelscoil Na Bhfal	26	290	27	157
Belfast	Gaelscoil na Mona	0	110	0	83
Belfast	Scoil An Droichid	26	125	25	118
Cookstown	Gaelscoil an tSeanchaí	0	33	0	29

Local Government District	School name	Approved enrolment		Actual enrolment	
		Nursery	Reception - Year 7	Nursery	Reception - Year 7
Derry	Bunscoil Cholmcille	26	196	26	100
Derry	Gaelscoil Eadain Mhoir	26	145	26	120
Derry	Gaelscoil na Daroige	0	81	0	54
Down	Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche	0	87	0	75
Dungannon	Gaelscoil Aodha Rua	0	12*	0	12
Dungannon	Gaelscoil Uí Neill	26	145	26	146
Fermanagh	Bunscoil an Traonaigh	0	58	0	31
Limavady	Gaelscoil Leim an Mhadaidh	0	18*	0	18
Lisburn	Scoil na Fuiseoige	0	145	0	107
Magherafelt	Gaelscoil na Spéiríní	0	58	0	27
Moyle	Gaelscoil an Chaistil	0	105	0	80
Newry & Mourne	Bunscoil an Iuir	0	129	0	92
Newtownabbey	Gaelscoil Eanna	0	67	0	70
Omagh	Gaelscoil na gCrann	26	87	26	84
Strabane	Gaelscoil Uí Dhochartaigh	26	150	24	128

Table B.**Approved and actual enrolments at Irish medium post-primary schools, by Local Government District – 2011/12**

Local Government District	School name	Approved enrolment Year 8 - 15	Actual enrolment Year 8 - 15
Belfast	Colaiste Feirste	585	550

Table C.**Pupils enrolled in Irish Medium primary and post-primary schools per head of population attending all schools, by Local Government District – 2011/12**

Local Government District	Irish medium primary schools	Irish medium post- primary schools
Antrim	0.012	0
Belfast	0.042	0.019
Cookstown	0.008	0
Derry	0.027	0
Down	0.011	0
Dungannon	0.030	0
Fermanagh	0.005	0
Limavady	0.006	0
Lisburn	0.010	0
Magherafelt	0.006	0
Moyle	0.053	0
Newry & Mourne	0.009	0
Newtownabbey	0.010	0

Local Government District	Irish medium primary schools	Irish medium post- primary schools
North Down	0.000	0
Omagh	0.021	0
Strabane	0.039	0

Source: NI school census for actual enrolments. DE School Access Team for approved enrolment figures.

Notes:

- * denotes actual enrolment. These schools received approval to open after the 2011/12 enrolment numbers were approved.
- Capacity has been interpreted as approved enrolment.
- Children in receipt of a statement of special educational needs, admitted on appeal or by direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body are supernumerary to a school's approved enrolment number.
- In addition to the figures listed, there were 708 pupils in Irish medium units in other primary schools and 212 pupils enrolled in Irish medium units in other post-primary schools.
- There were also 473 funded children in funded places in Irish medium voluntary and private preschool centres.
- Rates per head of population in Table 3 are based on the number of children attending nursery, primary and post-primary schools in the area specified.

Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of special educational needs co-ordinators employed in each Education and Library Board area in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7627/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executives of the education and library boards have confirmed that they do not hold details on the number of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).

The Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs details that all mainstream schools are required to have a designated teacher who fulfils the role of SENCO. The specific arrangements regarding this are, however, at the discretion of each school.

Recruitment Agencies: Payments

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education to detail the amount paid to recruitment agencies for (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time posts in his Department, and its arm's-length bodies, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7647/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The amount paid to recruitment agencies for (i) full time; and (ii) part-time posts in my Department and its arms length bodies, in each of the last three financial years is provided in the table below.

Financial Year	2008/09 £'000		2009/10 £'000		2010/11 £'000	
	Part -Time	Full- Time	Part -Time	Full- Time	Part -Time	Full- Time
Department		194		247		103
BELB		734		584		592
NEELB		513		545		478
SEELB		665		521		395
SELB		194		308		346
WELB		347		275		203
CCEA	-	-	-	-	-	-
CCMS	13	3				
Staff Commission	-	-	-	-	-	-

Financial Year	2008/09 £'000		2009/10 £'000		2010/11 £'000	
	Part -Time	Full- Time	Part -Time	Full- Time	Part -Time	Full- Time
YCNI	5		10		13	
Exceptional Special Circumstances Body						11
GTCNI		6	2	17	24	5
Totals	18	2,656	12	2,497	37	2,133

Notes:

- 0 Figures provided by the ELBs include costs, if applicable, associated with Libraries in 2008/09.
- 1 Details of the split between part-time and full-time were not available from the ELBs and all costs have therefore been attributed to full-time.

Teachers: Redundancy Package

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of how the recent redundancy package for teachers will impact on, and differ from, the existing transferred redundancy arrangements; (ii) whether it takes a redundancy to arise in the retiring teacher's school, or eligibility through a transferred redundancy, for a teacher to be able to apply; (iii) how the additional £120 million for education over three years will impact on the redundancy scheme; and (iv) whether there will be equality of access and eligibility across all schools for teachers aged over 55 who wish to retire.

(AQW 7652/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) As in previous years, the employing authorities will be operating a transferred redundancy scheme to allow teachers to volunteer for redundancy even if their own post is not being made redundant or there are no redundant posts within their school. This year a central clearing house will be operated across all employing authorities for those volunteers who cannot be accommodated initially within each employing authority.
- (ii) It is not possible to guarantee that every teacher who volunteers for redundancy will be accommodated, as it ultimately depends on the employing authorities being able to match volunteers to teachers in redundant posts. There is no early retirement scheme open to any teacher who wishes to leave the profession.
- (iii) The additional £120m will go directly to school budgets. While this will alleviate the financial challenges facing schools, it will not eradicate them. It is anticipated that the additional funding will significantly reduce the number of teacher redundancies that would otherwise have been required over the budget period.
- (iv) The transferred redundancy process is intended to help ensure that redundancies are managed on a voluntary basis and limit, as far as possible, the need for compulsory redundancies. It is not an early retirement scheme for teachers aged 55 or over.

Shared Education: Advisory Forum

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of meetings his Department has held over the last six months in relation to the establishment of the Advisory Forum on Shared Education; and who attended any such meetings.

(AQW 7653/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The commitment to establish a ministerial advisory group on shared education was included in the draft Programme for Government, which was published on 17th November 2011. Since then I have had a number of discussions with Departmental Officials on how to take forward the commitment.

GCSE Agricultural Courses

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Education whether he is aware of the difficulties which schools are experiencing in relation to meeting the full criteria for GCSE agricultural courses for 14-16 year old pupils and securing farm visits due to health and safety and other requirements,

(AQW 7701/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am advised by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment that there are no GCSE courses offered here that would be deemed as agricultural courses. I can also confirm that neither CCEA nor my Department has received information or correspondence from any school in relation to difficulties in the delivery by schools of GCSEs or indeed other qualifications associated with agriculture.

It could be that the member's concerns relate to a course other than a GCSE course that is being delivered collaboratively, for example, by a school in partnership with a Further Education College. In such cases a school must satisfy itself that the course

itself is suitable for children and that the arrangements in place for its delivery are also suitable. If the member wishes to write to me to elaborate on her concerns in a more specific manner I will certainly look into these.

Age-weighted Pupil Unit

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 6292/11-15, AQW 6293/11-15, and AQW 6294/11-15, to detail (i) the range and extent of the non-Age Weighted Pupil Unit increases that resulted in a reduction on the Age Weighted Pupil Unit value, which is significantly below the funding allocated in his Department's budget; and (ii) what pressures remain in relation to this matter. [R]

(AQW 7713/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) Funding is distributed to schools under the Common Funding Formula arrangements, using a range of factors to reflect identified needs, ensuring an equitable distribution of available funds within the overall level of funding available to schools under the Aggregated Schools Budget. The details of the Scheme are available from the Departmental website. The cash value of the Age Weighted Pupil Unit in 2012/13 is £16 lower than 2011/12 for three main reasons:
- The Aggregated Schools Budget for 2012/13 was £2.4m lower than 2011/12;
 - The funding required for non-AWPU funding factors increased by £4.44m, compared to the 2011/12 year. This net increase in non-AWPU funding factors reflected increased needs for TSN, Foundation Stage, Irish-medium Unit support, Administrative costs, Landlord Maintenance and VAT; and
 - the total weighted pupil AWPU to be funded within the formula was marginally higher than in the previous year.
- (ii) A Savings Delivery Plan has been developed across the Budget 2011-15 period to deliver the reductions necessary to ensure that the Department remains within budget. On 12 January 2012, following talks convened by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I announced additional funding for schools over the next 3 years. As a result of this additional funding, and the reallocation of £40m to schools from internal resources that I announced last November, the level of savings to be delivered over the next 3 years has reduced. Even with this additional funding the Department still faces a real terms reduction of £180m (9.2%) in resource funding by 2014/15, compared to the 2010/11 baseline. It is essential therefore that Boards of Governors continue to plan and make the necessary decisions required to ensure they live within their budgets.

Teachers: Working as Examiners

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many retired teachers have been recruited as examiners for local examination bodies; and (ii) the costs associated with the posts, in each year since 2005.

(AQW 7719/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) The table below shows the number of retired teachers that CCEA has engaged as examiners each year since 2005.

Year	Number of retired teachers who are examiners
2005	250
2006	300
2007	338
2008	339
2009	347
2010	354
2011	364

- (ii) This information is not readily available and could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee: Memento

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what arrangements he intends to put in place to enable school children to receive a memento of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee.

(AQW 7720/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to put such arrangements in place. I will leave it to individual schools to consider this issue.

Supervisory Assistants: Payment

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools in the (i) South Eastern Education and Library Board area; and (ii) Southern Education and Library Board area which received a letter about the budgetary situation and payment for supervisory assistants.

(AQW 7734/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The following schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area received a letter about the budgetary situation and payment for supervisory assistants:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| ■ Bangor Academy & Sixth Form College | ■ Newtownbreda High School |
| ■ Blackwater Integrated College | ■ Priory Integrated College |
| ■ De La Salle High School | ■ Regent House |
| ■ Down High School | ■ Saintfield High School |
| ■ Dundonald High School | ■ Shimna College |
| ■ Dunmurry High School | ■ St Colman's High School |
| ■ Fort Hill Integrated College | ■ St Colmille's High School |
| ■ Glastry College | ■ St Colm's High School |
| ■ Glenlola Collegiate | ■ St Columbanus' College |
| ■ Knockbreda High School | ■ St Columba's College |
| ■ Laurelhill Community College | ■ St Malachy's High School |
| ■ Lisnagarvey High School | ■ St Mary's High School |
| ■ Movilla High School | ■ St Patrick's Academy |
| ■ Nendrum College | ■ St Patrick's Grammar School |

The Southern Education and Library Board have advised that it is not aware of any correspondence issuing which would match this description. The Board's Finance Department has issued a number of updates to schools re the changing budgetary situation but nothing specifically linking this to the issue of Special Needs Classroom Assistants.

Statement of Educational Need: Psychologist Input

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education, for the East Belfast and the Castlereagh Borough Council areas, to detail (i) the role of educational psychologists in the issuing of Statements of Educational Need; (ii) the methodology by which this resource is apportioned to each school; (iii) the number of hours of educational psychology services available to each school; and (iv) the reasons for the use of stopwatches by those providing educational psychology services.

(AQW 7786/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) and South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) are responsible for the delivery of educational psychology services in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency and Castlereagh Borough Council area.

The role of educational psychologists (EPs) is primarily to provide the psychological advice required in the assessment of a child's special educational needs (SEN). A statement of SEN, where this is required, will be issued by the education and library board (ELB) based on the EP's and other professionals' advice.

At Stages 4 and 5 of the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (COP), when the ELB considers the need for a statutory assessment and where appropriate, a statement of SEN, referrals are received in both boards following consultation with an EP and are responded to in the order in which they are received within prescribed statutory timescales.

At Stage 3 of the COP, when schools are supported by specialists from outside the school including an EP, both boards' educational psychology services employ a time allocation model of delivery. Working closely with their named EP, schools prioritise their needs based on the principles of consultation, equity of access and flexibility. Psychology support using this model is apportioned based on school enrolment, social deprivation and educational achievement. In the SEELB, referrals from the post-primary sector are responded to in the order in which they are received.

The number of hours available to each school in the East Belfast parliamentary constituency and Castlereagh Borough Council area for Stage 3 referrals to EPs is detailed in the table below.

The Chief Executive of the BELB has confirmed that stopwatches may be used in the administration of timed tests undertaken by children to inform assessments. The Chief Executive of the SEELB has confirmed that there is no use of stopwatches in the delivery of educational psychology services.

Primary Sector

School name	Hours/Year*
Dundonald Primary School	50

School name	Hours/Year*
Gilnahirk Primary School	34
Cregagh Primary School	21
Lisnasharragh Primary School	25
Braniel Primary School	25
Tullycarnet Primary School	7
Brooklands Primary School	54
Knockbreda Primary School	20
Belvoir Park Primary School	36
Cairnshill Primary School	31
Lead Hill Primary School	9
Carryduff Primary School	14
St Joseph's Primary School	22
St Bernard's Primary School	26
St Ita's Primary School	26
Loughview Integrated Primary School	33
Moneyrea Primary School	12
Millennium Integrated Primary School	19
Belmont Primary School	10
Euston Street Primary School	16
Strandtown Primary School	36
Elmgrove Primary School	26
Avoniel Primary School	11
Orangefield Primary School	15
Greenwood Primary School	10
Knocknagoney Primary School	10
Dundela Infants School	10
Victoria Park Primary School	14
St Joseph's Primary School	10
St Matthew's Primary School	17
Campbell College Junior School	10
Strathearn School	10

Post-Primary Sector

School name	Hours/Year*
Dundonald High School	n/a
Our Lady and St Patrick's College	n/a
Knockbreda High School	n/a
Newtownbreda High School	n/a

School name	Hours/Year*
Ashfield Girls' High School	20
Ashfield Boys' High School	35
Orangefield High School	25
Grosvenor Grammar School	20
Bloomfield Collegiate	15
Campbell College	15
Strathearn School	15

* BELB's time allocation relates solely to contact time with the child being assessed.

SEELB's time allocation includes contact time with the child being assessed as well as other activities such as preparation, contact with parents and professionals and drafting of reports.

Supervisory Assistants: Post-primary Schools

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Education (i) what consultation took place in relation to the termination of direct Education and Library Board funding for supervisory assistants in post-primary schools in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area; and (ii) under what circumstances the funding will be reinstated.

(AQW 7788/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Chief Executive of the South-Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) wrote to the Principals of all Post-Primary schools in the SEELB on 28 September 2011 to advise them that the Board Commissioners were reviewing the payment of Supervisory Assistants. The SEELB proposed that as '..... Supervisory Assistance is a universal requirement for pupils attending mainstream school, in most circumstances, it should be the responsibility of the management of the school to ensure and fund adequate adult supervision during breaks including the lunch time period.' Principals were invited to submit their views/comments on the proposal.

The SEELB have advised that they have received 10 responses from school principals.

The SEELB Board Commissioners at their meeting on 24 January 2012 agreed the following:

- (i) That officers in Special Education within the SEELB will consider requests for specific supervisory assistant support in respect of pupils with statements.
- (ii) In the event of Special Education officers being satisfied that supervisory assistant support is required for a named pupil, the associated costs will be charged to the Board.
- (iii) That from 06 February 2012 (the start of the next lunar pay period) the cost of all other supervisory assistants in post-primary schools are coded to a school's delegated budget.

Civil Service: Posts

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Education how many Civil Service posts existed in his Department at (i) Administrative Assistant; (ii) Administrative Officer; (iii) Executive Officer 2; (iv) Executive Officer 1; (v) Staff Officer; (vi) Deputy Principal; (vii) Grade 7; and (viii) Grade 6 levels, at the beginning of (a) 2007; and (b) 2012, broken down by local Council area.

(AQW 7799/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The number of full-time equivalent posts in the Department of Education as at 1 January 2007 and 1 January 2012 are detailed below.

Department of Education Posts as at 1 January 2007 (FTE)

	Rathgael House North Down Borough Council	Waterside House Derry City Council	Purdy's Lane Castlereagh Borough Council	Total
AA	73.88	27.36	0.68	101.92
AO	91.28	53.84	0.00	145.12
EO2	92.60	22.20	0.00	114.80
EO1	55.52	12.68	0.00	68.20
SO	74.80	4.00	1.36	80.16

	Rathgael House North Down Borough Council	Waterside House Derry City Council	Purdy's Lane Castlereagh Borough Council	Total
DP	78.92	3.00	1.68	83.60
G7	35.06	1.00	0.00	36.06
G6	61.00	0.00	0.00	61.00
Total	563.06	124.08	3.72	690.86

Department of Education Posts as at 1 January 2012 (FTE)

	Rathgael House North Down Borough Council	Waterside House Derry City Council	Purdy's Lane Castlereagh Borough Council	TOTAL
AA	30.43	18.50	0.00	48.93
AO	64.80	52.57	0.00	117.37
EO2	65.42	23.93	0.00	89.35
EO1	46.96	10.68	0.00	57.64
SO	72.84	4.00	1.00	77.84
DP	81.94	3.00	0.00	84.94
G7	39.10	1.00	2.00	42.10
G6	59.00	0.00	0.00	59.00
Total	460.49	113.68	3.00	577.17

Woodlands Language Unit: Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline the rationale for the proposed closure of the Woodlands Language Unit in the Foyle constituency; and what provision will be made to replace the Unit to ensure that the young people who currently avail of its services are not disadvantaged.

(AQW 7814/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Woodlands Language Unit provides speech and language support for children who do not have statements of Special Educational Need (SEN), and who are enrolled in mainstream primary schools. Its location, within the grounds of Belmont House Special School, is considered unsuitable by the Western Education and Library Board as the current approach for children who need such support is to provide it at mainstream primary schools.

The Western Board has therefore been in discussion over the past two years with the Board of Governors of Belmont House Special School about the relocation of the 4 speech and language classes to mainstream primary school locations in both the controlled and maintained sectors.

The Western Board intends to publish a supporting statutory Development Proposal, which will afford anyone with an interest an opportunity to comment directly to the Department. However, at this stage, the issues involved are a matter for the Board to consider.

I understand that this issue has been the subject of public comment and concern and I am assured that the WELB will be writing to parents to clarify the position.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the current (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in his Department's Equality Unit.

(AQW 7819/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Three officers work in the Department of Education's Equality Team.

In 2010/2011, the Administration Salary Cost for the officers was £105,453.

In addition to equality duties the officers are also involved in issues that relate to Europe and North-South cooperation.

Extended Schools Programme

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how his Department intends to encourage children from less advantaged backgrounds to engage in out-of-school activities to enhance their academic performance.

(AQW 7823/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Extended Schools programme, which has a clear focus on improving education outcomes, enables those schools that draw pupils from some of the most disadvantaged communities to provide a range of services and programmes, outside of the traditional school day, to help meet the needs of pupils, their families and wider communities. During 2011/12, 454 schools received funding from the Department as part of the Extended Schools Programme.

The Department also supports 2 Full Service pilot programmes in North and West Belfast as part of continuing efforts to address the needs of disadvantaged communities and narrow the gap in achievement levels.

The Department provides funding for youth work through the ELB Youth Service and the Youth Council. Youth work provision, although relevant to all young people, is particularly relevant to young people who are disadvantaged. The Department is currently developing a new policy for the youth service: "Priorities for Youth Work in Education", which will provide a clearer focus on targeting disadvantage and addressing the needs of those who are most at risk of underachievement.

Integrated Schools

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education to list the integrated schools which are currently operating (i) at or beyond; or (ii) below, their designated enrolment capacity.

(AQW 7827/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The integrated schools which for the 2011/12 school year are operating at or beyond; or below, their designated enrolment capacity are as detailed in the tables below.

Integrated Primary Schools Currently Operating at or Beyond their Approved Enrolment Number

School Name	Actual Enrolment	Approved Enrolment
Drumlins Integrated Primary School	122	116
Forge Integrated Primary School	257	250
Rowandale Integrated Primary School	127	116

Integrated Post Primary Schools Currently Operating at or Beyond their Approved Enrolment Number

School Name	Actual Enrolment	Approved Enrolment
Drumragh College	585	580
Fort Hill College	856	850
Priory College	471	450
Shimna Integrated College	490	480
Strangford Integrated College	500	500
Ulidia Integrated College	502	500

Integrated Primary Schools Currently Operating Below their Approved Enrolment Number

School Name	Actual Enrolment	Approved Enrolment
Acorn Integrated Primary School	200	203
All Childrens Integrated Primary School	206	212
Annsborough Primary School	45	85
Ballycastle Integrated Primary School	129	158
Ballymoney Controlled Integrated Primary School	264	414
Bangor Central Primary School	575	588
Braidside Integrated Primary School	335	348
Bridge Integrated Primary School	398	406

School Name	Actual Enrolment	Approved Enrolment
Carhill Integrated Primary School	30	94
Carnlough Controlled Integrated Primary School	40	62
Cedar Integrated Primary School	179	196
Cliftonville Integrated Primary School	165	338
Corran Integrated Primary School	182	203
Cranmore Integrated Primary School	174	203
Crumlin Controlled Integrated Primary School	163	374
Enniskillen Integrated Primary School	211	244
Fort Hill Integrated Primary School	209	240
Glencairg Integrated Primary School	212	252
Glengormley Integrated Primary School	212	446
Groarty Primary School	40	63
Hazelwood Primary School	392	406
Kilbroney Integrated Primary School	90	140
Kircubbin Primary School	120	152
Loughview Integrated Primary School	399	406
Maine Integrated Primary School	105	120
Millennium Integrated Primary School	192	203
Millstrand Integrated Primary School	155	232
Oakgrove Integrated Primary School	380	400
Oakwood Integrated Primary School	195	203
Omagh Integrated Primary School	310	319
Phoenix Integrated Primary School	158	160
Portadown Integrated Primary School	198	203
Portaferry Integrated Primary School	53	101
Rathenraw Integrated Primary School	56	223
Roe Valley Integrated Primary School	145	156
Round Tower Integrated Primary School	267	276
Saints & Scholars Integrated Primary School	188	270
Spires Integrated Primary School	193	203
Windmill Integrated Primary School	197	210

Integrated Post-Primary Schools Currently Operating Below their Approved Enrolment Number

School Name	Actual Enrolment	Approved Enrolment
Blackwater Integrated College	242	400
Brownlow Integrated College	352	450
Crumlin Integrated College	214	400
Erne Integrated College	390	400

School Name	Actual Enrolment	Approved Enrolment
Hazelwood College	810	825
Integrated College Dungannon	462	500
Lagan College	1199	1200
Malone Integrated College	672	800
New-Bridge Integrated College	495	500
North Coast Integrated College	436	500
Oakgrove Integrated College	778	800
Parkhall Integrated College	665	735
Slemish College	717	720
Sperrin Integrated College	471	500

Source: NI school census for actual enrolments. DE School Access Team for approved enrolment figures.

Notes:

- 7 Capacity has been interpreted as approved enrolment.
- 8 Actual enrolment figures exclude children in receipt of a statement of special educational needs, admitted on appeal or by direction of the Exceptional Circumstances Body as they are supernumerary to a school's approved enrolment number.

Integrated Schools: Demand for Places

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education why parental demand for places in integrated schools is not being satisfied despite unfilled capacity in the integrated schools requested.

(AQW 7830/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Parental demand for places in all schools is limited by a school's admissions and enrolment numbers. These are set by the Department of Education as the definition of the school's capacity in terms of pupil numbers, in consultation with a school's Board of Governors and the Education and Library Board and CCMS as appropriate. Except for very rarely used exceptions, admissions legislation effectively requires that school must admit up to these numbers if the demand is there. Without exception schools may not exceed these numbers.

Accordingly, parental demand for places in integrated schools that may not be met will be (as it is in all schools) because demand has exceeded the number of available places. Unmet demand will not be despite the availability of places, defined by admissions and enrolment numbers. In the 2011/12 school year in the integrated sector, the provision of places in the integrated sector was such that the success rate for parental demand in (if taken to be expressed in parents' first choice of school) was 93% in terms of primary schools and 88% in terms of post primary schools.

Teachers: STEM Vacancies

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of temporary and full-time vacancies for teachers of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects in post-primary schools, in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 7848/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information is contained in the table below.

Number of Teacher Vacancies in the 2011/12 Academic Year in Post-Primary Schools at 7 November 2011 by Education and Library Board²

Subject	Type of Vacancy	Education and Library Board Area					
		Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Mathematics ³	Full-time Permanent	0	0	2	0	1	3
	Full-time Temporary ⁶	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Part-time Permanent	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Temporary ⁶	1	0	0	0	0	1

Subject	Type of Vacancy	Education and Library Board Area					
		Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
Science ⁴	Full-time Permanent	1	0	0	0	1	2
	Full-time Temporary ⁶	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Part-time Permanent	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Temporary ⁶	2	0	1	1	0	4
Design and Technology ⁵ (including Engineering)	Full-time Permanent	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Full-time Temporary ⁶	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Permanent	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Temporary ⁶	0	0	0	0	0	0
Information Technology	Full-time Permanent	0	0	1	1	0	2
	Full-time Temporary ⁶	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Part-time Permanent	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Temporary ⁶	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total Vacancies	Full-time Permanent	2	0	3	1	2	8
	Full-time Temporary ⁶	0	1	1	0	1	3
	Part-time Permanent	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Temporary ⁶	3	0	1	1	0	5

Source: Teacher Vacancy Survey

Notes:

- 1 All figures refer to vacancies in schools on 7th November 2011.
- 2 Number of vacancies is for classroom teachers only.
- 3 Mathematics includes Statistics but excludes special needs provision in Mathematics.
- 4 Science includes Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Integrated or combined science and other science.
- 5 Design and Technology includes woodworking, metalwork, technical drawing and other technical subjects such as building, engineering and motor mechanics.
- 6 Temporary vacancies include temporary positions of 1 year or more and temporary positions of less than 1 year.
- 7 Engineering is included within Design and Technology. A breakdown for Engineering and Technology is therefore not feasible.
- 8 The STEM subject classifications are based on those in Annex 2 of the 2009 Report of the STEM review for the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning.

Pupil:Computer Ratio

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the current ratio of pupil to computer in schools; (ii) the desired pupil to computer ratio; (iii) if the target ratio is being met, and if not, how his Department plans to meet its target.

(AQW 7853/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd:

- (i) C2k has advised that based on the PCs and laptops provided by C2k the average computer to pupil ratio in Primary Schools is 1:6. For Post-Primary Schools the ratio is 1:5.
Schools enhance their hardware provision by making direct purchases via the C2k's managed service school catalogue and when such purchases are taken into account the ratio for Primary schools is 1:5 and for Post-Primary Schools it is 1:3.
The ratio in Special Schools is 1:2.
Schools can also purchase items not in the C2k catalogue and when they do so the above ratios are improved. The Department does not hold information on such purchases.

- (ii) & (iii) The Department does not have a desired pupil to computer ratio. It is up to schools to determine their ICT requirements taking into account their teaching practices which will vary from school to school. The Department has ensured that there is a level of ICT provision within all schools, supplied directly through the managed service operated by C2k. As mentioned at (i) above, schools can decide to supplement this provision using their delegated budgets.

The latest C2k contract will herald a new flexibility for schools providing opportunities to connect a wider range of digital devices to the managed service. The new contract is not yet finalised, but should be in place from April 2012, when a full implementation plan will be in place.

Schools: Repairs Needed in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the schools in the North Down area that are in need of major repairs; and the associated costs.

(AQW 7861/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: According to the Education and Library Boards' estate management system, the current maintenance backlog in schools in the North Down area is as follows:

School	Maintenance Backlog (£)
Bangor Nursery	53,545
Hollywood Nursery	1,500
Trinity Nursery	63,920
Ballymagee Primary	3,290
Ballyvester Primary	28,550
Bloomfield Road Primary	313,680
Clandeboy Primary	274,395
Crawfordsburn Primary	20,450
Donaghadee Primary	139,580
Grange Park Primary	256,540
Hollywood Primary	138,769
Kilcooley Primary	219,047
Millisle Primary	125,235
Rathmore Primary	367,230
Redburn Primary	604,405
Saint Anne's Primary	29,615
Saint Comgall's Primary	5,190
Saint Malachy's Primary	210,958
Saint Patrick's Primary	298,945
Bangor Central Integrated Primary	143,850
Glenraig Integrated Primary	61,900
Saint Columbanus College	527,685
Priory College	561,885
Bangor Grammar School	4,791,098
Clifton Special	3,700
Total	9,244,962

There is a continuous, actively managed programme of planned maintenance across the schools' estate that will affect the overall backlog maintenance (currently £310m). In addition, reactive maintenance is required to address unexpected emergency issues such as a heating system failing and the cost of such work is not reflected in the maintenance backlog. Whilst the

backlog has not reduced substantially since our response to your previous AQW in January of this year, you should note that the Board may have carried out work of a reactive nature or repairs required for health and safety reasons.

Human Resources

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Education how many staff are employed in his Department's Human Resources section.
(AQW 7878/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: There are currently 10 full-time staff and 2 part-time staff employed in the Department's Human Resources section.

Schools: Additional Budget Allocations

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education from where the additional funding of £120 million for the schools' budget will be sourced.
(AQW 7886/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: This will be a matter for the Finance Minister to consider in the first instance and so I am unable to comment.

Teachers: Pay Increase

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will provide additional funding to schools to cover the cost of the one percent increase in teachers' pay in 2012 and 2013.
(AQW 7887/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: In the June 2010 emergency budget the Government announced a pay freeze on all public sector workers earning more than £21,000. The pay freeze for teachers is effective from 1 September 2011 to 31 August 2013.

In agreeing Budget 2010 allocations my predecessor made provision for increases in the teachers' paybill across the 4 year period based on pay assumptions available at that time.

On 29 November 2011 the Chancellor announced in his Autumn Statement that public sector pay awards will be set at an average of 1% for each of the two years after the current pay freeze comes to an end.

Pay increases for teachers are only implemented after negotiations at the Teachers' Negotiating Committee. Negotiations on teachers' pay increases after 31 August 2013 have not yet commenced. Once these have been completed, allocations already provided for teachers' pay awards can be reviewed.

Schools: Delegated Spend

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to increase the proportion of his budget which goes directly to schools' budgets in delegated spend.
(AQW 7888/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: On 12 January, following talks convened by the First Minister and deputy First Minister I announced an additional funding package for schools over the next 3 years. This is over and above the £40m that I reallocated to schools last November from within the education budget.

As these additional funds will only help alleviate rather than eradicate the financial pressures on schools, I fully intend to continue to argue the case for further investment in the education sector. I have also asked my officials to carry out a review right across the education budget with the primary focus being on delivering additional funding for the classroom.

Free School Meals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether his Department recognises that eligibility for free school meals is an unreliable indicator of social deprivation.
(AQW 7889/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department takes the view that entitlement to free school meals is in fact an effective indicator of social disadvantage for a number of reasons.

These include the fact that it is highly correlated with the multiple deprivation measure and, as it relates to an individual pupil, is more robust than a spatial measure which assumes everyone in an area is alike. FSME is also updated regularly and available to us as part of the census return.

Age-weighted Pupil Unit

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education why the cut to the Age Weighted Pupil Unit is more severe than the cut to the overall aggregated schools budget.
(AQW 7890/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Aggregated Schools Budget (ASB) is distributed to schools using the Common Funding Formula, as outlined in the Common Funding Scheme. The details of the Scheme are available from the Departmental website. The Age Weighted Pupil Unit (AWPU) cash value is determined by:

- the overall level of funding - the ASB;
- the amount of this budget used to fund other 'non AWPU' funding factors within the formula (such as Premises, TSN, Small Schools support and Foundation Stage);
- a range of demographic values such as the number and profile of pupils. Higher 'weighted' pupils such as 6th form and nursery-age pupils, alongside a moderate increase in the number of pupils in schools, results in a further reduction in the AWPU cash value.

There is, therefore, not a linear relationship between changes in the ASB and the AWPU cash value.

Fuel Hedging

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education whether his Department, and its arm's-length bodies, are engaged in fuel hedging to manage fluctuations in fuel prices.

(AQW 7897/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education and its arm's-length bodies are not engaged in fuel hedging to manage fluctuations in fuel prices.

Entitlement Framework: Transport Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what arrangements are in place to facilitate travel to an alternative post-primary school, when a pupil's nearest school does not provide the subjects on its curriculum that are required for a chosen career.

(AQW 7905/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The focus of the post 14 curriculum is very firmly on meeting the needs of pupils by offering them a wider range of courses under the entitlement framework. On the assumption that there may be costs associated with planning and delivering an expanded curricular offer through collaboration, my Department provides earmarked funds to schools which may be used to cover any aspect of the entitlement framework including travel costs when a suitable course is delivered in partnership with the most appropriate provider. My priority is to see tangible and measurable outcomes in terms of course delivery to meet the needs of pupils through the appropriate and cost effective use of the entitlement framework resources. We do not have school catchment areas here.

Entitlement Framework: Transport Costs

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Education what financial restrictions are in place to ensure that post-primary schools do not use their resources to provide school transport in other post-primary school catchment areas.

(AQW 7906/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The focus of the post 14 curriculum is very firmly on meeting the needs of pupils by offering them a wider range of courses under the entitlement framework. On the assumption that there may be costs associated with planning and delivering an expanded curricular offer through collaboration, my Department provides earmarked funds to schools which may be used to cover any aspect of the entitlement framework including travel costs when a suitable course is delivered in partnership with the most appropriate provider. My priority is to see tangible and measurable outcomes in terms of course delivery to meet the needs of pupils through the appropriate and cost effective use of the entitlement framework resources. We do not have school catchment areas here.

Teachers: Working in Retirement

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many teachers, who have taken early retirement, have subsequently taken up temporary teaching positions in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7949/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I refer you to your question AQW 778/11-15 and my earlier response which was published in the Official Report on 1 July 2011.

Schools: Accrued Money

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Education to detail the accrued money held by each school, or by his Department on behalf of each school, in the (i) Belfast Education and Library Board; and (ii) the South Eastern Education and Library Board areas.

(AQW 7966/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The amounts which individual schools have accrued as delegated budget savings are routinely available from the Local Management of Schools Outturn Statements which are published on Education and Library Board Websites. The latest full financial year information currently available is in respect of the 2010/11 year. In respect of those schools for which the Belfast

Education and Library Board (BELB) and South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) are Funding Authorities, I have reproduced electronic links to the Outturn Statements below.

BELB

http://www.belb.org.uk/Downloads/lms_ot_1011.pdf

http://www.belb.org.uk/Downloads/lms_ot_1011_p3.pdf

SEELB

http://80.4.159.11/school_man_new/pdfs/outturn2011.pdf

Spend on Fuel

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education how much his Department, and its arm's-length bodies has spent on fuel in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7971/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The amount spent on fuel by the Department of Education and its arm's length bodies in each of the last five years is detailed in the table below.

Fuel Costs**£'000**

Financial Years	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
BELB	196	178	228	222	272
NEELB	410	438	541	469	603
SEELB	480	532	633	616	694
SELB	760	869	992	976	988
WELB	1,096	946	1,448	1,222	1,335
CCEA	3	3	4	4	5
CCMS	0	0	0	0	0
Staff Commission	0	0	0	0	0
YCNi	0	0	0	0	0
GTC	0	0	0	0	0
Exceptional Circumstances Body	0	0	0	0	0
DE	0	0	0	0	0
Totals	2,945	2,966	3,846	3,509	3,897

Notes:

- 1 The above figures cover diesel and petrol only as confirmed by your office.
- 2 Figures provided by the ELBs include costs, if applicable, associated with the Public Library Service up to and including 2008/09.
- 3 As the amounts provided are in round thousands, costs totalling less than £500, in any year for any ALB, have not been included.

Teachers: English Vacancies

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of temporary and full-time vacancies for teachers of English in post-primary schools in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 7989/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The information is contained in the table below.

NUMBER OF TEACHER VACANCIES IN THE 2011/12 ACADEMIC YEAR IN POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS AT 7 NOVEMBER 2011 BY EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARD2

Subject	Type of Vacancy	Education and Library Board Area					
		Belfast	Western	North Eastern	South Eastern	Southern	Total
English ³	Full-time Permanent	2	0	0	0	0	2
	Full-time Temporary ⁴	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Permanent	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Part-time Temporary ⁴	0	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Teacher Vacancy Survey

Notes:

- 9 All figures refer to vacancies in schools on 7th November 2011.
10. Number of vacancies is for classroom teachers only.
11. English excludes special needs provision in English.
12. Temporary vacancies include temporary positions of 1 year or more and temporary positions of less than 1 year.
13. In addition to the 2 vacancies still existing at 7th November 2011, 35 vacancies had already been filled by the 7th November 2011; 17 Full-time Permanent vacancies, 14 Full-time Temporary vacancies and 4 Part-time Temporary vacancies.

Free School Meals

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether his Department is seeking an alternative indicator of social deprivation rather than the number of children who receive free school meals.

(AQW 7993/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is content that that entitlement for free school meals (FSME) is an effective indicator of social disadvantage for a number of reasons. FSME is highly correlated with the multiple deprivation measure and, as it relates to an individual pupil, is more robust than a spatial measure which assumes everyone in an area is alike. FSME is also updated regularly and available to us as part of the census return.

Where appropriate, the Department does apply spatial measures of deprivation. For example, the Multiple Deprivation Measure and those living in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas are used in relation to a number of its programmes such as Extended Schools and SureStart.

Teachers' Negotiating Committee

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether teacher leaders will be included in future Teachers' Negotiating Committee negotiating panels.

(AQW 7996/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The constitution of the Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) states that teachers unions are to be represented by those unions on the NI Teachers' Council (NITC). The NITC comprises the five recognised teacher unions, one of which, the National Association of Headteachers, exclusively represents the interests of school leaders.

Schools: LMS Budgets

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what plans there are to increase the money allocated to Local Management of Schools budgets, to bring them into line with other jurisdictions.

(AQW 7997/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Direct comparisons between the funding here and other jurisdictions are not appropriate as the arrangements for delegating funding to schools varies so considerably. These include differences in the nature of the functions delegated to individual schools and the associated funding. For example, in some jurisdictions the funding for school meals, school transport or special needs can be delegated directly to schools while in others these services will be managed centrally to reduce the administrative burden on schools. Furthermore, different starting ages and transfer ages, alongside differing arrangements for post-16 education make comparisons more difficult.

International comparisons are difficult, due to variations in the timing of research, definitions used and the levels of delegated autonomy.

On 12 January 2012, I confirmed that I had secured significant additional funding for schools over the next 3 years, on top of the £40m to schools that I announced last November. Even with this additional funding my Department still faces a real terms reduction of £180m (9.2%) in resource funding by 2014/15, compared to the 2010/11 baseline.

Questions for Written Answer: Stationery Costs

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education how much his Department has spent on stationery costs in replying to Assembly Written Questions, including the price of the envelopes and paper used, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8014/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education does not routinely record the cost of stationery used in the answering of Assembly Questions and an exercise to do so would result in disproportionate cost.

Drumlins Integrated Primary School, Ballynahinch

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to secure a permanent site for Drumlins Integrated Primary School in Ballynahinch, and for his assessment of the suitability of the current temporary location, including the lack of planning permission.

(AQW 8057/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: A site search has been completed and the Department of Education (DE) officials met, in December 2011, with the owner of the preferred site to discuss the purchase of the land at a valuation provided by the Land and Property Services (LPS). The site owner has indicated that he will not sell the site at the LPS valuation.

The second preferred option is a site owned by the South Eastern Regional College (SERC). DE is progressing the feasibility of purchasing this site and has met with SERC, the school and NICIE to discuss the matter.

The school achieved viability in September 2009 but cannot be vested in the schools' estate until a suitable new site is found. The current site is the third site the school has moved to since 2006 and is unsuitable as the Civic Amenity Site is located to the rear of the school.

Hospitality: Spend

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what has been the total spend on hospitality by his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8072/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The amount spent on hospitality by the Department of Education in the last five years is shown in the following table.

Financial year	£'000
2006-07	45
2007-08	89
2008-09	74
2009-10	57
2010-11	26

Schools: Invitations for Ministerial Visits

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the school visit invitations he has received; and (ii) the school visit invitations he has declined since coming into office.

(AQW 8111/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since coming into office I have been invited to 119 schools. I have accepted 52 invitations and declined 64. 3 invitations are still under consideration. Details of the schools are detailed in the tabled below.

Accepted	Declined
Ceara Special School, Lurgan	Forge Integrated PS, Belfast
St Mary's PS, Newtownbutler	Model PS, Derry
St Colmcille's PS, Downpatrick	Gaelscoil na Speirini, Draperstown
Primate Dixon PS, Coalisland	Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin, Belfast*

Accepted	Declined
Brownlow Integrated College, Craigavon	Holy Trinity PS, Enniskillen
St Mary's Gortnaghey PS, Dungiven	Lismore Comprehensive, Craigavon
St Mary's, Limavady	Drumlins Integrated PS, Ballynahinch
St Mary's PS, Stewartstown	Omagh Integrated PS, Omagh
St Paul's JHS, Craigavon	St Mark's HS, Warrenpoint
Wellington College, Belfast	St Clare's Convent PS, Newry
Castle Tower Special School, Ballymena	St Theresa's PS, Lurgan
St Louise's Comprehensive, Belfast	St Patrick's College, Dungannon
St Francis, Derrylatinee	Foyle Learning Community, Derry*
St Mary's HS, Newry	St Patrick's College, Belfast
Foyle College, Derry	St Mary's HS, Newry
St Gerard's Educ Centre, Belfast	St Brigid's PS, Magherafelt
St Patrick's PS, Gortin	Castle Tower School, Ballymena
St John's PS, Moy	St Luke's PS, Belfast
Ballyoran PS, Portadown	Devenish College, Enniskillen
St Patrick's PS, Crossmaglen	Carrick PS, Burren
Sacred Heart College, Omagh	Bocombra PS, Portadown
Barrack St Boys' PS, Belfast	St Nicholas PS, Ardglass
St Columbanus' College, Bangor	St Mary's Girls' PS, Strabane
St Joseph's College, Belfast	St Mary's HS, Belleek
St Bernard's PS, Glengormley	All Children Int PS, Newcastle
Oakwood School and Assessment Centre, Belfast	St Mary's PS, Granemore
St Mary's PS, Attinure	St Colm's HS, Draperstown
St Mark's HS, Warrenpoint	Bangor Central PS, Bangor
Naiscoil Éanna, Glengormley	Holy Trinity PS, Belfast
Clea PS, Keady	Carrickfergus College, Carrickfergus
De La Salle College, Belfast	Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche, Castlewellan*
Bunscoil Bheanna Boirche, Castlewellan*	St Rose's Dominican College, Belfast
Corpus Christi College, Belfast	St Mary's HS, Newry
St Michael's GS, Lurgan	St Patrick's GS/St Brigid's HS, Armagh
St Patrick's College, Banbridge	St Killen's College, Garron Tower
Gaelscoil na Ómaigh, Omagh	St Joseph's PS, Newcastle
St Joseph's PS, Armagh	St Teresa's PS, Belfast
Holy Rosary PS, Belfast	St Malachy's PS, Armagh
St Joseph's College, Coalisland	Hollywood PS, Hollywood
Sperrinview Spec School, Dungannon	Redburn PS, Hollywood
Down HS, Downpatrick	Priory College, Hollywood
Millburn PS, Coleraine	Ballykeigle PS, Comber

Accepted	Declined
St Francis PS, Lurgan	St Bronagh's PS, Rostrevor
St Genevieve's HS, Belfast	Mitchell House School, Belfast
Foyle Learning Community, Derry	St Gemma's HS, Belfast
Tannaghmore PS, Craigavon	St Dominic's, Belfast
Roan St Patrick's PS, Eglish	Belfast HS, Belfast
Regent House, Newtownards	Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin, Belfast*
Ballyoran PS, Portadown	St Brigid's HS, Armagh
Our Lady and St Patrick's, Belfast	St Anne's PS, Derry
Methodist College, Belfast	St Colm's HS, Dunmurry
Loughshore Education Resource Centre, Belfast	College Farm Nursery Armagh
	Gaelscoil ui Dhochartaigh, Strabane
	St Patrick's PS, Castlewellan
	Lagan College, Belfast
	Tannaghmore PS, Lurgan
	Drumcree College, Portadown
	Bangor Central IPS, Bangor
	Ballyclare HS, Ballyclare
	Foyle Learning Community, Derry*
	Magherafelt NS, Magherafelt
	Maine IPS, Randalstown
	St Mary's IPS, Killyleagh
	Bunscoil na Traonaigh, Lisnaskea
Still under consideration	
St Patrick's PS, Portaferry	
Holy Child PS, Belfast	
St Oliver Plunkett PS, Belfast	

* invited on 2 occasions

Education and Skills Authority: Staffing Costs

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of staff (i) appointed to; and (ii) who are being paid to work for, the Education and Skills Authority, broken down by (a) post; and (b) annual cost.

(AQW 8118/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) does not yet exist; its establishment is planned for April 2013.

Gavin Boyd's contract of employment to my Department as Chief Executive (Designate) of ESA was recently renewed. Upon the establishment of ESA, on 1 April 2013 he will become the Chief Executive of the organisation. My Department does not give details of individuals' salaries; however, the post of Chief Executive (Designate) is within the salary band £145-150,000. There are no other ESA staff in position at present. Six Directors (Designate) were recruited following competition, but they have not yet taken up post and remain employees of existing education organisations.

Schools Estate

Mrs Hale asked the Minister of Education whether the total value of the schools estate in the maintained sector is greater or lesser than that in the controlled sector.

(AQW 8140/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The most recent valuation of the schools in the maintained sector was carried out in 2003 and cannot be used as a robust comparator with the controlled estate that was last valued in 2008.

The Department is considering options for addressing this issue in future, but a resurvey of the schools' estate would be a major exercise that would incur disproportionate cost and take several months to complete.

Class Sizes: Impact on Pupil Development

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Education what research his Department has carried out, or what evidence his Department has, on the impact of class sizes on pupils development.

(AQW 8155/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department has carefully considered the local data and the international research on the issue of class sizes.

As regards local data we looked at the relationship between pupil-teacher ratios and assessment results at the end of key stages 2 and 3 and at GCSE. Our analysis showed there is no evidence of a correlation between class size and pupil outcomes.

International research evidence also suggests that, except during the very early years, there is little correlation between class size and pupil outcomes. Improving the quality of teaching is found to be a more effective route to improving outcomes.

A recent research report published by the Department for Education in England, *Class Size and education in England evidence report* (December 2011), found that overall, the available evidence suggests that, compared to other options such as increasing teacher effectiveness, class size reduction policies are not the best option in terms of value for money to raising pupil attainment.

Within all stages of a child's education in school, our focus is on raising standards and supporting and promoting high quality teaching and learning and our school improvement policy is designed with this purpose in mind.

Area Plans

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education whether up-to-date Area Plans exist in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQW 8156/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Area Planning Terms of Reference (TOR) which issued to the Education and Library Boards on 15 December 2011 define the task and the scope of the process and make it clear that area plans must be based on robust and verifiable data. The TOR are available in full at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/area-planning-terms-of-reference.htm>.

It is a matter for the Education and Library Boards, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectoral bodies, to determine the most appropriate means of arriving at area plans in line with Departmental Guidance.

The area planning process must cover the entirety of grant-aided primary and post-primary provision within the Board areas and must take account of cross boundary issues.

The TOR also outlined a timescale for the completion and submission of area plans. Those for post-primary schools have been requested by March 2012, and those for primary schools by June 2012. However, in view of the scale and complexity of the issues involved, these timescales are indicative and subject to discussion with Boards.

The completion of the plans is not an end in itself, and their implementation will be an ongoing process.

Area Plans

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale for the completion of, and the areas that will be affected by Area Planning in each Education and Library Board area.

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Mr O'Dowd: The Area Planning Terms of Reference (TOR) which issued to the Education and Library Boards on 15 December 2011 define the task and the scope of the process and make it clear that area plans must be based on robust and verifiable data. The TOR are available in full at <http://www.deni.gov.uk/area-planning-terms-of-reference.htm>.

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Education and Library Boards: Surplus Property

Mr Craig asked the Minister of Education what plans his Department has for vacant Education and Library Board properties, such as Rathvarna House, Lisburn.

(AQW 8158/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Education and Library Boards have a responsibility, under Managing Public Money, to dispose of surplus property. In doing this they adhere to the guidance on the disposal of public sector property issued by DFP's Land and Property Services. Surplus property must either be transferred within the public sector at market prices or put on the open market.

Rathvarna House is currently being considered for purchase by a Housing Association.

Education and Skills Authority: Irish-medium Project Manager

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, given that there is no legislative basis for the Education and Skills Authority (ESA), why the post of Irish-Medium Project Manager for the ESA has been advertised; and whether such managers will be appointed in other education sectors.

(AQW 8204/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Education and Skills Authority (ESA) does not yet exist; its establishment is planned for April 2013 under the Executive's Programme for Government.

Following advertisement, a temporary post was filled in April 2010, on the basis of secondment to my Department, to take forward work connected with the Irish Medium Review. This post was placed within the ESA Implementation Team. Applications were invited from all eligible staff within the RPA affected education sector bodies, including schools.

There are no proposals currently for the appointment of project managers for other sectors.

Schools: Mobile Phone Use

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to ban pupils from using mobile phones in schools.

(AQW 8281/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: It is a matter for the Board of Governors of each school to adopt a policy regarding the use of mobile phones by children and young people on school premises.

Department for Employment and Learning

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

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) what discussions he, or his officials, have had with the relevant trade unions in relation to the proposed merger of Queen's University, Belfast and Stranmillis University College, Belfast; and (ii) whether he, or his officials, and the trade unions hold the same views.

(AQW 7182/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Discussions with relevant trade unions in relation to the proposed merger of Stranmillis University College with Queen's University Belfast took place on 3 August 2011 and 6 October 2011. After the latter, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions confirmed in writing that "the official position of UCU1, at national regional and branch level is that there is no opposition to the merger". As to my views on this issue, I would refer you to my Statement to the Assembly on 28 November 2011.

Stranmillis University College: Board of Governors

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning (i) who recommended or advised on the extension of the Chairmanship of the Stranmillis University College Board of Governors; (ii) what consultation was carried out prior to the decision to extend the Chairmanship; (iii) how many candidates were in the running for this post; and (iv) to outline the rationale behind the decision to extend the Chairmanship.

(AQW 7230/11-15)

Dr Farry: My decision to extend the term of office of the Chair of the Governing Body of Stranmillis University College complied with the relevant Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland (CPANI) guidelines. These do not require a consultation to be carried out and, given that the extension related to only one person, no other candidates were involved.

The rationale for the extension was set out in the Press Release issued by my Department on 21 December 2011, namely, that it was "in the interests of maintaining continuity and stability in both the Governing Body and the College".

Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how he is using EU policies, networks and programmes to achieve the key objective to promote Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths subjects to young people through creative and inspirational initiatives which can involve industry, academia and Government, as detailed in 'Winning in Europe: European Priorities 2011-12'.
(AQW 7261/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department is not currently engaged directly in EU policies, networks and programmes related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) but will continue to work to identify potential opportunities to maintain and enhance links with relevant policies and programmes through the work of the STEM Government sub group and implementation of the STEM Strategy.

Employment Service as part of its actions under the Barroso Taskforce Initiative is actively exploring opportunities to access European funding to support programmes and work with young people seeking employment.

'Made Not Born' Campaign

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to outline the criteria used by the Made Not Born 2012 Leadership Learning Series programme to determine where its events will take place.
(AQW 7291/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Department's 'Made Not Born' campaign promotes management and leadership programmes through a carefully planned series of events. The 2012 programme, as with each of the previous 3 years, sets as its primary criteria, to hold events in towns throughout all of Northern Ireland (north, south, east and west) taking into account local catchment areas and reasonable travelling distances. This is to ensure that as many SMEs as possible have the opportunity to attend an event to learn about the business benefits of developing their own people through the use of specialist management and leadership training. Feedback from past events is also used to help determine future locations.

Steps to Work

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether people, who were previously claiming benefits but are now enrolled in college courses towards employment, have travel expenses or subsistence costs included in their bursaries or are able to claim back the costs incurred in travelling to college.
(AQW 7306/11-15)

Dr Farry: While attending short accredited training courses on the Steps to Work programme, all participants are entitled to full travel expenses to cover the cost of their journeys to and from the course venue. Participants are reimbursed by the Steps to Work Lead Contractor.

All other students enrolled on nationally accredited professional and technical courses at Further Education (FE) colleges may be eligible for financial help, including travel costs, through FE Awards and / or college Hardship Funds.

FE Awards provide students with a means tested maintenance grant of up to £2,092 to provide financial assistance in relation to living expenses generally, including travel costs.

Students who are not eligible for FE Awards or who have exhausted their awards and still face financial difficulties can make applications to the college Hardship Fund, which is discretionary and intended to provide support to learners who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty with meeting costs associated with learning. The maximum amount payable is £3,500 per annum, including any FE Award (calculated on a pro rata basis for part-time students) and is aimed specifically at providing assistance with fees, books and equipment, travel costs and associated living costs.

In addition, any student under 19 years of age who is following a full-time course at a FE college and whose home is located over the statutory distance of three miles from any college qualifies for travel assistance. Eligible students are provided with annual travel tickets for use on public transport. Alternatively, students who chose to use their own cars can receive financial assistance up to the same value of the travel ticket which is £649.39.

Further Education College: Coleraine

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what progress has been made over the last year to replace the existing further education college in Coleraine; and when work on this project will start.
(AQW 7309/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Northern Regional College submitted a Strategic Outline Case which recommended options for the College estate at five campuses, including Coleraine. The Strategic Outline Case was approved in April 2011 by my Department and by the Department of Finance and Personnel. The next stage is the completion of a more detailed Outline Business Case, which the College is currently preparing. The timetable for completion and approval of this business case is January 2013. A bid to finance the projects was made in Budget 2010 and as no funds were allocated in this bidding round it is not possible to specify a start date.

Further Education Campus, Coleraine: Capital Investment

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the capital investment for the further education campus in Enniskillen.

(AQW 7348/11-15)

Dr Farry: The South West College is currently preparing a Business Case to address deficiencies at its campus in Enniskillen. The business case will consider a range of options, one of which is a shared services use of the old Erne Hospital site. The viability of this option is dependent on the involvement of a range of other public sector partners.

A bid was made in Budget 2010 for capital funding, in years 2013/14 and 2014/15, but no allocation was made.

Work Placements

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department has taken to ensure that students who are taking courses that have a work placement element, but are having difficulties securing placements, are able to continue with their courses and to graduate.

(AQW 7351/11-15)

Dr Farry: Universities and university colleges are responsible for their own policies and procedures, including work placements.

However, I am advised by the University of Ulster that in the current economic downturn it has been decided that students on sandwich courses with compulsory placements, who have been unsuccessful in finding a placement, but who could demonstrate appropriate efforts to find a placement, should be permitted to proceed directly to the final year of study.

The University also agreed that students who had not made sufficient effort to find a place could opt to apply for a leave of absence, so that they could continue to search for a placement which might possibly be completed before the following academic year.

Queen's University Belfast has advised that it is aware that the number of work placements may be reduced due to the current economic climate and it is monitoring the situation. To date it has not identified any significant increase in the difficulties experienced by students in securing placements. In such circumstances, however, the University has mechanisms in place to enable students to continue with their courses and to graduate.

The University is exploring additional options that will provide students with relevant experience. These include:

- adoption of a more flexible timeframe for the completion of obligatory work placements. For example, some Schools have accepted a 'portfolio' of placement experience provided it meets the 9 month degree programme requirement. In this way a student may undertake a 6 month placement followed by a summer 3 month placement, or complete a part time placement over 15 months.
- broadening the definition of work placement beyond the traditional, for example, accepting work placements within the University, or participation on the Study USA programme.

In addition, through the University's Degree Plus programme, students are encouraged to reflect on and utilise all aspects of their University experience, including part time paid work, to enhance their employability.

To date, St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College have advised that they are not experiencing any significant difficulties in finding work placements for students.

Certificate of Religious Education

Lord Morrow asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 2469/11-15 and AQW 6427/11-15, whether, in the interests of good relations, equality, access to services and positive collaboration, he will introduce a strategy to share the teachers with the Catholic Certificate of Religious Education between St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College.

(AQW 7376/11-15)

Dr Farry: This is an issue that will be explored with both university colleges during my announced study of the teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland.

Further Education Colleges: Staff Travelling Expenses

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether each campus of each Further Education College pays staff travelling expenses for any relevant work that they carry out; and to detail the cost of these expenses broken down by campus and college for the last year.

(AQW 7380/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not hold the information requested by the Member, as terms of employment are a matter for each college Governing Body.

I have passed this query to the six Further Education College Directors, who will respond to the Member directly.

Regional Colleges: Staff Travel Expenses

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the travel expenses claimed by the (i) Chief Executives; (ii) Principles; (iii) Senior Management; and (iv) Board of Governors of each campus of each Regional College in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7382/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department does not hold the information requested by the Member, as the award of travel expenses for Governors and the terms of employment for staff members are a matter for each college Governing Body.

I have passed this query to the six Further Education College Directors to respond to the Member directly.

Regional Colleges: Omagh and Strabane

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what is the current level of higher education provision delivered by the Regional Colleges in (i) Omagh; and (ii) Strabane.

(AQW 7407/11-15)

Dr Farry: South West College currently delivers higher education provision for 145 full-time and 443 part-time students at its Omagh campus covering a range of courses including Foundation Degrees in Creative Media Production; Architectural Technology with Sustainable Design; Energy, Environment and Sustainable Development, and Event Management.

North West Regional College currently delivers part-time higher education provision for 40 students at its Strabane campus covering the following courses; Certificate in Counselling Studies, Higher National Certificate in Health & Social Care and Higher National Certificate / Diploma in Advanced Practice in Working with Children and Families. There is not currently any full-time higher education provision delivered at the Strabane campus.

As I announced on 6 December last year there will be an allocation of an additional 70 full-time higher education places across the further education regional colleges. My Department will determine which colleges receive an additional allocation of places but, as with all other full-time and part-time higher education in further education provision, it is the responsibility of the individual college to determine where its courses are delivered and how best to distribute its allocation of places across its campus network.

Craft Skills Training: Omagh and Strabane

Mr Byrne asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what proposals his Department has to increase participation in Craft Skills training in Omagh and Strabane.

(AQW 7409/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department provides a range of training opportunities throughout Northern Ireland for people of all ages. These opportunities, outlined below, are available across a wide range of occupational areas including craft and construction and offer incentives by way of financial support.

Training for Success provides a guarantee of a training place for all eligible unemployed young people aged 16 and 17, with extended eligibility for those with a disability or from an in-care background. Training is offered through the demand led Training for Success and Programme-Led Apprenticeship programmes with participants following their chosen occupational area. My Department funds contracted training suppliers for training delivery and, in addition, a weekly training allowance is paid to participants.

ApprenticeshipsNI is a demand-led provision, and as such, it is employers and not my Department that create apprenticeships. There are over 100 ApprenticeshipsNI frameworks to choose from covering a diverse range of occupational areas. The frameworks are designed by Sector Skills Councils/Industry Representative Bodies to meet the need of their particular sector. The apprentice is employed from day one and my Department funds training providers for training delivery and an employer incentive bonus is paid on completion.

There are currently 82 participants on ApprenticeshipsNI and 147 Programme-Led apprentices following construction apprenticeships in the West Tyrone area.

Skills Solutions is a proactive service to local industry and enables companies to upskill and reskill their employees by the provision of bespoke training helping them become more productive and competitive within their sector. Skills Solutions Advisers will meet with employers to discuss their training requirements and to look at how the Department can assist the business.

Government-sponsored Training Schemes

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the number of people under age 26 who attended government sponsored training schemes in each year since 2006, broken down by gender.

(AQW 7440/11-15)

Dr Farry: Annex A illustrates the overall occupancy for those aged under 26 on Training for Success and ApprenticeshipsNI each year since 2007, using the 30th September as a baseline comparison. The occupancy profile is also broken down by gender.

ApprenticeshipsNI is an all age provision and participants are in employment. Participants on the Training for Success programme are, in the main, young school leavers.

New Deal and Steps to Work

Annex B shows the number of participants aged under 26 who started New Deal or Steps to Work from April 2006 to September 2011. Steps to Work is an employment programme, rather than a training scheme, and subsumed the former New Deal programmes in Northern Ireland from 29 September 2008. The aim of Steps to Work is to assist people who are unemployed or economically inactive to find and sustain employment. Participants may avail of training through the Steps to Work programme where this has been identified as a barrier to them finding work.

In addition, the Department has in place a contract with Parkanaur College, Dungannon for the delivery of vocational training in a residential setting for people with disabilities who are unable to access mainstream training provision due to the effects of their disabilities. A small number of participants (under 20) are currently availing of this training.

Annex A - Training for Success (including Jobskills)

Date	Female	Male	Total	% Female	% Male
30 September 2007	2130	5581	7711	27.6%	72.4%
30 September 2008	1667	4389	6056	27.5%	72.5%
30 September 2009	1785	5158	6943	25.7%	74.3%
30 September 2010	2243	5680	7923	23.3%	71.7%
30 September 2011	2554	5787	8341	30.6%	69.4%

All (Waged) Apprentices

Date	Female	Male	Total	% Female	% Male
30 September 2007	1496	5707	7203	20.8%	79.2%
30 September 2008	2229	6268	8497	26.2%	73.8%
30 September 2009	2175	4878	7053	30.8%	69.2%
30 September 2010	1914	3853	5767	33.2%	66.8%
30 September 2011	2361	3843	6204	38.1%	61.9%

Annex B - Starts on New Deal and Steps to Work by participants aged under 26

Year/Quarter	Starts on New Deal 18-24 and 25+			Starts on Steps to Work		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
2006/07	4,563	1,894	6,457	-	-	-
2007/08	3,614	1,490	5,104	-	-	-
2008/09	1,855	690	2,545	4,119	1,369	5,488
2009/10	760	290	1,050	7,975	2,367	10,342
2010/11	808	335	1,143	9,377	3,355	12,732
Apr-June 2011	192	89	281	2,282	799	3,081
June-Sep 2011	3	2	5	2,480	895	3,375
Total	11,795	4,790	16,585	26,233	8,785	35,018

Notes to Table:

- (1) During 2007/08, the Steps to Work pilot was introduced in six offices (Carrickfergus, Knockbreda, Limavady, Lisburn, Magherafelt and Shaftesbury Square). Figures for the Steps to Work pilot are not included in this table. The Steps to Work programme was introduced widely in NI on 29th September 2008 and subsumed New Deal 18-24 and 25+. Steps to Work was introduced in the Foyle Contract Management Area on 25th July 2011.
- (2) Includes those who have received an initial invitation but have not yet attended their first interview.
- (3) Includes starts on New Deal 18-24, those aged 25 on starting a New Deal 25+ episode and those aged under 26 on starting a Steps to Work episode. An individual can start New Deal/Steps to Work more than once.

Teacher Training Provision

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the timescale for a final announcement on the future of teacher training provision.

(AQW 7468/11-15)

Dr Farry: The first stage should be completed in the Spring of 2012, and the second stage in Autumn of 2012.

Veterinary Medicine

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, pursuant to AQW 6459/11-15, to detail the number of (i) students from Northern Ireland currently taking degree courses in veterinary medicine outside Northern Ireland; (ii) veterinary medicine graduates from Northern Ireland who have returned to practise as veterinary surgeons in each of the last five years; and (iii) veterinary surgeons from Northern Ireland currently practising in Northern Ireland, expressed as a percentage of the total number of veterinary surgeons in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7517/11-15)

Dr Farry: Information held by my Department relates to students at UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and therefore figures for those enrolling in other countries are not provided.

- i In 2010/11 there were 150 students from Northern Ireland enrolled on veterinary science courses at HEIs in Great Britain (GB). This figure includes students across all years of study.
- ii. Information on the destinations of students has been obtained from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey which is carried out six months after graduation. Destinations of veterinary science graduates at any other point after graduation are not available from my Department. Due to the relatively small number of leavers from veterinary science courses each year, figures from this survey have been amalgamated between 2005/06 and 2009/10. On this basis, of the 105 Northern Ireland domiciles who graduated from veterinary science courses at GB HEIs between 2005/06 and 2009/10, and who responded to the DLHE, 35 returned to Northern Ireland to work as veterinary surgeons.
- iii. Figures for veterinary surgeons from Northern Ireland currently practising in Northern Ireland, expressed as a percentage of the total number of veterinary surgeons in Northern Ireland are not held by my Department.

Notes:

- 1 The source for parts i and ii is from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
- 2 It should be noted that the above information on destinations relates to students who gain qualifications at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- 3 Enrolment figures include students in their first and continuing years of study in both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Only a proportion of these students will be in their final year and therefore expected to qualify in any given year.
- 4 Figures have been rounded to the nearest 5.
- 5 The DLHE survey was issued to all students whose study was full-time or part-time and who obtained relevant qualifications reported to HESA for each reporting period. Response rates for the DLHE survey are generally around 80% for NI.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7540/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department has not designed or developed any mobile phone applications. You may also wish to note that further education colleges have undertaken the following projects:

- (i) South Eastern Regional College launched a mobile phone application, at the start of the 2010/11 academic year, aimed primarily at students but available also to members of the public. The purpose of the application was to increase the students' understanding of Health and Safety issues within the college in a new and innovative manner;
- (ii) Northern Regional College has designed an online micro-site, which members of the public can use to access the college's part-time curriculum via their mobiles phones. The application will go live on 23rd April 2012;
- (iii) South West College developed an application to allow students to view the training available at the college; and
- (iv) In addition, all six further education colleges have engaged with local SME businesses, through the Open Source Solution Centre project, to provide assistance with software development. Part of this project involved the development of mobile applications for local businesses, some of which would have been made available to the public.

Universities: Catering Costs

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the prices being charged to students by private catering companies which operate within university buildings; and whether he has any plans to take action to ensure that the prices charged are reasonable.

(AQW 7667/11-15)

Dr Farry: This is an operational matter for the universities and my Department has no remit to intervene.

Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Knock Airport

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential of Knock Airport, including the role it plays in bringing visitors to Co Fermanagh; and how her Department can maximise the benefits to the local tourist industry of the airport, given its proximity to destinations such as Belleek Pottery and the Marble Arch Caves.

(AQW 7243/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Ireland West Airport Knock (IWAK) is situated within another jurisdiction and services County Mayo and neighbouring counties in the Republic of Ireland. However, it can be used as a gateway to County Fermanagh, which can also be conveniently accessed via City of Derry Airport, Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport.

Tourism Ireland seeks to maximise the tourism potential of all airports which provide access to Northern Ireland (including IWAK) by investing in co-operative marketing activity, not just with airports but also with airlines and other tourism interests to drive demand for services from key overseas markets and to identify opportunities for the introduction of new services.

Fermanagh provides an excellent opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland tourism and Tourism Ireland features the county – including the Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark and Belleek Pottery – as part of its extensive global destination marketing programme.

Training Costs

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail any caps or restrictions on the costs associated with outsourced training, by companies that are in receipt of public funding.

(AQW 7277/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI may offer an element of project based support for training costs through its Business Improvement Training Programme (BITP).

Clients are required to submit a training plan linked to identified business improvement needs. Proposals are rigorously assessed and challenged to ensure eligibility and value for money.

Support is negotiated on a project by project basis and is not available for induction training nor any other training mandated by law – Health & Safety for example.

There are no specific caps or restrictions on the cash cost of individual elements of outsourced training although Invest NI does apply limitations to the percentage support rate offered for any specific project.

Any support offered however will be proportionate and is normally considerably below the maximum percentage limits allowed under EU regulations.

Training plans may include both in-house and outsourced training. Support for outsourced training is only available for vouched and approved expenditure in line with the agreed training plan as specified in a Letter of Offer.

Training Costs: Recovery

Ms Lo asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the provisions in place for her Department to monitor the recovery of training costs from the employees of companies that have received public funding.

(AQW 7278/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI public funding mechanisms for training support to companies is delivered through Invest NI. Invest NI may offer an element of project based support for training costs through its Business Improvement Training Programme (BITP).

Companies are required to submit a training plan, detailing all training activities, linked to identified business improvement needs. Proposals are rigorously assessed and challenged to ensure eligibility and value for money. Support is negotiated on a project by project basis. Payment of funds against projects is against vouched and approved actual expenditure.

In relation to the training support that Invest NI provides, the recovery by companies of training costs from employees is uncommon. Invest NI has been made aware of only one company who has adopted this practice. As this is an uncommon practice, Invest NI has no specific provisions in place for monitoring the recovery of training costs from the employees of companies that have support under BITP. However, the legal agreement between InvestNI and companies receiving support toward training costs states:

“The Client shall....inform Invest NI of any circumstance which has caused or is likely to cause a loss or misuse of funding and provide a full and detailed report in writing to Invest NI.”

This would include the requirement for companies to notify InvestNI of payment of any public funds which have subsequently been recovered from employees.

Hotel: Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the conditions that an application for a new hotel in Ballycastle would have to meet to receive funding from her Department; and whether such an application would be affected by planning applications for hotels elsewhere in the Moyle council area.

(AQW 7301/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Any application for capital support for a new hotel must be able to clearly demonstrate how the project satisfies the general principles of support outlined in the Invest NI "Support for Tourism Businesses" guidelines. These focus on establishing quality projects which are capable of competing in the national and global marketplace by being customer focused and market driven. They also require the promoter to be able to demonstrate that the business will be clearly differentiated from existing and competing projects. In addition the Promoter should be able to demonstrate that it has a clearly defined strategy for growth. Projects that simply displace visitors from similar projects will not be considered. The onus is on the promoter to prove that market need exists.

In addition, any project seeking support must be able to meet Invest NI's basic criteria for support by demonstrating viability; a need for support and a positive return to the economy.

Should an application for assistance be successful Invest NI would issue a Letter of Offer that contains a number of terms and conditions some of which must be included in all offers and others are particular to the individual project.

With reference to whether such an application would be affected by planning applications for hotels elsewhere in the Moyle council area it should be noted that any application is looked at on its own merits but an appraisal will take into account a range of factors when considering the future viability of the project.

Invest NI's guidance on support for business and tourism businesses in particular is available in published form and I will write to you directly with copies of this information and will place a copy in the Assembly Library.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Link with Water Pollution

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 6257/11-15, what the British Geological Survey is intending to test for, as part of this wider baseline study, including a list of any chemicals or metals that will be included in the search.

(AQW 7345/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The British Geological Survey is carrying out a baseline study of groundwater geochemistry in seven areas of the UK, including Northern Ireland, where there is current or potential future interest in shale gas exploration and development and no current groundwater methane data exist. Existing groundwater abstraction or monitoring sites – generally boreholes – will be selected for sampling.

Initial surveillance sampling will be followed by re-sampling of selected sites for more detailed assessment. In the sampling Round 1 samples will be taken to characterise general groundwater chemistry and screen groundwater for the presence of dissolved methane and other light hydrocarbons. In Round 2 sites with elevated groundwater methane concentrations, or other relevant characteristics of interest, will be re-sampled in order to characterise methane source, using stable isotope and potentially radiocarbon isotopes, groundwater residence time indicators and indicators of microbiological activity related to methane chemistry (methanotrophs).

Samples will be collected and analysed for the following parameters:

Round 1

- Dissolved concentrations of CH₄ and CO₂, (and higher alkanes if detectable)
- Major and trace element chemistry by ICP-MS and IC
- Dissolved Oxygen Concentration and fluorescence
- ¹³C and possibly ²H composition of CH₄ (and higher alkanes if concentrations permit) in selected samples
- Trace volatile and semi-volatile organic compounds (emerging pollutants) by GCMS in selected samples
- Field measurements of dissolved oxygen, redox, pH, temperature, SEC and alkalinity

Round 2

- Confirm dissolved CH₄ and CO₂ concentration (and higher alkanes if detectable)
- ¹³C and possibly ²H composition of CH₄ (and higher alkanes if concentrations permit)
- ¹⁴C activity of CH₄ (only if other measurements fail to identify likely CH₄ source)
- ¹³C in DIC; ¹⁸O and ²H in groundwater
- Residence time (CFC and SF₆ concentrations) of groundwater
- Microbiological indicators associated with methane chemistry, e.g. methanotrophs

- Trace volatile and semi-volatile organic compounds (emerging pollutants) by GCMS

Full details of the major and trace element chemistry for which the samples will be analysed is not yet available but these will be similar to the analyses carried out in the collaborative project, undertaken by BGS and the Environment Agency, called The Natural (Baseline) Quality of Groundwaters in England and Wales. Further information and downloadable reports from this project can be found at <http://www.bgs.ac.uk/research/groundwater/quality/home.html>

Hydraulic Fracturing: Links with Water Pollution

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 6257/11-15, to list the organisations that will assist the British Geological Survey in carrying out this work.

(AQW 7346/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As stated in answer to AQW 6257/11-15, the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the Geological Survey of Northern Ireland will be assisting the British Geological Survey (BGS) in the sampling of well/borehole waters in Northern Ireland as part of their UK-wide study of baseline geochemistry of groundwater. Further details of the proposed study are given in the answer to AQW 7345/11-15.

'The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming' Campaign

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she has taken to ensure that we get proportionate coverage in 'The Gathering: An Irish Homecoming' campaign; and to outline plans for our inclusion in this campaign.

(AQW 7373/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Gathering is an initiative being run by the Republic of Ireland Government with the aim of attracting the diaspora home for a holiday in 2013. Any increase in tourism numbers to the island is to be welcomed and Northern Ireland is well placed to benefit as the initiative fits well with our plans for 2013 when Londonderry is the UK City of Culture and we will host the World Police and Fire Games. We will also have the Titanic Belfast and the new Causeway Visitor Centre to offer tourists in 2013.

Available Hotel Rooms

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) the number of hotel rooms available in each of the last ten years; and (ii) the projected numbers for each of the next three years.

(AQW 7374/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) The number of hotel rooms available in each of the last 10 years is as follows:

Year	Hotels	Bed rooms
2002	132	5,696
2003	129	5,837
2004	131	5,944
2005	128	5,957
2006	129	6,078
2007	129	6,413
2008	131	6,986
2009	138	7,643
2010	139	7,765
2011	136	7,563

- (ii) It is not possible to make an accurate assessment of the number of additional hotels and hotel bedrooms which might become available over the next three years as this is subject to the planning process. However to provide an indication of potential future developments, in the last 3 years the Northern Ireland Tourist Board has been consulted by Planning Service on 10 hotel proposals, encompassing more than 720 hotel bedrooms.

Tourism Destinations

Mr McMullan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to list the nine key tourism destinations that she referred to in her statement on Economic Strategy on 9 November 2011.

(AQW 7381/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The draft Tourism Strategy for Northern Ireland to 2020 proposes nine key tourism areas/destinations which are:

- | | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| ■ Armagh | ■ Fermanagh Lakelands | ■ Mourne |
| ■ Belfast | ■ Londonderry | ■ Sperrins & Tyrone |
| ■ Causeway Coast and Glens | ■ Lough Neagh | ■ Strangford Lough |

My Department and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board continue to engage in consultations with key stakeholders including local authorities in each of the areas to facilitate the final definition of the key areas and development of destination management plans across Northern Ireland.

Mountain Biking

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the tourism potential of mountain biking. (AQW 7384/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Northern Ireland Tourist Board has identified mountain biking as a key tourism opportunity for Northern Ireland and has invested over £1.9 million developing new mountain bike trails all which have added to Northern Ireland's potential to become a world class, short-break mountain bike destination.

This includes £1.4million to implement two world class mountain bike trails at Castlewellsan and Kilbroney in the Mourne Mountains. The project is seen as of strategic tourism and recreational importance for County Down and Northern Ireland. This new facility is due to be ready for use in forthcoming World Police and Fire Games 2013.

The business case for the Mourne biking project conservatively estimated it will welcome 22,000 visitors in year one, generating £660,000 of economic impact to the local area.

We have the example of Scotland to look at, where considerable investment has taken place in developing mountain bike trails and supporting infrastructure. It has been assessed that £46.5million was generated directly from mountain biking, growing to £119 million when you include all of the additional trip expenditure.

Invest NI Start-up Scheme

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what changes have been made to the InvestNI start-up scheme advertised under the Go For It brand since the start of October 2011 compared to the Go For It strand of the Enterprise Development Programme, which was delivered by the Local Enterprise Agency Network until 30 September 2011; and to outline the rationale behind these changes.

(AQW 7403/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI is not currently advertising or delivering a specific start-up scheme in connection with Go For It. The arrangements put in place during the period of delay as a result of the legal challenge are part of Invest NI's core service and include business advice, signposting to other sources of help, and business plan support.

The Go For It strand of the Enterprise Development Programme delivered:-

- Pre Start - seminar-based offering
- Compulsory business planning workshop
- Optional One to one financial business planning (up to 2 hours)
- Training workshops including financial and business planning, employing staff, IT and innovation, managing business finances, market planning, market research, operations and legal issues, selling and networking, taxation and bookkeeping
- Business clinics on specific business issues
- Client Business plan
- Mentoring
- Web Packages

Invest NI is prevented from delivering a programme of this type as a direct result of the legal action being taken by Enterprise Northern Ireland.

Invest NI Start-up Scheme

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how the current start up scheme delivered by InvestNI, as advertised on the InvestNI website, differs from the proposed Business Start Up Programme, which is subject to a legal challenge.

(AQW 7405/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Invest NI is not currently advertising or delivering a specific start-up scheme in connection with Go For It. As part of Invest NI's core service, through the Regional Office network, staff provide advice and business plan support. Invest NI is also proactively engaging with other stakeholders providing services in this area including DEL and Princes Trust NI and, where appropriate, is signposting individuals to these organisations for support.

The new Business Start Programme, which has been delayed as a result of the legal challenge, proposes the following core elements:-

- An initial 1:1 'Business Assessment' session
- A Financial and Business Planning training session.
- A 1:1 financial and business planning advisory/mentoring session.
- A Client Business Plan

Invest NI is presented from initiating delivery of this programme as a direct result of the legal action undertaken by Enterprise Northern Ireland.

Tourism: West Tyrone

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what capital expenditure has been given to tourism related projects in West Tyrone over the last five years.

(AQW 7408/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Over the past 5 years to date 3 capital projects have received offers of financial assistance totalling £520,000. A further 10 capital projects have submitted applications of which 2 were unsuccessful, 1 was withdrawn and 7, which were submitted in January 2012, are currently at the preliminary stage of assessment.

Bed and Breakfast Sector: Newry and Mourne

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what action she will take to provide a new quality scheme for the bed and breakfast sector in Newry and Mourne to improve the visitor experience.

(AQW 7413/11-15)

Mrs Foster: On the 20th of June 2011 NITB launched a new Quality Grading Scheme to the Serviced Accommodation Sector, which includes B&B's and Guesthouses in Northern Ireland. To date NITB have received 17 B&B application requests from the Newry and Mourne area. To date 3 B&B's have been assessed and a star grading has been awarded. The NITB's Quality Grading Schemes are open all year round for applications and information can be accessed on NITB.com.

Green Investment Bank

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) for an update on the establishment of a Green Investment Bank; (ii) to outline her Department's position on such a fund; and (iii) what steps her Department is taking to maximise the funding that is drawn down.

(AQW 7414/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) The Government committed in the 2011 budget to fund the Green Investment Bank (GIB) with £3 billion over the period to 2015. The GIB is a UK-wide initiative and will be open to Northern Ireland applicants once it becomes operational.

The GIB will evolve over two key phases, preceded by a preliminary Government investment phase:

- government investments managed by UK Green Investments from 2012 to State Aid approval;
- establishment as a stand-alone institution following approval; and,
- full borrowing powers from 2015, subject to public sector net debt falling as a percentage of GDP

Offshore wind power generation, commercial and industrial waste processing and recycling, energy from waste generation, non-domestic energy efficiency and support for the Green Deal will be the first priority sectors for the Bank, subject to approval by the European Commission. At least 80% of the funds committed by the Bank over the Spending Review period to 2015/16 period will be invested in these priority sectors.

- (ii) In the draft Economic Strategy we have committed to encourage and develop the green economy and develop the sustainable energy sector. I welcome any steps the Government is taking to accelerate private sector investment in the UK's transition to a green economy. The establishment of the GIB will complement other green policies to help accelerate additional investment.
- (iii) The Government expects to obtain state aid approval for the GIB by early 2013. In advance of that UK Green Investments (UKGI), a team within the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), has been established to drive investment in the UK's green infrastructure until the GIB is formally established. UKGI will begin making investments in green projects from April 2012. DETI will continue to monitor developments in relation to the GIB and, where appropriate, will support NI businesses to maximise their access to the Bank.

Shackleton Army Barracks, Ballykelly

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues concerning the compilation of a masterplan for the development of Shackleton army barracks at Ballykelly.

(AQW 7450/11-15)

Mrs Foster: None. As I pointed out at DETI Oral Questions on Monday 6th February 2012, OFMDFM are leading on this matter.

North Coast: Visitors

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the number of visitors to (i) the Giants Causeway; (ii) Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge; and (iii) the Bushmills Distillery in each of the last five years, broken down by the country from which the visitor came.

(AQW 7452/11-15)

Mrs Foster: This information is sourced from the Northern Ireland Visitor Attraction Survey. The report for 2011 will not be available until March 2012 so data has been provided for the years 2006 to 2010. It is important to note that the Visitor Attraction Survey is a voluntary survey and all data presented in the report is based solely on the visitor numbers provided by attractions choosing to take part in the survey. Visitor numbers are supplied by the proprietor of the attraction and are taken in good faith. Information provided by Attractions (other than visitor numbers) is treated in strictest confidence. Visitor origin information is not available for release.

Year	Attraction Name	Visitor Numbers
2010	Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre	464,195
2010	Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge	238,227
	Old Bushmills Distillery	98,318
2009	Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre	714,612
	Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge	241,856
	Old Bushmills Distillery	100,318
2008	Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre	751,693
	Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge	241,291
	Old Bushmills Distillery	101,589

Year	Attraction Name	Visitor Numbers
2007	Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre	712,714
	Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge	222,613
	Old Bushmills Distillery	123,000
2006	Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre	553,063
	Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge	184,904
	Old Bushmills Distillery	134,298

Energy Efficiency Directive

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what further policy development her Department is considering on energy efficiency measures to comply with the potential targets under the proposed new Energy Efficiency Directive.

(AQW 7453/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am not able to give further details at this stage as it remains policy in development.

Enterprise NI: Performance

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 4968/11-15, (i) to detail the specific issues that "arose both in the SABP in 2006 and in the delivery of EDP within the contract period April 2009 – end September 2011"; and (ii) to provide figures that substantiate this claim.

(AQW 7505/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In respect of the specific issues that arose in the Start a Business Programme, (SABp) in July 2006 Invest NI identified a number of potential irregularities in relation to the Enterprise Northern Ireland (ENI) delivery of the programme. Invest NI subsequently appointed independent auditors to identify the extent of the potential irregularities. As a result, a financial sanction was imposed on ENI. Significant changes were made to SABp processes in an effort to ensure no similar problems occurred going forward.

Within the delivery of the Enterprise Development Programme (2009-2011), the Growth Programme incorporated two elements:

- **Growth Core** – a mentoring programme targeting businesses achieving the VAT threshold. This was open to all sectors;
- **Growth Pipeline** – involving the identification, development and referral of export focused growth businesses to Invest NI client bank.

Invest NI raised concerns with ENI around both the capacity and capability of the network to deliver both the Growth Core and Growth Pipeline elements. Indeed the Growth Core element was discontinued after 15 months as targets were significantly under-achieved. During this period 284 projects were supported against a corporate target of 1000 for the same period.

Within the Growth Pipeline, Invest NI staff were required to operate alongside a number of the ENI Growth Co-Ordinators in order to ensure the programme made progress.

The outturns for the Growth Programme against Target are reflected, as follows:

- **Growth Core:** 284 Participants achieved against a 1,000 target (28% achieved) – 15 months to June 2010
- **Growth Pipeline:** 179 entries against a target of 600 (29.8% achieved), although 70% of exit target was achieved.

Enterprise NI: Performance

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 4968/11-15, to detail the (i) pro-rata target figures; and (ii) pro-rata actual figures delivered for the Growth Pipeline over the lifetime of the contract. **(AQW 7506/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: Within the delivery of the Enterprise Development Programme (2009-2011), the Growth Programme incorporated two elements:

- **Growth Core** – a mentoring programme targeting businesses achieving the VAT threshold. This was open to all sectors;
- **Growth Pipeline** – involving the identification, development and referral of export focussed growth businesses to Invest NI client bank.

Invest NI raised concerns with Enterprise Northern Ireland (ENI) around both the capacity and capability of the network to deliver the Growth Programme. Indeed the Growth Core element was discontinued after 15 months as targets were significantly under-achieved. During this period 284 projects were supported against a corporate target of 1000 for the same period.

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Invest NI: Land at Creagh and Station Road, Magherafelt

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment why the figures in AQW 6024/11-15 and AQW 6300/11-15 for the allocation and use of lands at Creagh and Station Road, Magherafelt do not match. **(AQW 7518/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: Invest NI's land holding at its Creagh and Station Road industrial estates is by definition the total land owned by the Agency and that figure includes, for example, the land upon which footpaths, roads, landscaping and underground services have been constructed.

It is not normal practice to include these lands in the area which is sold in support of economic development and therefore Invest NI cannot regard them as having been allocated to or leased by businesses.

This distinction between the land which Invest NI holds and the land which it is able to sell accounts for the difference between those figures provided in response to AQW 6024/11-15 and AQW 6300/11-15.

Strategic Energy Framework

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what financial assistance is available for businesses to help them meet the renewable energy targets set out in the draft Strategic Energy Framework. **(AQW 7546/11-15)**

Mrs Foster: Businesses wishing to generate electricity from renewable sources are incentivised by the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation. This provides a revenue stream for the renewable electricity generated in the form of Renewables Obligation Certificates which are then sold to electricity suppliers. There are no grants available for the generation of renewable electricity.

DETI has recently consulted on proposals to provide financial support for a range of renewable heat installations. It has been proposed that the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) will first be available to non-domestic customers and later extended to the domestic sector. The RHI is designed to incentivise the uptake of renewable heat technologies to ensure a level of 10% renewable heat by 2020, in line with the target set in the Strategic Energy Framework. This is a challenging and ambitious target

given a starting position of 1.7% renewable heat. My Department is currently carrying out further analysis on the proposed scheme in advance of finalising levels of support. An announcement will be made in due course.

Football: NFL Game

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (i) whether her Department, and its arm's-length bodies, have given any consideration to the possibility of hosting a United States National Football League match on one of our sports grounds, to boost our profile across America.

(AQW 7574/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Final decisions on hosting a US National Football League (NFL) game at a sports ground in Northern Ireland would be a matter for the NFL and any relevant sports ground owner. However, there are no sports grounds currently in Northern Ireland that would be large enough to accommodate the numbers of spectators that are understood to regularly attend NFL games held outside the United States.

If however the NFL were willing to organise such an event the Northern Ireland Tourist Board currently run the Tourism Events Fund for National and International tourism events. I would encourage event organisers to submit applications to the scheme which will open in September 2012 for the 2013/14 year.

Should a high profile US National Football League game be hosted in Northern Ireland, Tourism Ireland would be happy to put in place a promotional campaign in the US to attract as many fans as possible to travel to Northern Ireland for the game.

Social Tariffs

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the introduction of social tariffs by energy companies for low-income customers.

(AQW 7583/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am already on record as stating that the introduction of social tariffs would be extremely complex and unlikely to solve the hardships caused by fuel poverty. As such, I have no plans to introduce social tariffs at this time.

Electricity: Price Reductions

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in light of electricity price reductions in Britain, whether any similar reductions are planned for customers in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7585/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I understand that the Utility Regulator monitors wholesale and retail energy prices on an ongoing basis and is keeping this matter under review. If wholesale energy costs continue to fall, this will be reflected in the electricity bills of Northern Ireland consumers in due course.

Hydraulic Fracturing

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 6424/11-15, (i) to detail the chemical constituents, including CAS numbers, of the chemical compounds; and (ii) whether her Department has any more specific information on (a) where the fresh water was obtained; and (b) the disposal of the waste water and how it was treated prior to disposal
(AQW 7586/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The information requested is not held by my Department.

Businesses: High Energy Costs

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she is aware that some businesses, with a significant number of staff, are currently spending more on energy costs than employment costs; and (ii) how she intends to address the high energy costs for businesses.

(AQW 7589/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am very aware of the impact of high energy costs on the business competitiveness of companies operating in Northern Ireland, particularly those companies in energy intensive industries.

While my Department endeavours to create conditions within the market to boost competition and drive down prices, it has no role in setting the tariffs which business energy users pay. However, Invest NI, provides a range of support to help companies manage energy costs and to operate as efficiently as possible.

Invest NI's Sustainable Development team is actively seeking to introduce all possible measures to improve energy efficiency and in the last three years has helped Northern Ireland companies save more than £50 million per year. Advice and audits are available to all manufacturing businesses and financial support is primarily provided through our funding of the interest-free Energy Efficiency Loan Fund managed by the Carbon Trust.

Credit Unions

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what support will be offered to Credit Unions to implement new measures to comply with Financial Services Authority requirements.

(AQW 7607/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My officials, together with staff from the Financial Services Authority (FSA), the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS), and the Financial Ombudsman's Office have provided a structured programme of support to all credit unions in the period leading to transfer of regulatory arrangements to FSA in March 2012.

This has included two separate series of road shows held in locations across Northern Ireland; one in September/October 2011 was designed to inform the consultation process, while the most recent was aimed at providing NICUs with a fuller understanding of how the new regulatory arrangements will work in practice. These, with considerable contribution from, and participation of, DETI officials, were delivered by FSA / FSCS representatives and provided valuable opportunities for discussion and for useful contacts to be made between individual NICUs and FSA / FSCS staff. The road-shows, which concluded on 2 February 2012, were well attended by NICU representatives. FSA has also included a special Northern Ireland 'help section' on its website specifically for the assistance of NICUs.

FSA has indicated that it will maintain its support to NICUs for as long as required.

Green Investment Bank

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential to obtain funding through the Green Investment Bank; and whether it could be used to help fund renewable energy projects and modernise the electricity grid infrastructure.

(AQW 7608/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Green Investment Bank (GIB) is a UK-wide initiative and will be open to Northern Ireland applicants once it becomes operational.

The GIB is designed to accelerate private sector investment in the UK's transition to a green economy. The Government committed in the 2011 budget to fund the GIB with £3 billion over the period to 2015. The GIB will evolve over two key phases, preceded by a preliminary Government investment phase:

- government investments managed by UK Green Investments from 2012 to State Aid approval;
- establishment as a stand-alone institution following approval; and,
- full borrowing powers from 2015, subject to public sector net debt falling as a percentage of GDP

Offshore wind power generation, commercial and industrial waste processing and recycling, energy from waste generation, non-domestic energy efficiency and support for the Green Deal will be the first priority sectors for the Bank over the Spending Review period to 2015/16, subject to approval by the European Commission. At least 80% of the funds committed by the Bank over the Spending Review period will be invested in these priority sectors.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by her Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7630/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and its arm's length bodies have not designed any mobile phone applications nor are they developing any.

Current/Capital Budget Allocations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether her departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to her capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7637/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department's current budget for 2011/12 comprises £186.5 million (43.4%) Resource expenditure and £242.7 million (56.6%) Capital. The Capital figure includes a net amount of £216 million in respect of support for the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

A breakdown of expenditure plans for future years is available from the departmental website at www.detini.gov.uk/index/deti-spending-proposals.

Civil Service: Posts

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many Civil Service posts existed in her Department at (i) Administrative Assistant; (ii) Administrative Officer; (iii) Executive Officer 2; (iv) Executive Officer 1; (v) Staff Officer; (vi) Deputy Principal; (vii) Grade 7; and (viii) Grade 6 levels, at the beginning of (a) 2007; and (b) 2012, broken down by local Council area.

(AQW 7691/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

Grade	*Numbers Of Posts			
	Belfast Local Council		Castlereagh Local Council	
	2007	2012	2007	2012
Administrative Assistant	44.4	9	2	2
Administrative Officer	115.76	58.64	6.72	8.34
Executive Officer 2	68.84	53.47	2	1
Executive Officer 1	46.8	39.07	2.68	2.2
Staff Officer	55.08	46.56	5.36	5.16
Deputy Principal	49.72	46.78	1	1
Grade 7	27.04	24.66	1	1
Grade 6	2	2	0	0

* These figures are expressed as whole time equivalent posts.

Electricity: Price Increases

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what control her Department, or the Utility Regulator, have over the timing of electricity price increases.

(AQW 7727/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no direct role in the process of setting electricity tariffs or the timing of tariff reviews. On at least an annual basis, the Utility Regulator carries out a review and scrutinises any proposed electricity tariff changes for Power NI due to its monopoly position within the market. The Utility Regulator also monitors wholesale and retail energy prices on an ongoing basis and, if necessary, can conduct an in-year review of tariffs.

Recruitment Agencies: Payments

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to detail the amount paid to recruitment agencies for (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time posts in her Department, and its arm's-length bodies, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7743/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

(i) Amount paid to Recruitment Agencies (Full-time posts)

2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
£323,377	£94,033	£112,504

(ii) Amount paid to Recruitment Agencies (Part-time posts)

2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
£12,102	£12,161	£13,684

Climate Change Research

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the research conducted by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research which claimed that consuming just 20 percent of Lancashire's shale gas reserves would equate to 15 percent of the UK's carbon budget up to 2050, whether the climate change impact of gas extraction will be taken into account in her decision about whether to grant permits for extraction.

(AQW 7750/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The carbon footprint of shale gas production would be one of the factors considered in any decision about permission for any future shale gas development in Northern Ireland. My Department remains committed to increasing the percentage of electricity and heat produced from renewable energy sources and reducing carbon emissions, but recognises that fossil fuels will still be required for the foreseeable future. As the recent Tyndall Report notes, "With effective capture of fugitive methane from flow back, greenhouse gas emissions from shale gas are likely to be only marginally higher than those from conventional gas sources per unit of energy." The impact of shale gas production on carbon emissions would have to be

assessed in the context of the current and future energy supply mix for Northern Ireland, taking into account the use of fossil fuels in both the electricity and heating sectors.

Human Resources

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many staff are employed in her Department's Human Resources section.

(AQW 7760/11-15)

Mrs Foster: 14 full-time equivalent staff work in the Department's Human Resources Branch.

Tourism: Visitor Numbers

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how our visitor numbers compare with the visitor numbers in the Irish Republic, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7761/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The total number of out-of-state visitors to Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are detailed below.

Year	Visitors to Northern Ireland (000s)	Visitors to Republic of Ireland (000s)
2005	1,972	7,376
2006	1,979	8,043
2007	2,107	8,377
2008	2,076	8,072
2009	1,918	7,219

Source: Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Fáilte Ireland

Domestic trips by Republic of Ireland (ROI) residents within ROI and Northern Ireland (NI) residents within NI are excluded from this table.

Visitors who overnighted in both NI and ROI will be included in both columns of the table.

Final visitor estimates for 2010 are not yet available for NI or ROI.

Credit Unions

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what representations she has made, or intends to make, to Treasury regarding the concerns of credit unions about the proposals to restrict the majority of their investments to one year maturity.
(AQW 7828/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Following the joint HM Treasury and FSA consultation exercise on future regulation policy in relation to NI credit unions, I wrote to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury (FST) in November 2011, setting out a number of concerns with the proposals within the document. One of these related to the twelve month limit on investment periods for those credit unions which will transfer as 'version 1' on 31 March 2012 and which will comprise the majority of transferees. The letter was copied to the Chief Executive of the Financial Services Authority for his observations. As a result of my intervention, in its December 2011 policy response to the consultation, FSA announced a policy change in respect of several issues, including a one year transitional easement for investment limits following the transfer date of 31 March 2012.

However, from my contact with the trade bodies as well as correspondence received from individual credit unions, I am aware that there is considerable disappointment that the policy easement remains as an interim, transitional measure. In view of this, I have again written to the FST and the FSA on 1 February 2012, outlining the detrimental effect this policy will continue to have on credit unions here and requested that this issue be reviewed.

Credit Unions

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what support her Department will offer to credit unions during their transfer to Financial Services Authority regulation.
(AQW 7829/11-15)

Mrs Foster: DETI officials, together with staff from the Financial Services Authority (FSA), the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) and the Financial Ombudsman Service (FOS) have provided a programme of support to all NI credit unions (NICU) in the period leading up to transfer of regulatory arrangements to FSA in March 2012.

This has included two separate series of road shows held in locations across Northern Ireland; one in September/October 2011 was designed to inform the consultation process, while the most recent was aimed at providing NICUs with a fuller understanding

of how the new regulatory arrangements will work in practice. These, with considerable contribution from, and participation of, DETI officials, were delivered by FSA / FSCS representatives and provided valuable opportunities for discussion and for useful contacts to be made between individual NICUs and FSA / FSCS staff. The road-shows, which concluded on 2 February 2012, were well attended by NICU representatives. FSA has also included a special Northern Ireland 'help section' on its website specifically for the assistance of NICUs.

FSA has indicated that it will maintain its support to NICUs for as long as required.

Renewable Energy: Investment in South Down

Mr W Clarke asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how much her Department invested into the renewable energy sector (i) prior to; and (ii) since 2007; and how much of this investment has been directed to projects in the South Down constituency

(AQW 7832/11-15)

Mrs Foster:

- (i) Prior to 2007 it is only possible to provide an estimate of the total investment by the Department in the renewable energy sector for the period April 2003 to March 2007 and this is approximately £8.25m. DETI investments in renewable energy have not been specifically allocated to any Northern Ireland constituency in the period referred to.
- (ii) For the period from April 2007 to date, including any commitments for the period up to end March 2012, estimated total investment in projects and consultancy assignments deemed to have primarily a renewable energy focus is £14.5m. DETI investments in renewable energy have not been specifically allocated to any Northern Ireland constituency in the period referred to.

Renewable Energy: Targets in South Down

Ms Ruane asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's performance against renewable energy targets; and to what extent projects based in South Down have contributed to the targets.

(AQW 7835/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Programme for Government 2008 – 2011 included a target of 12% electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2012. The Northern Ireland Executive's Strategic Energy Framework (SEF) has a target of 40% electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020. Over the 12 month rolling period to end December 2011, on average, 12.5% of electricity consumption was from renewable sources.

The SEF also includes a target of 10% renewable heat by 2020 which is intended to be delivered through a Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) for Northern Ireland. At present, 1.7% of Northern Ireland's heat demand is met by renewable fuels.

The Department does not hold information specifically by constituency area on the contribution of renewable energy projects to the various targets. However, the absence of any large scale wind farms in South Down would indicate that only a very small contribution is made by renewable electricity generation in that constituency, most likely from single small scale wind turbines and hydro.

Fuel Shortage

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the potential for a fuel shortage; and what plans her Department has in place if such a fuel shortage were to occur.

(AQW 7840/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I have no concerns with respect to current stocks of fuel held by the four Northern Ireland based terminals, which are more than adequate to meet expected demand.

The Department has well developed plans to deal with any severe disruption to fuel, which thankfully is a very rare occurrence. They are regularly exercised and tested with key stakeholders at both a UK and local level.

Oil Industry: Regulation

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she has any plans to introduce an industry standard for the oil industry, similar to the CORGI standard for gas.

(AQW 7843/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The All Party, Parliamentary Gas Safety Group, launched its report, entitled "Preventing Carbon Monoxide Poisoning", in November 2011. This followed a six-month inquiry by the Group into carbon monoxide poisoning. A recommendation of the report is that government should seek to bring in regulation for the whole fossil fuel sector, in line with that of the gas industry. The Coalition Government's response is awaited.

Home Heating Oil: Profit Margin

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what is the estimated average of the profit margin on a 20 litre drum of home heating oil.

(AQW 7844/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department has no statutory remit for the oil industry, particularly retail filling stations where I understand most of the trade in 20 litre drums is conducted. A significant number of the 550 local filling stations are independently owned and operated, and will set their own prices for a range of retail products.

Renewable Heat Incentive

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to increase the Renewal Heat Incentive tariff on bioliquids to 3p per kWh for home heating purposes.

(AQW 7865/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In July 2011, my Department consulted on proposals to introduce a Northern Ireland Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI). These proposals involved a phased approach with the non domestic sector being able to avail of the RHI from the outset and the domestic sector being included at a later date. It was also proposed that interim support in the form of a Renewable Heat Premium Payment would be available for the domestic sector. Full details of the proposals are on the DETI website.

The consultation closed in October 2011 and in light of the responses received, my Department has been carrying out further analysis prior to developing a final policy position. I hope to make an announcement on the final design of the RHI shortly.

Electricity: Interconnection

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, pursuant to AQW 6900/11-15, whether there has been any cost-benefit modelling undertaken, as asked in the original question.

(AQW 7891/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I refer the Member to the answer to AQW 5723/11-15.

Department of the Environment

Fish Kills: Cost of Clean-ups

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 3066/11-15, what was the total cost of clean-ups in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5901/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): The fish kills detailed in AQW 3066/11-15 were caused by discharges of organic industrial effluent, such as sewage or farm effluent, into rivers. Once organic pollution enters a river there is very little that can be done in terms of clean up. The main course of action is to stop any further pollution getting into the river as quickly as possible once the source has been established.

I can confirm that there were no clean-up costs incurred by the Department in relation to the incidents detailed in AQW 3066/11-15.

0845 Numbers

Mr Girvan asked the Minister of the Environment how much revenue has been raised by his Department in each of the last three financial years by the usage of 0845 numbers,

(AQW 6393/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has two 0845 numbers to accept queries in respect of driving licences, motor tax and vehicle and driving tests. However, no revenue is raised by the Department from the usage of these numbers.

Planning Service: Definition of Land in Ballycastle

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment whether the Planning Service considers that the land adjoining 22, Drumavoley Road, Ballycastle, which is owned by the occupant is a field or a garden.

(AQW 6444/11-15)

Mr Attwood: On 1st March 2010, the Department issued a Certificate of Lawfulness of Existing Use or Development on the lands to the rear of 16-22 Drumavoley Road, accepting that the land adjoining 22 Drumavoley Road, Ballycastle, which is owned by the occupant, to be a garden.

Planning Service: Complaints

Mr McKay asked the Minister of the Environment how many complaints the Planning Service has received since 2009, in relation to how it has dealt with planning matters in the planning applications for 22, Drumavoley Road, Ballycastle.

(AQW 6445/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Northern Area Planning Office has, since 2009, provided 10 official complaint responses in relation to planning matters at 22 Drumavoley Road, Ballycastle, as detailed below.

Ref	Complaint Stage	Work Area	Date of Response	Comments
CO/2009/0020	One	Development Management	14/01/2010	
CO/2009/0020	One (Continuance)	Development Plan	25/01/2010	
CO/2010/0001 & 3	Two	Development Plan	25/02/2010	
CO/2010/0008	Two	Development Management	23/03/2010	
CX 28239	Three	Development Plan & Development management	23/04/2010	Joint response covering areas raised in two previous stage 2 complaints
CO/2010/0007	One	Admin	12/03/2010	
CO/2011/0015	One	Development Plan	19/12/2011	
CO/2012/0001	Two	Development Plan	16/01/2012	
CO/2012/0002	One	Admin	Due 08/02/2012	

Rates (Amendment) Bill: Clause 2

Mr Allister asked the Minister of the Environment whether there are any planning issues regarding the establishment of a window display of the type and nature anticipated in Clause 2 of the Rates (Amendment) Bill.

(AQW 7113/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department would take the view that the provisions of the Planning (Control of Advertisement) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1992 permit the establishment of window displays of the type and nature detailed in Clause 2 of the Rates (Amendment) Bill without the need to apply to the Department for advertisement consent for their display.

Legislative Proposals

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 4123/11-15, when his Department intends to submit their legislative proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

(AQW 7204/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I submitted my proposals for primary legislation to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 4 January 2012.

Groomsport: Apartment Blocks

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment whether he can confirm that unwanted apartment blocks will not be built in Groomsport, now that it has been designated as an Area of Village Character.

(AQW 7252/11-15)

Mr Attwood: An Area of Village Character (AVC) designation in Groomsport is included in the draft Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan proposals. While the draft designation is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications in that area it should be noted that the PAC report is currently under consideration by the Department while the plan is being prepared for adoption.

In addition individual planning applications are considered on their own merits and the proposed design criteria for the Area of Village Character would not rule out the development of apartments within the AVC.

I will keep this issue and relevant application under attention.

Drivers: Uninsured

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment what steps are being taken to improve the co-ordination between the Driver and Vehicle Agency and the PSNI in the tracking and prosecution of uninsured drivers

(AQW 7332/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has already put in place measures to help ensure that the PSNI can identify and remove vehicles detected while being driven uninsured.

Regulations made by the Department which came into operation in July 2008 require the Motor Insurers' Bureau (MIB) to provide the PSNI with information on uninsured vehicles. In addition, regulations made by the Northern Ireland Office, in consultation with the Department, which came into operation in January 2009, allow the PSNI to seize vehicles being driven without insurance.

The PSNI uses information from the MIB's Motor Insurance Database to detect uninsured drivers, including in conjunction with its vehicle Automatic Number Plate Recognition system.

Ultimately, continuous insurance enforcement would be an effective means to address the issue. It is cost prohibitive for the NI Government to introduce a system. It may follow 'integration' of vehicle licensing with those in Britain, but, as I have warned, the potential cost in job losses is a serious risk. That is why I have made the argument that DVA jobs can be protected through a number of measures.

Water Quality: Ballyholme Beach and Groomsport Beach

Mr Easton asked the Minister of the Environment whether Ballyholme Beach and Groomsport Beach met water quality standards last year.

(AQW 7445/11-15)

Mr Attwood: At the second Good Beach Summit, on 21 September 2011, I announced the EC Bathing Water Directive Compliance results for Northern Ireland.

In 2011, all 24 (100% compliance) of Northern Ireland's identified bathing waters achieved the mandatory water quality standards of the EC Bathing Water Directive i.e. passed the Directive achieving Good water quality. 20 out of 24 (83% compliance) achieved the tighter guideline requirements of the Directive i.e. passed the Directive achieving Excellent water quality.

Groomsport Beach achieved the tighter guideline requirements of the Directive i.e. passed the Directive achieving excellent water quality while nearby Ballyholme Beach achieved the mandatory water quality standards of the EC Bathing Water Directive i.e. passed the Directive achieving Good water quality.

Ballyholme Beach had failed the overall requirements of the directive on three occasions in recent years (2010, 2008 & 2007). To pass the overall mandatory requirements of the Directive in 2011 is a very positive result for the area and may, in part, be credited to the ongoing investment in sewerage infrastructure in the greater north Down area.

George Best Belfast City Airport: Planning Agreement

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of the Environment where responsibility for the George Best Belfast City Airport Planning Agreement would reside following the Review of Public Administration.

(AQW 7461/11-15)

Mr Attwood: It is the case that, final decisions on which types of planning matters will remain the responsibility of the Department after the reorganisation of local government will be taken nearer the time of the transfer of functions to local government. However, planning issues in relation to our airports have significant regional and economic impact. I believe therefore that airport planning issues will remain the responsibility of central government.

Animal Welfare: Snaring Regulations

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration his Department has given to how the new snaring regulations will act as a deterrent to the current animal welfare problems associated with the use of snares.

(AQW 7484/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The aim of the new regulations will be to mitigate as far as reasonably practicable the risks of adverse welfare impacts. For example it is proposed to require users of snares to ensure that their snares adhere to certain technical standards. These standards include the fitting of permanent stops, which prevent the noose from tightening beyond a specific point, and swivels to facilitate twisting by any animal caught by the snare which will mitigate the risk of injury. It is also proposed to adopt a Code of Practice for Northern Ireland to supplement the new regulations in order to promote the highest possible standards in the use of snares.

Animal Welfare: Snaring Regulations

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department intends to seek independent veterinary advice to inform the drafting of the snaring regulations.

(AQW 7486/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department does not propose to seek independent veterinary advice in the initial phase of preparing the proposals. However veterinary interests in Northern Ireland will form an important part of the consultative process which will be undertaken prior to making any new regulations, which I trust will address the issue raised by the member.

Animal Welfare: Snaring Regulations

Ms Lo asked the Minister of the Environment whether his Department has met or plans to meet (i) veterinary associations; and (ii) animal welfare organisations to discuss the development of the draft snaring regulations.

(AQW 7488/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Department has no specific plans to meet veterinary associations to discuss the development of the draft snaring regulations. However, as indicated in my answer to AQW 7486/11-15, such interests will be fully consulted about the proposals.

Departmental officials met animal welfare interests during 2011 to discuss the proposals. More recently, on 23 January 2012 officials were present during a meeting I held with representatives from the League Against Cruel Sports. During this meeting the issue of snares was discussed at some length.

Thatched Roofs: Cost of Repairs

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the rationale behind the Environment Agency's policy of providing grant aid of only 75 percent of the cost of repairs to thatched roofs.

(AQW 7516/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Recognising the importance and rarity of this type of building, along with the recurring costs they present to owners to maintain, listed building grant-aid is set at a higher rate than that provided for normal repair works such as stonework, which is normally 35%. This provides significant support to owners of listed thatched buildings. The Built Heritage is a vital element of the character of our lives and tourist/economy growth. That includes thatched roofs.

Window Repairs: Grant Aid

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the Environment Agency's policy in relation to the provision of grant aid for the repair of windows, including double-glazing, in listed buildings which are (i) private homes; (ii) commercial premises; and (iii) public buildings.

(AQW 7519/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The department has authority under Article 106 of The Planning (NI) Order 1991 to provide grant-aid for the '... repair and maintenance of a listed building...' and therefore focuses on the repair of historic fabric. Double glazed window units are not regarded as a 'repair', but as an alteration. This has always been the policy, based on legislation, and therefore the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) does not provide grant-aid assistance for double glazed units in any type of listed building.

NIEA does provide assistance for the repair of historic windows, currently at a rate of 35%. It regards them as components of historic fabric, and assesses them for grant-aid accordingly. There is no difference in the grant-aid offered for private homes, commercial premises or public buildings, in these circumstances.

Listed Buildings: Grant Aid

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of the Environment what steps his Department is taking to facilitate and expedite the inspection and grant aid process for the maintenance and repair of listed buildings.

(AQW 7521/11-15)

Mr Attwood: Within my department the NIEA Historic Buildings Unit manages the Listed Buildings Grant-aid Scheme, to assist with the repair and maintenance of the historic fabric of listed buildings. NIEA Conservation Architects carry out an inspection before any work is undertaken. This ensures that the proposed works are necessary. They may also need to visit during the duration of the scheme, which facilitates the release of 'interim' payments, as well as undertaking a final inspection to ensure works undertaken comply with requirements of the scheme. A final payment will not be released without this having taken place.

All grants are processed as expeditiously as possible, whilst ensuring compliance with audit and other NICS financial guidelines and procedures. Internal processes and targets for the issue of acknowledgements, schedules of requirements and payments are closely monitored. Performance indicators are currently in line with targets.

The listed building grant-aid policy is currently under review, and will be the subject of a public consultation exercise later in the year. Any proposed changes to the scheme will be reflected in updated/revised internal procedures.

Northern Area Plan

Mr Storey asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on the draft Northern Area Plan.

(AQW 7560/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Draft Northern Area Plan 2016 is the subject of an Independent Examination currently being conducted by the Planning Appeals Commission. Stage one of the Independent Examination addressed strategic policy matters as contained in Volume One of the Draft Plan and was held over the period 19th September 2011 until the 6th October 2011. Stage Two of the examination into site specific matters commenced on 23rd January 2012 and is programmed to close on 22nd March 2012. Following the Examination the Planning Appeals Commission will prepare a report recommending how the objections should in their view be addressed. The Department will take into account this report, amending the Plan where appropriate, before moving to final adoption.

Glynn River: Discharge Consents

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of the Environment, pursuant to AQW 5761-11/15, to detail all of the conditions of consent to discharge numbers 106/11 and 107/11.

(AQW 7676/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) has issued 2 consents (consent nos. 106/11 and 107/11) to Bord Gáis Energy (Northern Ireland) for discharges of site drainage from an exploratory borehole site into the Raloo Water, a tributary of the Glynn River, near Glenoe.

Both consents permitting the discharges were issued by the Department on 19 July 2011. These consents authorise the discharge of site drainage from the premises at any time, providing all conditions of consent are complied with.

I have attached a copy of consent to discharge 106/11 at Annex A and a copy of consent to discharge 107/11 at Annex B.

NIEA is currently reviewing the electronic data storage facility relating to discharge consents. The ultimate aim of this project is to provide a web based facility to allow public access to consent records. In the meantime, however, all information on the public register concerning discharge consents is available from NIEA on request.

High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

Mr Weir asked the Minister of the Environment to detail the timescale for the full implementation of the High Hedges Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

(AQW 7810/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The High Hedges Act (NI) 2011 will become fully operational on 31 March 2012.

Planning Application B/2011/0057/F

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of the Environment whether he intends to direct a refusal of planning application B/2011/0057/F in respect of the sewage cake storage facility on the A37 Broad Road, Coleraine.

(AQO 1253/11-15)

Mr Attwood: The consultation process on the planning application is currently ongoing and the Department is not yet in a position to make a decision on the application. When all material planning matters have been fully considered, the Department will make a recommendation to Limavady Borough Council. I am very aware of this issue and the member diligently brings it to my attention and I have asked for updates at every appropriate stage of the planning process.

Department of Finance and Personnel

Solicitors and Barristers: Debarred

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many (i) solicitors; and (ii) barristers have been debarred because of professional misconduct in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 7106/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The Department of Finance and Personnel does not hold statistics on how many solicitors or barristers have been disbarred because of professional misconduct in each of the last ten years. That information is held by the relevant professional body which is the Law Society for solicitors and, in the case of barristers, the Bar Council.

Figures obtained by the Department from the Law Society in relation to the numbers of solicitors removed from the roll of solicitors by the independent Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal on grounds of professional misconduct over the past 10 years are tabulated overleaf.

The Bar Council has indicated that no barristers have been disbarred by it within the last 10 years.

TABLE A

Year	Number of Solicitors Removed from the Roll
2002	0
2003	4
2004	2
2005	3
2006	3

Year	Number of Solicitors Removed from the Roll
2007	2
2008	2
2009	2
2010	4
2011	3

Rate Relief

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many people are currently in receipt of rates relief, but not in receipt of housing benefit.

(AQW 7399/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As at 29th January 2012, there are 4,877 current awards of Rate Relief where the recipient is not in receipt of Housing Benefit as administered by Land & Property Services.

Rates: Vacant Properties

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of occupied properties, previously thought to be unoccupied, where rates have not been paid in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7447/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The information requested is not available as the relevant historic information is available only at a point in time that is, at year-end. The number of vacant properties fluctuates as properties move in and out of occupation on an ongoing basis, therefore historic information only captures the number of properties that were vacant at the end of year. It should also be noted that prior to 1st October 2011, unoccupied domestic properties received a full discharge from the rating liability, so no rates were due or paid.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7457/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel has not developed, and is not in the process of developing, any mobile phone applications for use by members of the public.

Rates: Vacant Properties

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in light of his commitment to provide reduced rates for vacant properties while permitting the continued use of window displays within such units, whether he would consider additional rate reductions for vacant units accommodating young and social enterprise projects.

(AQW 7492/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As you will be aware the Rates (Amendment) Bill reached its final stage in the Assembly on 7 February. This introduces two measures to deal with the issue of empty retail premises and the blighting effect that they are having on our town and city centres.

At present almost any use of a property, including storage or displays, will trigger full occupied rates. The Bill provides that where shop window displays are used for (non-political) community or other non-commercial purposes the property will still be considered unoccupied. Ratepayers will continue to receive 50% empty property relief (or an exclusion if applicable). This will encourage ratepayers to take steps to brighten up shopping areas, without incurring full occupied rates, and work with the local community to help revitalise affected areas.

The Bill will also allow new occupiers of long term empty retail premises to receive a 50% rebate on their rates for 12 months, effectively providing for the continuation of empty property relief. The property will need to have to been empty for 12 months and when last occupied used for the retail provision of goods or services.

I do not consider it necessary to extend these measures more broadly. However, as I have already advised the Assembly any non-domestic ratepayer will be able to avail of the 50% rebate, where they occupy a long term empty retail property, regardless of the next use to which the property is put. This would include those using the empty retail premise for the purpose of accommodating young and social enterprise projects.

Mortgage and Debt Arrears

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 6159/11-15 and AQW 6161/11-15, why his Department does not hold information on mortgage and debt arrears.

(AQW 7513/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Banking is a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine and is therefore outside the remit of the Department of Finance & Personnel.

Banks and other lending institutions are not compelled by UK regulatory authorities to publish data on mortgage and debt arrears in the format requested and therefore this information is not available at this time.

Peace III Funding

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the efficiency of the allocation of Peace III funding. **(AQW 7545/11-15)**

Mr Wilson: I am content with the pace at which PEACE III is progressing. The Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) has advised that, from a total Programme budget of approximately £300 million, some £270 million (90 per cent) has to date been allocated to projects.

SEUPB expects the remainder of the PEACE III budget to be allocated within the next three to six months.

PEACE III has to date met all of its EU targets and SEUPB expects that it will continue to do so.

Current/Capital Budget Allocation

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether his departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to his capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7549/11-15)

Mr Wilson: My Department's revenue expenditure does not vary proportionately to my Department's capital budget allocation.

A number of my Department's activities incur revenue expenditure, but do not require significant capital investment.

In addition, depending on the purpose of the capital expenditure, my Department's revenue expenditure may increase, decrease or remain unchanged as a result of capital investment. If a new asset is purchased this is likely to increase revenue expenditure, for example through increased depreciation costs. However, if an existing asset is replaced the revenue expenditure may remain the same or decrease, for example through reduced costs of maintaining a newer asset.

Banks: Response to Businesses

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the response of the banks to the needs of businesses in the current economic downturn.

(AQW 7623/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Having a competitive banking sector that meets the needs of businesses and consumers is vital as our economy struggles to recover from the recession. There have been concerns that the availability of credit has been constrained and that the cost of credit has sometimes been prohibitive. I have therefore been working with the British Bankers Association (BBA) and the local banks on this important issue for some time now. And in that regard, I am pleased that the local banks have made progress in implementing the reform measures currently being undertaken through the Better Business Finance initiative. I believe these actions – including the establishment of an independent appeals process – have the potential to offer a fairer and more transparent banking sector in the future.

And while I have no doubt that the cost and conditions attached to credit remain an issue, data provided to my Department by the British Bankers Association (BBA) also indicates that demand for credit is subdued and the BBA have reported that 90 per cent of loan applications are approved. So business confidence is also clearly an issue.

That said, I recognise that the banking sector can still do more. I will therefore continue to engage with local banking representatives to encourage them to meet the needs of local businesses. I have also made representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and to the Governor of the Bank of England to ensure that Northern Ireland's banks are included in nationwide banking initiatives aimed to improve liquidity and the availability of credit, such as the upcoming National Loan Guarantee scheme.

Deaths: Mephedrone Consumption

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the number of deaths in each of the last three years where mephedrone consumption was recorded as a contributing factor.

(AQW 7718/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Over the three year period between 2008 and 2010 there has been one death registered in 2010 in Northern Ireland due to drug poisoning¹ where mephedrone was mentioned on the death certificate. Data for 2011 will not be available until April

2012. Deaths due to drug poisoning are likely to be referred to the coroner and can take time to be fully investigated. Therefore there is often a period of time between when such deaths occur, and when they are registered.

- 1 International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision codes:
 F11-F16, F18-F19 – Mental and behavioural disorders related to drug use
 X40-X44 – Accidental poisoning by drugs
 X60-X64 – Intentional self-poisoning by drugs
 X85 – Assault by drugs
 Y10-Y34 – Undetermined and other poisoning by drugs.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in his Department's Equality Unit.

(AQW 7806/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department of Finance and Personnel currently employs 1 member of staff in the Department's Equality Unit. The staff member is a Deputy Principal with a salary range of £34,163 - £38,893.

Credit Checks: Guidelines

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what control or input his Department has in relation to the issuing of guidelines on credit checks by the Financial Services Authority.

(AQW 7811/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Banking is a Reserved Matter for HM Treasury to determine and is therefore outside the remit of the Department of Finance & Personnel.

As I understand it, banks use their own systems when performing credit checks and these details would be considered confidential. The Financial Services Authority does not closely regulate credit checks or credit scoring for general lending by banks.

Civil Servants: Average Pensions

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail (i) the total number of civil servants who retired on an exit salary of £80,000 or greater in the last five years; and (ii) the average pension received.

(AQW 7854/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The number of civil servants who retired on an exit salary of £80,000 or greater the last five years and the average pension received is set out in the table below:

	2006/ 2007	2007/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011
Civil Servants on exit salary of £80k +	8	9	5	5	13
Average pension	43,287	43,628	46,723	29,569	34,405

Hospitality: Spend

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what has been the total spend on hospitality by his Department in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8071/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Hospitality expenditure by the Department of Finance and Personnel (including its executive agencies) in each of the last five years is as follows:

	£'000
2007/08	205
2008/09	209
2009/10	91
2010/11	62
2011/12*	42

* This represents hospitality spend for the current financial year up to 31 December 2011.

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Hospitals: Patient Tracker Positions

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on recruitment to the Patient Tracker positions in the Royal Victoria Hospital's Accident and Emergency department; and why agency staff, who are currently employed in the positions, are barred from applying for the permanent positions.

(AQW 7289/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Belfast HSC Trust is using a system of internal trawls in order to fill the Patient Tracker positions in the Royal Victoria Hospital's Accident and Emergency Department. This redeployment process will, in the first instance, target permanent medical secretaries who meet the relevant skills requirements. This process follows a modernisation review of medical secretary provision within the Trust and is aimed at preventing a redundancy situation among this staff group.

This process of restructuring and redeploying existing internal staff fully complies with the requirements of the Agency Workers Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011.

Compton Review

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Compton Review identifying a need for approximately £25 million to restructure the Health Service, to detail (i) how the funding would be spent; and (ii) whether the funding is available from the Executive's budget in each of the next three financial years.

(AQW 7428/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Review recommended that transitional funding of approximately £25m, £25m and £20m would be required over the next three years to support the implementation of the new model of service as set out in Transforming Your Care. This funding would be required to support the development of the Integrated Care Partnerships; take forward service changes; and reshape the workforce.

My Department is currently engaged in financial planning for the period 2012/13 to 2014/15. The HSC faces significant financial challenges over this period. I will want to consider carefully how the resources can be identified to support Transforming Your Care, including raising the matter with the Department of Finance and Personnel. I am clear that much needed reform must be progressed and resources will need to be found to help to do so.

Hospitals: Booking Lines

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average response time to answer a call on the booking line in each hospital in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 7463/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Western HSC Trust has informed me that during January 2012, their telephony statistics show that the Altnagelvin Booking Centre received 12,986 calls at an average speed of answer of three minutes and 47 seconds.

The Tyrone County Hospital Booking Centre, which covers calls for both Tyrone County and Erne Hospitals, received 2,800 calls, during January 2012, at an average speed of answer of 35 seconds.

Pseudomonas: Altnagelvin Area Hospital

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when he was first briefed, or became aware of, the December 2011 pseudomonas incident in Altnagelvin Area Hospital; and what action he took.

(AQW 7493/11-15)

Mr Poots: I was made aware of a pseudomonas outbreak in Altnagelvin Area Hospital by my Department in a submission of 13 December 2011. The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Estates Officer issued a joint letter to the Health and Social Care service on 22 December 2011 reminding the service of the infection risks associated with water systems in healthcare facilities and reminding the service of important messages about infection prevention and control contained in two earlier communications.

While it is important to act quickly, the Department must ensure that it has sufficient and accurate information in order to give sound, resolved advice on the appropriate actions to take in the interests of patient safety. In infectious disease incidents the cause of the problem is not always apparent and detailed investigative work is necessary to identify and address the underlying cause and so, in this case, reduce the risk to the babies. In these circumstances the aim is to strike the best possible balance in both acting quickly and doing the right thing.

Pseudomonas: Altnagelvin Area Hospital

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why the letter of 22 December 2011, concerning the pseudomonas problem, did not mention (i) that in Altnagelvin Area Hospital on 14 December 2011 a tap had been found positive for pseudomonas; and (ii) the death of a baby at the hospital.

(AQW 7495/11-15)

Mr Poots: The purpose of the letter of 22 December 2011 was to highlight the risks associated with water sources and to reinforce earlier messages about infection control.

This letter did not refer to the contaminated tap that was identified in Altnagelvin on 14 December because additional specialised tests identifying the particular strain of Pseudomonas bacteria were still being processed. Therefore it had not been established at that stage whether this tap could have contributed to the infections that had occurred. A reference to this tap could have been misleading and was not necessary for the purposes of the letter. The priority on 22 December was to focus attention on the risks from water sources; the actions required; and on the importance of good infection prevention and control.

The letter of 22 December did not mention the death of the baby in Altnagelvin because Pseudomonas can cause infection in any clinical area where there are immunocompromised or debilitated patients. For that reason, the letter was issued to a wide group of staff, as it applied to a number of clinical areas. Focusing on the death of a child in the neonatal unit in Altnagelvin could have implied that this was a problem localised to Altnagelvin or to neonatal units only.

Pseudomonas: Sterile Water

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the pseudomonas outbreak, the date from which only sterile water has been allowed to come into contact with babies in neo-natal units.

(AQW 7497/11-15)

Mr Poots: It was agreed during a teleconference held on Saturday 21 January, at which all the HSC Trusts were represented, that neonatal units should move to using sterile water for all nappy changes with immediate effect. Before then the Western Trust and the Belfast Trust had already adopted this measure in response to the cases and Pseudomonas colonisation of babies in their neonatal units. The region-wide approach was reiterated and clarified in a joint letter of 28 January to the Trusts, PHA and HSC Board issued by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Estates Officer.

Pseudomonas: Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when action was first taken at the Royal Victoria Hospital's Neo-natal Unit as a result of the pseudomonas event at Altnagelvin Hospital and letter of 22 December 2012.

(AQW 7498/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have commissioned an independent review and have asked Professor Patricia Troop and her team specifically to review the effectiveness of the Trusts' management of the occurrences of Pseudomonas infection and colonisation within neonatal units. I have asked the Review team to present an interim report to me by the end of March 2012 and to present their final report within eight weeks of the interim report. I will present the findings of the Review to the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

Current/Capital Budget Allocation

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to his capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7550/11-15)

Mr Poots: The table below shows the current expenditure and capital investment allocations for my Department over the current budget period.

	2011/12 £m	2012/13 £m	2013/14 £m	2014/15 £m
Current	4,383.1	4,447.6	4,569.2	4,659.4
Capital	200.5	279.8	187.5	183.0
Total	4,583.6	4,727.4	4,756.7	4,842.4

Source: Budget 2011 -15 Document

My Department's current expenditure allocation does not vary proportionately to its capital investment allocation.

Physiotherapist Post: Suffolk Day Centre, Belfast

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety when the physiotherapist post at the Suffolk Day Centre, Belfast, will be filled.

(AQW 7563/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am advised that the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have now successfully recruited a new full time member of staff to the learning disability team. This member of staff will commence work on 1 March 2012 and this will include work within the Suffolk Day Centre.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Maternity Leave

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area at Band 5 within Learning Disability are currently on maternity leave.

(AQW 7564/11-15)

Mr Poots: Belfast Health & Social Care Trust have advised that 5 (4.50 WTE) staff employed at pay band 5 within Learning Disability are currently on maternity leave.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Maternity Leave

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why staff in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust area at Band 5 within Learning Disability who are currently on maternity leave are being replaced by staff at Band 3 who are not receiving additional pay or conditions.

(AQW 7565/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Belfast HSC Trust has not deployed Band 3 staff to undertake the duties of Band 5 staff in Learning and Disability who are absent on maternity leave. Each post is assessed using the Agenda for Change Job Evaluation Scheme which determines the pay band for each post and the appropriate rate of pay. All staff deployed within Learning Disability services at the Trust have been allocated duties commensurate with their Agenda for Change grading.

Belfast Health and Social Care Trust: Agency Staff

Ms S Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) how many agency staff are currently employed in Learning Disability in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Area; and (ii) for how long each agency staff member has been employed.

(AQW 7566/11-15)

Mr Poots: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust have advised that at February 2012, 22 agency staff are employed within Learning Disability in the Trust. Their employment lengths are given in the table below.

Number of Agency Staff employed in Learning Disability within Belfast Health and Social Care Trust by length of employment as at February 2012

Length of Employment	Headcount
0-3 months	8
3-6 months	4
6-12 months	4
12-24 months	4
Over 24 months	2

Source: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

Notes: All 22 agency staff listed in the above table are employed at Pay Band 2 level.

Business Services Transformation Programme

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 7042/11-15, for his assessment of whether the Business Services Transformation Programme business case should have distinguished between savings from systems implementation and savings from reconfigured shared services, so as not to mislead the consultee and to make it clear what savings will be realised.

(AQW 7597/11-15)

Mr Poots: As explained in reply to AQW 7042/11-15, and as was recognised in the business case approved by DFP in 2010, the closely interdependent nature of the IT systems and reconfigured shared services means that no meaningful distinction can be drawn between these two elements of the Business Services Transformation Programme. It follows that no-one has been misled on the point.

Recruitment Agencies: Payments

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the amount paid to recruitment agencies for (i) full-time; and (ii) part-time posts in his Department, and its arm's-length bodies, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7650/11-15)

Mr Poots: Table 1. The amount paid to recruitment agencies for full or part-time posts in the Department of Health Social Services and its arms-length bodies.

	2008/2009	2009/2010	2010/2011
DHSSPS	£408,630	£74,835	£31,608
PCC	NA	£33,290	£75,781
PHA	NA	£514,000	£479,891
NIBTS	£4,000	£68,000	£52,000
NIMDTA	£68,578	£43,707	£16,476
NIPEC	£13,466	£6,141	£16,950
NIGALA	£26,740	£268	£10,324
RQIA	£95,143	£116,717	£95,781
NISCC	£233,338	£130,741	£185,152
NIFRS	NA	NA	NA
SHSCT	£3,449,190	£4,986,334	£4,494,386
SEHSVT	£8,132,185	£8,211,931	£4,074,499
NHSCT	£5,021,000	£6,492,000	£6,392,000
NIAS	£462,334	£511,856	£425,336
WHSCT	£6,393	£9,530	£11,071
BHSCT	£23,710,000	£19,900,000	£13,100,000
HSCB	NA	£960,000	£381,420
BSO	NA	£1,422,118	£1,512,118
Total	£41,630,997	£43,481,468	£31,354,793

It should be noted that:

- 1 These are total figures for each year as systems do not provide a breakdown between full time and part time posts.
- 2 NIFRS - does not pay any money directly to Recruitment Agencies.
- 3 PCC, PHA, HSCB and BSO were not established until April 2009.

MRI Scanner: Paediatric Intensive Care Unit, Royal Victoria Hospital

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans his Department has to install an MRI scanner in the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast.

(AQW 7665/11-15)

Mr Poots: The installation of an MRI scanner at the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit is subject to business case analysis and approval to assess the need for and value for money of the proposal. The Belfast Trust is currently developing the required analysis and a detailed Outline Business Case (OBC) is expected to be submitted later in 2012, for consideration and approval. Following approval, I will then be in a position to consider whether the required funding can be accommodated within my constrained budgetary allocation.

Domiciliary Care

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the levels of domiciliary care currently being provided in each Health and Social Care Trust area compare to that which was provided in (i) 2000; (ii) 2005; and (iii) 2010. (AQW 7705/11-15)

Mr Poots: Table 1 below presents information on the number of clients receiving domiciliary care services in Northern Ireland during a survey week in 2008, 2009 and 2010. This information is not available on a comparable basis before 2008.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Statutory			Independent			Total Clients Receiving Domiciliary Care (excludes double counting)		
	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010
Belfast	5,393	4,883	4,836	2,166	2,579	2,889	6,297	6,214	6,427
Northern	3,709	3,453	3,285	927	1,030	1,605	4,143	4,052	4,164
South Eastern	2,344	1,728	1,598	2,459	2,696	2,772	4,278	3,908	3,954
Southern	3,299	3,183	2,880	1,686	1,545	1,709	4,685	4,462	4,331
Western	2,861	2,635	2,328	2,565	2,740	2,507	3,657	4,741	4,513
Northern Ireland	17,606	15,882	14,927	9,803	10,590	11,482	23,060	23,377	23,389

Source: CC7b Community Information Return.

- 1 Information for; 2008 relates to the survey week 21st–27th September 2008 inclusive; 2009 relates to the survey week 20th–26th September 2009 inclusive and; 2010 relates to the survey week 19th–25th September 2010 inclusive.

The number of clients in receipt of domiciliary care services increased by 329 (1.4%) from 23,060 during the survey week in 2008 to 23,389 during the survey week in 2010.

The latest available information shows that during the survey week 19th–25th September 2010, 14,927 clients received domiciliary care services from the statutory sector, 11,482 clients received domiciliary care services from the independent sector (this information cannot be split by private and voluntary sectors), and 3,020 clients received domiciliary care services from both sectors.

This information is published in the 'Domiciliary Care Services for Adults in Northern Ireland' publication which is available to download from the DHSSPS internet site at:

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib-3/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/adult_statistics-1/statistics_and_research-dom_care_services.htm

Domiciliary Care

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many domiciliary care packages are currently provided by the (i) statutory sector; (ii) private sector; and (iii) voluntary sector. (AQW 7706/11-15)

Mr Poots: Table 1 below presents information on the number of clients receiving domiciliary care services in Northern Ireland during a survey week in 2008, 2009 and 2010. This information is not available on a comparable basis before 2008.

Table 1

HSC Trust	Statutory			Independent			Total Clients Receiving Domiciliary Care (excludes double counting)		
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HSC Trust	Statutory			Independent			Total Clients Receiving Domiciliary Care (excludes double counting)		
	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010	2008	2009	2010
Northern Ireland	17,606	15,882	14,927	9,803	10,590	11,482	23,060	23,377	23,389

Source: CC7b Community Information Return.

- 1 Information for; 2008 relates to the survey week 21st–27th September 2008 inclusive; 2009 relates to the survey week 20th–26th September 2009 inclusive and; 2010 relates to the survey week 19th–25th September 2010 inclusive.

The number of clients in receipt of domiciliary care services increased by 329 (1.4%) from 23,060 during the survey week in 2008 to 23,389 during the survey week in 2010.

The latest available information shows that during the survey week 19th–25th September 2010, 14,927 clients received domiciliary care services from the statutory sector, 11,482 clients received domiciliary care services from the independent sector (this information cannot be split by private and voluntary sectors), and 3,020 clients received domiciliary care services from both sectors.

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http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/stats_research/stats-cib-3/statistics_and_research-cib-pub/adult_statistics-1/statistics_and_research-dom_care_services.htm

Residential Care Homes

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the change in the number of (i) residential care homes; and (ii) places available at residential care homes since 2005.

(AQW 7708/11-15)

Mr Poots:

Year	(i) No. of residential homes	(ii) No. of residential places available
2005	353	5,947
2011	267	4,757

The fall in numbers of residential care Homes, and consequently the reduction in the number of residential care places, is in keeping with one of my Department's key priorities, to support people in their own home maintaining independence for as long as it is safe and possible to do so. All assessments are person-centred and take account of individuals' choice and needs.

Care Management Assessments

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether common standards of care management assessments are currently being achieved in all Health and Social Care Trust areas, and if not, to detail why.

(AQW 7709/11-15)

Mr Poots: In March 2010 my Department issued 'Care Management, Provision of Services and Charging Guidance' to colleagues across the HSC. This guidance was issued in order to ensure a harmonised approach to each stage of the care management process which includes assessment of need. In addition, the guidance sets out clear requirements for reviews of needs identified in such assessments to ensure that service users are supported in an environment which best matches their needs.

The Northern Ireland Single Assessment Tool (NISAT) was developed to assess the health and social care needs of older people across Northern Ireland, bringing a consistent structure to assessment and outcomes. NISAT takes account of standards set by the Department regarding assessment, care management and discharge arrangements, and is currently at varying stages of roll-out across the five Trusts.

Suicide: Relationship with Alcohol or Drug Addiction

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is a correlation between suicide and alcohol or drug addiction.

(AQW 7710/11-15)

Mr Poots: Alcohol and drugs act as a disinhibitor, affecting a person's judgement and decision making process, and therefore increasing the likelihood of a depressed person making a suicide attempt.

Substance abuse is a significant risk factor for suicide, and in particular, heavy drinking patterns are linked to a higher incidence of suicide. International research also indicates that 1 in 3 young people were intoxicated at the time of their suicide attempt.

Alcohol and Drug Addiction

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much the (i) voluntary sector; and (ii) statutory sector have spent on tackling alcohol and drug addiction in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7711/11-15)

Mr Poots: On the 26th January 2012, I launched the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2 (NSD), which is a cross-sectoral strategy to reduce the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse. The NSD seeks to direct action across five pillars: prevention and early intervention; harm reduction; treatment and support; criminal justice; and monitoring, evaluation and research. This Department allocates approximately £8 million to its implementation each year, and additional funding of approximately £6.5 million is provided through the mental health budget for the provision of treatment and support services.

In 2011/12, of the funding highlighted above:

- (i) £4,916,407 was allocated to the community and voluntary sector; and
- (ii) £9,859,695 was allocated to statutory sector services.

It was not possible to provide figures for 2009/10 and 2010/11 in the timeframe, however, as the majority of this funding is allocated on the basis of rolling contracts and recurrent funding, the expenditure in these two years would be broadly similar to the figures given for 2011/12.

It should be noted that that the funding set out above is the money allocated from the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency to the statutory and community and voluntary sectors. It is not possible to give the total funding these services receive from donations, charitable organisations and other Government Departments.

10-day Prompt Payment of Invoices

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the ten day prompt payment of invoices performance target is based on calendar days or working days; and at which point the ten day count commences.

(AQW 7723/11-15)

Mr Poots: The guidance in relation to this issue is contained in Managing Public Money Northern Ireland. Annex 4.6.3 of this publication indicates that Public Sector organisations should aim to pay suppliers wherever possible within 10 working days. The ten day count commences from the date the invoice is received in the organisation.

Extant HSC guidance on this matter does not specify that working days should be used and as such, the majority of HSC trusts have been reporting on a calendar day basis, thereby understating their performance against this target. In order to ensure a consistent reporting basis, HSC guidance will now be updated to reflect Managing Public Money Northern Ireland.

Businesses: Payment of Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 5640/11-15, to detail (i) the number of invoices paid by the Health and Social Care Trusts (a) in the 2010/11 financial year; and (b) from 1 April 2011 to 31 October 2011; and (ii) how many of these invoices were paid late.

(AQW 7724/11-15)

Mr Poots: The total number of invoices paid by the HSC Trusts in the 2010/11 financial year and during the period 1 April to 31 October 2011 is presented in the following table.

The number of invoices paid within agreed terms, or if no terms have been agreed, within 30 days following the receipt of goods or a valid invoice (whichever is later) is also provided, together with the number of invoices paid late.

		2010/11	2011/12 1 April 11 to 31 October 11
Northern	Total invoices paid	137,673	74,387
	Total invoices paid on time	131,636	70,155
	Total invoices paid late	6,037	4,232
Belfast	Total invoices paid	356,767	209,484
	Total invoices paid on time	319,905	193,564
	Total invoices paid late	36,862	15,920
Western	Total invoices paid	98,991	59,877
	Total invoices paid on time	94,451	57,476
	Total invoices paid late	4,540	2,401

		2010/11	2011/12 1 April 11 to 31 October 11
South Eastern	Total invoices paid	121,262	76,295
	Total invoices paid on time	111,417	70,075
	Total invoices paid late	9,845	6,220
NIAS	Total invoices paid	15,137	8,986
	Total invoices paid on time	14,764	8,702
	Total invoices paid late	373	284
Southern	Total invoices paid	108,591	64,981
	Total invoices paid on time	98,136	57,926
	Total invoices paid late	10,455	7,055

Businesses: Payment of Invoices

Mr McClarty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 5640/11-15 (i) to detail the nature of the on-going prompt payment performance monitoring of Health and Social Care Trusts and other health bodies; (ii) if he will publish the findings of the internal audit review on the Trusts' levels of compliance with departmental guidance on prompt payment; and (iii) to detail the reasons why any of the Trusts and other health bodies have not achieved the minimum prompt payments target of 95 percent.

(AQW 7726/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The Department receives monthly returns from all of its Arm's Length Bodies which report (both for the current month and year to date cumulative) details of the total number of invoices paid, the number paid within 30 days or other agreed terms and the percentage this represents of the total.
- (ii) Trusts' levels of compliance with Departmental guidance on prompt payment are contained within each Trust's annual Internal Audit Report.
- (iii) The main reasons why some organisations have not achieved the minimum prompt payments target of 95 percent are:
 - The constraints of the current IT systems on which the HSC's payment function depends;
 - the wide geographical spread of sites within the organisations and the impact of this on payment procedures;
 - delays in receiving appropriate or complete information from suppliers.

Domiciliary Care

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria used in each Health and Social Care Trust area to determine eligibility for (i) domiciliary care packages; and (ii) domiciliary care Attendance Allowance.

(AQW 7780/11-15)

Mr Poots: In May 2008 the Department issued Regional Access Criteria for Domiciliary Care. The Criteria provide a framework for a more consistent approach to eligibility and fairer access to domiciliary care. Identified risks to independence, or personal safety are compared to the eligibility criteria against four bands:

- (i) Critical, Substantial, Moderate and Low. Health and Social Care Trusts are required to provide services where the identified risk to independence falls within the Critical or Substantial bands.
- (ii) Eligibility for Attendance Allowance is determined by the Social Security Agency and is a matter for the Department for Social Development.

Social Care: Residential Homes

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how much, on average, his Department has paid for one week of social care in a residential home in the (a) independent sector; and (b) statutory sector in each year since 2005; and (ii) whether these prices reflect any increases in inflation and other operating costs.

(AQW 7781/11-15)

Mr Poots: The average weekly cost of residential care is set out in the table below. The average cost represents the running costs of the accommodation and is calculated on the number of occupied resident weeks in the year.

This does not represent the cost to the HSC as residents in both the statutory and independent sector will make personal contributions to the cost of their accommodation.

- (i) The average weekly cost of a one week stay in residential care in the statutory and independent sectors from 2004/05 to 2010/1:

Average Cost per Person per Week (£)

	(a) Independent Sector	(b) Statutory Sector
2004/05	379	730
2005/06	416	787
2006/07	456	840
2007/08	474	936
2008/09	502	1,032
2009/10	515	1,099
2010/11	528	1,140

The figures represent residential care only for both adults and children and exclude those in nursing care.

- (ii) The average weekly cost represents the full running cost of the accommodation and therefore takes account of all increases in inflation and other operating costs.

Brendan Lillis

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what arrangements, if any, the Public Prosecution Service has requested that his Department put in place to monitor the state of health of Brendan Lillis, given that he could stand trial if his health improves.

(AQW 7805/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has not received a request from the Public Prosecution Service to monitor the state of health of Brendan Lillis.

Speech and Language Therapists

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of full-time equivalent speech and language therapists in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 7812/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of speech and language therapists employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is given in the table below.

Speech and Language Therapists within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care by Trust as at 31st December 2011

Trust	HC	WTE
Belfast	126	100.77
Northern	117	95.82
South Eastern	78	65.19
Southern	72	60.82
Western	63	56.41
Total	456	379.01

Source: Human Resources Management System

Notes:

HC = Headcount; WTE = Whole-time Equivalent

Figures exclude bank staff, staff on career breaks and staff with a whole-time equivalent of 0.03 or less.

10-day Prompt Payment of Invoices

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 2224/11-15, to detail the number of invoices paid within 10 days by each Health and Social Care Trust area between 1 April 2011 and 31 October 2011.

(AQW 7815/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of invoices paid by the Trusts within 10 days between 1 April 2011 and 31 October 2011 is summarised in the following table:

Trust	Number of invoices paid within 10 days between 1 April 2011 to 31 October 2011
Northern	41,232
Belfast	108,140
Western	35,024
South Eastern	31,154
NIAS	4,270
Southern	24,403

Invoices: Late Payment

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) why his Department's arm's-length bodies paid 110,346 invoices late in the 2010/11 financial year and between 1 April 2011 and 30 November 2011; and (ii) to detail the procedures that suppliers should follow to claim statutory late payment interest and any compensation applicable.

(AQW 7816/11-15)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The main reasons why Arm's Length Bodies have paid invoices late are:-
- The constraints of the current IT systems on which the HSC's payment function depends. I can confirm however that new financial systems will be rolled out across the HSC in the second half of the 2012/13 financial year as part of the Business Services Transformation Programme;
 - the wide geographical spread of sites within the organisations and the impact of this on payment procedures;
 - delays in receiving appropriate or complete information from suppliers.
- (ii) There are no formal documented procedures for suppliers to follow to claim statutory late payment interest and compensation. Suppliers should liaise directly with organisations where invoices have been paid late under the Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1988.

Disabled Car Parking Bays: Misuse

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to address the misuse of disabled car parking bays at health care facilities.

(AQW 7820/11-15)

Mr Poots: The public consultation on the Draft Policy for Car Parking Provision and Management in the Health & Social Care Sector period ended on 30 December 2011. The proposed draft policy retains the use of vehicle immobilisation as a deterrent against all forms of car-parking abuse (including misuse of disabled spaces) on hospital sites and extends the potential for its use to other Health & Social Care sites

A possible alternative or complementary measure might be to increase the number of security staff on HSC sites. The new policy provides for such costs being recovered through charging for car parking on HSC sites. Trusts may consider this approach in response to sustained parking abuse.

Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how much the judicial review in relation to the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee cost his Department, including (a) the legal costs incurred by his Department; and (b) the legal costs his Department had to pay to the Committee as a result of the outcome of the judicial review.

(AQW 7825/11-15)

Mr Poots: The remedy hearing for the Judicial Review brought by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI), formerly the Pharmaceutical Contractors Committee (PCC), was held on 7 February 2012. At the hearing Mr Justice Treacy awarded legal costs against my Department but did not impose any other financial penalty. The Departmental Solicitor's Office acted on behalf of my Department and to date they have not submitted an account of the costs they incurred in defending the action. To date no account has been received from CPNI of the legal costs they incurred in taking the Judicial Review.

Oasis Dental Care Limited

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the opening date and location of each Oasis Dental Care Limited practice; and (ii) the number of (a) adults; and (b) children, under 18 years of age, registered at each practice. **(AQW 7833/11-15)**

Mr Poots: The answer to this question is set out in the table below:

Practice Location	Opening date	Adults registered (Jan 2012)	Children Registered (Jan 2012)
Enniskillen	16/11/2009	7,365	1,828
Londonderry	16/11/2009	4,921	1,204
Omagh	02/02/2010	2,686	573
Dungannon	03/02/2010	2,263	666
Strabane	04/02/2010	2,362	722
Cookstown	22/03/2010	2,473	535
Carrickfergus	23/03/2010	2,475	549
Glengormley	24/03/2010	3,104	758
Holywood	22/04/2010	1,255	293
Bangor	05/05/2010	1,816	402
Banbridge	09/06/2010	1,444	392
Newry	10/06/2010	668	129
Lisburn	14/06/2010	1,612	460
Dundonald	09/08/2010	2,039	583

Oasis Dental Care Limited

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many orthodontic treatment cases have been completed by Oasis Dental Care Limited up to 31 January 2012.

(AQW 7834/11-15)

Mr Poots: Information obtained from the Family Practitioner Services, Information and Registration Unit of the HSC Business Services Organisation shows that no orthodontic treatment cases have been completed by Oasis Dental Care Limited up to 31 January 2012.

An orthodontic treatment case has been defined as dental treatment for which a claim containing at least one item from Determination I, Section VIII of the Statement of Dental Remuneration has been submitted for payment. This data only applies to treatments paid for either in full or in part by the Health Service; information on private treatment is not available.

Oasis Dental Care Limited

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the value of the contract with Oasis Dental Care Limited; (ii) the amount paid to Oasis Dental Care Limited for the contract in the (a) 2009/10; (b) 2010/11; and (c) 2011/12 financial years, to date.

(AQW 7836/11-15)

Mr Poots: The value of the contract with Oasis Dental Care Limited for the provision of additional dental services is £5.7 million per year. The table below shows the payments made to Oasis Dental Care Limited:

	Payments to Oasis Dental Care Ltd £
2009/10	645,109
2010/11	4,290,041
2011/12 (To 31 Jan 2012)	4,574,004

Payments are less than the total contract value because:

- The 14 Oasis practices opened in a phased roll out between November 2009 and August 2010; and

- Payments to Oasis are net of patient contributions, which are collected and retained by Oasis.

Tyrone County Hospital: Renal Services

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he will ensure that the removal of the laboratory from Tyrone County Hospital will not have a detrimental effect on the renal services provided in the hospital and throughout the West Tyrone area.

(AQW 7850/11-15)

Mr Poots: In December 2007 the Department's review, *The Future of Pathology Services in Northern Ireland* set out the strategic policy which guided the development of pathology services in Northern Ireland. In order to secure higher quality and more efficient services the Department endorsed the recommendation that there should be no laboratory facilities at local and enhanced local hospitals; services should instead be provided by the nearest acute hospital laboratory.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust is currently exploring options to ensure that the proposed changes will have no detrimental effect on the renal services provided in the Tyrone County Hospital and surrounding area. In addition, Tyrone County Hospital will continue to have appropriate point-of-care testing to effectively support renal services.

Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland: Judicial Review

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much the judicial review in relation to Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland cost his Department.

(AQW 7855/11-15)

Mr Poots: The remedy hearing for the Judicial Review brought by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI) was held on 7 February 2012. At the hearing Mr Justice Treacy awarded legal costs against my Department but did not impose any other financial penalty. The Departmental Solicitor's Office acted on behalf of my Department and to date they have not submitted an account of the costs they incurred in defending the action. To date no account has been received from CPNI of the legal costs they incurred in taking the Judicial Review.

Speech and Language Therapy: Spend

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much, per head, was spent on speech and language therapy in the last 12 months, in each Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 7856/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information requested is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Human Resources

Dr McDonnell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many staff are employed in his Department's Human Resources section.

(AQW 7881/11-15)

Mr Poots: A total of 27 staff (24.18 Full Time Equivalent) are employed in my Department's Human Resources and Learning and Development sections.

Speech and Language Therapists: Provision

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many speech and language therapists currently work in the Health Service; and (ii) for his assessment of whether the service provision is adequate.

(AQW 7884/11-15)

Mr Poots: At 31 December 2011 there were 456 (379.01 Whole Time Equivalent) speech and language therapists employed within health and social care in Northern Ireland. This represents an increase of 58 (35.3 WTE) or 14.6% (10.3% WTE) from the December 2007 figure of 398 (343.7 WTE). In the current very challenging financial climate facing health and social care in NI, I consider that speech and language therapists continue to provide a high quality and professional service to all those clients who require their expertise, support and advice. Moreover, in relation to children, in recent years speech and language therapists have invested time working with teachers and parents to ensure a partnership approach to the delivery of programmes to children and allow more children to benefit from speech and language therapy advice.

Speech and Language Therapists: Provision

Mr Ross asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many speech and language therapists have been employed by the Health Service in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7885/11-15)

Mr Poots: The number of speech and language therapists employed within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care over the last five years broken down by Health and Social Care Trust is given in the following table.

Speech and Language Therapists within Northern Ireland Health and Social Care by Trust as at 31st December 2007-2011

Trust	2007		2008		2009		2010		2011	
	HC	WTE	HC	WTE	HC	WTE	HC	WTE	HC	WTE
Belfast	118	97.6	117	93.0	120	95.6	117	94.2	126	100.8
Northern	90	78.6	93	80.6	103	88.8	108	88.9	117	95.8
South Eastern	67	56.3	73	61.5	72	60.7	74	62.2	78	65.2
Southern	69	60.8	66	57.6	66	57.0	66	56.6	72	60.8
Western	54	50.4	57	53.7	57	53.5	59	52.5	63	56.4
Total	398	343.7	406	346.3	418	355.6	424	354.4	456	379.0

Source: Human Resources Management System

Notes:

HC = Headcount; WTE = Whole-time Equivalent

Figures exclude bank staff, staff on career breaks and staff with a whole-time equivalent of 0.03 or less.

Fuel Hedging

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether his Department, and its arm's-length bodies, are engaged in fuel hedging to manage fluctuations in fuel prices.

(AQW 7896/11-15)

Mr Poots: Fuel procurement for the DHSSPS accommodation in Castle Buildings is managed by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) and DFP have confirmed that fuel hedging is not used in the procurement process. The Western, Northern and South Eastern HSC Trusts use fuel hedging to reduce their exposure to volatile and potentially rising fuel costs.

Respite Care: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr McCallister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many respite care hours, for all programmes of care, were provided in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area between 2009 and 2011.

(AQW 7901/11-15)

Mr Poots: This information is not available centrally within my Department and could only be obtained by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust at disproportionate costs.

Rare Disease Plan: Public Consultation

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the public consultation on a rare disease plan.

(AQW 7919/11-15)

Mr Poots: The UK Plan on Rare Disease is a joint plan being produced by the four nations of the UK. We are working closely with our counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales.

I have been advised that work is progressing on refining the consultation and finalising questions. No decision has been taken about when the consultation will be launched. However, I expect this to be agreed shortly.

Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland: Judicial Review

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the judicial review in relation to Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland, including the total legal costs.

(AQW 7931/11-15)

Mr Poots: The remedy hearing for the Judicial Review brought by Community Pharmacy Northern Ireland (CPNI) was held on 7 February 2012. At the hearing Mr Justice Treacy awarded legal costs against my Department but did not impose any other financial penalty. The Departmental Solicitor's Office acted on behalf of my Department and to date they have not submitted an account of the costs they incurred in defending the action. To date no account has been received from CPNI of the legal costs they incurred in taking the Judicial Review.

Tenders: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's advertisement on 29 March 2011, in the Belfast Telegraph Classifieds (i) why, under the procurement process, there was only a 13 day turnaround in which the applicants had to apply in writing requesting the tender documentation; (ii) how many organisations applied; and (iii) which organisation was successful.

(AQW 7968/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that the question refers to an advertisement for two community-based learning disability drop-in centres. On that understanding, the answer to each part of the question is as follows:

- (i) the service concerned is categorised as social care, which is not subject to the standard procurement requirements. The Trust nevertheless allowed 10 working days for responses to its advertisement, as provided for in the Department's guidance on compliance with procurement regulations;
- (ii) two organisations applied; and
- (iii) Compass Advocacy Network was successful.

Shared Services

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether financial assessments are part of the proposed Shared Services.

(AQW 7973/11-15)

Mr Poots: No. Financial assessments are outside the scope of the shared services proposals currently being consulted on.

Shared Services

Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail (i) the grades; and (ii) how many of each grade will be employed in each centre under the Shared Services proposal.

(AQW 7974/11-15)

Mr Poots: Without prejudice to the outcome of the public consultation, the Business Services Organisation shared draft indicative structures for the shared services with directors of HR and with the trade unions on Friday 10 February. Those structures illustrate initial thinking with regard to the level and banding of posts. Final decisions on shared service structures are dependent on the eventual model and locations of shared services and will be affected also by the detailed design for the replacement IT systems.

Tenders: Northern Health and Social Care Trust

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in relation to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's advertisement on 29 March 2011, in the Belfast Telegraph Classifieds (i) which organisation ran the schemes before they were put out to tender for the areas listed in the advert; (ii) whether European money was involved before or after the tendering process; (iii) who currently runs these schemes/services in the Antrim and Magherfelt areas; (iv) to detail the timescale and process of the tendering; (v) how many organisations applied; and (vi) which organisation was successful.

(AQW 7975/11-15)

Mr Poots: It is assumed that the question refers to an advertisement for community-based learning disability drop-in centres in Ballymena and Coleraine. On that understanding, the answer to each part of the question is as follows:

- (iv) these were new services, with no previous providers;
- (v) no EU money was involved;
- (vi) such facilities depend on partnership working, with the Trust providing the service and the relevant organisation providing the accommodation and volunteers. In the instance referred to, the organisations concerned are INVOLVE (Antrim) and VOLUNTEER CENTRE (Magherfelt/Cookstown);
- (vii) The advertisement was published on 29 March with a closing date of 12 April ie it allowed 10 working days for response;
- (viii) two organisations applied;
- (ix) Compass Advocacy Network was successful.

Adult Services: Homefirst Community Trust

Mr Gardiner asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the individual who last held the post of Director of Adult Services in the Homefirst Community Trust, is the same individual as the current Director of Adult Services in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 7982/11-15)

Mr Poots: Since its establishment in April 2007, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust has not had a Director of Adult Services post.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the current (i) number; and (ii) annual cost, of staff employed in his Department's Equality Unit.

(AQW 7991/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department currently employs four staff (2.75 full time equivalent) on the Equality function.

The annual cost of these staff is £85,267.

Tristel: Adverse Reactions

Mr T Clarke asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 7590/11-15, whether a copy of the Tristel Product case-note audit of all adverse reactions has been published; and where it can be accessed.

(AQW 8012/11-15)

Mr Poots: The audit of case notes of those staff who had reported symptoms was used internally within the Trust. The information is an audit of staff personal health information and is therefore not available for publication.

Questions for Written Answer: Stationery Costs

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much his Department has spent on stationery costs in replying to Assembly Written Questions, including the price of the envelopes and paper used, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8017/11-15)

Mr Poots: DHSSPS does not routinely collect this information and it would only be available at disproportionate cost.

Joe McCloskey: Independent Investigation

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he will order an independent investigation into the death of Fire Fighter, Joe McCloskey, at the Gorteen Hotel, Limavady on 2 November 2003.

(AQW 8122/11-15)

Mr Poots: I have no plans to commission an independent investigation into the death of firefighter Joe McCloskey. I have given very careful consideration to the three separate investigations already undertaken into the circumstances surrounding Mr McCloskey's death. None of these was able to provide a definitive conclusion and I am not aware of any fresh evidence on which to base a new investigation.

Speech and Language Therapy: Western Health and Social Care Trust

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 7856/11-15, how much, per head, was spent on speech and language therapy in the last 12 months, in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area.

(AQW 8131/11-15)

Mr Poots: The information is not readily available in the format requested, and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Stereotactic Ablative Radiotherapy

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the criteria used to determine a referral for stereotactic ablative radiotherapy to another part of the UK.

(AQW 8153/11-15)

Mr Poots: Stereotactic ablative radiotherapy is not currently provided in Northern Ireland. Referrals for such treatment would therefore be considered under the process the HSC Board uses for the approval of Individual Funding Requests (IFRs) or Extra Contractual Referrals (ECRs) to providers outside Northern Ireland.

The criteria used to determine Extra contractual referrals are as follows:

- The patient's clinical condition requires specialised care that could only be sustained for a large catchment population and cannot be provided for a small geographic area such as Northern Ireland;
- The patient's clinician wishes to seek a second opinion from a provider outside Northern Ireland because of complexities of the patient's condition or circumstances;
- The treatment is available locally but the patient has some exceptional reason which renders their case different from the vast majority of other patients with the same condition and which therefore justifies a referral for care or treatment outside Northern Ireland.

The decision to recommend a patient for stereotactic radiotherapy in the first instance is a matter for the clinical judgement of the referring consultant. This will be done on the basis of the patient's clinical condition, the best available evidence on the most appropriate treatment and discussions with the patient on his or her treatment options.

Omagh Hospital: Mental Health Services

Mr Doherty asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the mental health services that will be available at the new hospital planned for Omagh.

(AQO 1275/11-15)

Mr Poots: In Phase 1 of the Omagh Hospital project it is proposed to provide accommodation in the new Health and Care Centre for a range of community mental health services currently based at Lissan House.

Proposals for Phase 2 currently include a 26-bed acute psychiatric unit, day care facilities, a 7-bed addiction unit and accommodation for a community addiction team. However, the provision of both inpatient acute mental health care and addiction services are currently under regional review by the Health and Social Care Board. A business case, setting out the final proposals for Phase 2, will be required.

Ballymena Health and Care Centre

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the new Ballymena Health and Care Centre.

(AQO 1276/11-15)

Mr Poots: Detailed proposals for the new health and care centre in Ballymena have been developed. Given the constraints on my capital budget, I have instigated work to consider how best to progress a range of new health and care centres, including Ballymena. This will look at financing options both conventional and private with a view to early delivery of this project with the most cost-effective procurement methodology.

Whilst this review is ongoing, I have given approval for the enabling works for the new Ballymena Health and Care Centre to commence and work is due to start on site shortly.

Bamford Review

Mr Molloy asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Compton Report and its implications, whether he has any plans to accelerate the implementation of the recommendations contained in the Bamford Report.

(AQO 1277/11-15)

Mr Poots: Transforming Your Care's key messages of person-centred care, and a shift from hospital care to more responsive community care, reiterate and reinforce the Bamford priorities for the reform and modernisation of mental health and learning disability services. Progress has already been made through the 2009-11 Bamford Action Plan, but there is much more still to be done.

My Department is developing the 2012-15 Bamford Action Plan within the resources available, both in my Department and the HSC, and across the many other Departments and their arm's length bodies which contribute to the realisation of the Bamford vision.

Antrim Area Hospital: Accident and Emergency

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how the number of people waiting twelve hours, or more, for treatment in Antrim Area Hospital's Accident and Emergency Department, between October 2011 and December 2011, compares with the previous two years.

(AQO 1278/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am aware of the high levels of activity and delays within the Emergency Department at Antrim Area hospital and indeed the number of patients waiting over 12 hours has been of particular concern.

Between October and December 2011 a total of 810 patients waited more than 12 hours from arrival at the emergency department to be either treated and discharged or admitted - 252 in October, 164 in November and 394 in December. In the same period in 2010 356 patients waited over 12 hours and in 2009 99 patients waited more than 12 hours.

I acknowledge that these figures are high and that there is a pressing need to improve performance. However, fluctuations in the number of emergency department attendances will always occur, and I can assure you that emergency cases will always be dealt with as a priority.

I have acted robustly to ensure that the HSC Board and the Northern Trust work together to put in place a number of immediate measures to improve services.

South Tyrone Hospital: Minor Injuries Unit

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Minor Injuries Unit at South Tyrone Hospital.

(AQO 1279/11-15)

Mr Poots: The South Tyrone Hospital Minor Injuries Service is currently operational from 9am-9pm seven days per week. It is provided by Emergency Nurse Practitioners supported by nursing/auxiliary staff. The Minor Injuries Unit has access to diagnostic services between 9am-9pm Monday to Sunday.

The Minor Injuries Unit at South Tyrone Hospital plays an important role in the provision of urgent care in the Dungannon area and during 2010/11 there were over 18,800 attendances at the Unit.

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust is currently consulting on the future service model for minor injury services across the Trust area. This consultation process is due to end on 24 February 2012.

As Minister I want to ensure any proposed changes to the configuration of services focus on safety, sustainability and resilience in clinical terms.

Multiple Sclerosis: Newry and Armagh

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the number of people suffering from Multiple Sclerosis in the Newry and Armagh area.

(AQO 1281/11-15)

Mr Poots: Unfortunately, the number of people currently diagnosed with MS in the Newry and Armagh area is not known; however I understand there are approximately 900 people living with MS in the Southern Trust area as a whole.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr McElduff asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the performance of the Health Service in meeting the health requirements of people with Multiple Sclerosis.

(AQO 1282/11-15)

Mr Poots: Within the UK, it is believed NI has the second highest prevalence rate of MS after Scotland. So it is important that we have a health service that is appropriately skilled and understands how best to support people with MS.

In NI, I believe we are providing a high quality service to all members of the population, regardless of their illness or condition. All services accessed by people with MS are provided on the basis of assessed need, and I am proud of the dedication and commitment shown by the HSC workforce in continuing to make a difference within the current resource constrained environment.

Of course there remains work to be done; and I would assure you I will continue to work together with the HSC, the voluntary and community sector, patients and carers, to ensure that people with MS can live full, independent and inclusive lives.

Diabetes

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to improve services for people with diabetes.

(AQO 1283/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Report of the Health and Social Care Review "Transforming Your Care" identifies long term conditions, such as diabetes, as a key area for health and social care. I want to ensure that services are commissioned and delivered that will secure optimum health outcomes and well-being for people with diabetes and that these services reflect the principles of the new model of care set out in "Transforming Your Care".

To this end I have asked officials in my Department to instigate a review of the Report developed in 2003 by the Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team (CREST)/ Diabetes UK Joint Taskforce which set out a framework for diabetes care in Northern Ireland. This review will consider the provision of existing services and emerging priorities in order to inform the development of a strategic and co-ordinated approach to improving services for people with diabetes.

'Protect Life'

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what plans he has to update the 'Protect Life' suicide strategy.

(AQO 1284/11-15)

Mr Poots: A review of the 'Protect Life' strategy has been completed and I will seek Executive clearance within the coming weeks for publication of an updated version of the Strategy.

The "refreshed" strategy will reflect the findings of evaluation of various initiatives and local research on suicide prevention.

It will also take into account latest international evidence of best practice in this field.

An independent overall evaluation of the impact of 'Protect Life' will also be completed this year and will inform future suicide and self harm prevention policy in Northern Ireland from 2014 onwards.

Department of Justice

Police Part-time Reserve Gratuity Scheme

Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice how many appeals were received in relation to the Police Part-Time Reserve Gratuity Scheme; and how many of the appeals were successful.

(AQW 6919/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): 41 appeals have been received against the decision to refuse a gratuity payment on the basis of eligibility, or against the banding of a payment. Of these, 31 have been successful. In addition, 29 applications have been made to challenge the decision not to accept any applications received following the deadline of 4 February 2011. Since this is not a matter of eligibility but of policy, these cases have been treated separately from the appeals and applicants will be informed shortly.

Robert Black

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice (i) on how many occasions Robert Black has been transported to, and from, Northern Ireland; (ii) what was the method of transport on each occasion; and (iii) what the total cost has been to date.

(AQW 7299/11-15)

Mr Ford: I would refer the Member to the table in the corrected response to AQW 3975/11-15, which details this information.

Human Trafficking

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how many convictions have been secured in Northern Ireland, in each of the last five years for (i) trafficking into the UK for sexual exploitation; (ii) trafficking out of the UK for sexual exploitation; (iii) trafficking within the UK for sexual exploitation; and (iv) paying for sex from someone who has been forced into prostitution.

(AQW 7337/11-15)

Mr Ford: Trafficking for sexual exploitation offences may be prosecuted under Section 57(1)(a), 57(1)(b), 58(1) and 59(1) of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. Paying for the sexual services of a prostitute subjected to force may be prosecuted under Section 53(a) of the same act.

Data for the calendar years 2007 to 2010 (the last year for which data are available) record one conviction for the offences listed: for trafficking within the UK for sexual exploitation in 2008.

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Prison Service: Strategic, Efficiency and Effectiveness Programme

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice when the Prison Service's Strategic Efficiency and Effectiveness Programme will be published.

(AQW 7356/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service's Strategic, Efficiency and Effectiveness (SEE) Programme was launched on 28 June 2011. Since then, the Prison Review Team (PRT) has also published its final report in October 2011.

At present the SEE Programme incorporates approximately 70 separate ongoing workstreams linked to the NIPS change programme, not all of which are directly related to the PRT recommendations.

The SEE Programme, as it sits within the wider PRT reform agenda, is a very complex programme and there is not at this stage any single "SEE Programme" document which captures the programme in its entirety.

NIPS has already shared material with the Justice Committee in January 2012 relating to the key workstreams within the SEE Programme, their key outcomes and milestones, where these are known and how they align with the PRT recommendations. NIPS is also currently developing its Business Plan for the 2012-2013 business period and it is anticipated that plans under the SEE Programme will be integrated into that Business Plan. The Business Plan will be shared with the Justice Committee in due course.

Progress against the reforms planned under the SEE Programme and the Prison Review Team report will be subject to ongoing monitoring by the Ministerial-led Prison Review Oversight Group, which is due to meet for the first time on 15 February. Regular updates will also be provided to the Justice Committee.

Marian Price: Parole Commissioners

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what representations his Department has made to the Parole Commissioners in relation to Marian Price.

(AQW 7357/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department has not made any representations to the Parole Commissioners in relation to Marion McGlinchey (nee Price).

Marian Price: Revocation of Licence

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what representations his Department has received in relation to the revocation of Marian Price's licence by the Secretary of State.

(AQW 7358/11-15)

Mr Ford: The detention of a female prisoner in a male establishment has attracted representations from organisations such as British Irish Rights Watch (BIRW), the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Celtic League.

In addition, a number of individuals from the UK and abroad, have written to me to express concerns that Mrs McGlinchey's licence has been revoked. Sinn Fein and SDLP MLAs have also contacted me on her behalf. In addition SDLP MLAs also tabled a motion for debate in the Assembly on this issue which was heard on the 30 January.

Civil Legal Aid

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice to detail the (i) current average waiting time from a refusal of a civil legal aid application until a determination of a civil legal aid appeal; and (ii) the waiting time in each of the last four years.

(AQW 7360/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Legal Services Commission holds information that gives an indication only of waiting times. Waiting time is defined as the time between an application being refused and the earliest decision on appeal.

The table below sets out the average waiting time from a refusal of a civil legal aid application until a determination of civil legal aid appeals over the last four years.

Year	Average waiting time, Application to determination of a civil legal aid appeal
11/12 (to date)	20 weeks
10/11	21 weeks
09/10	20 weeks
08/09	23 weeks
07/08	25 weeks

Civil Legal Aid

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice what is the average waiting time for a civil legal aid application to be processed; and how this compares to the previous four years.

(AQW 7361/11-15)

Mr Ford: The average processing time is defined as the time from the date of registration of an application for civil legal aid to the date a legal aid decision is determined.

Prior to September 2011 the Legal Services Commission registered all applications, whether completed correctly or not. Post September 2011 a pilot project has been initiated to only register correctly completed applications.

The table below sets out the average waiting time for a civil legal aid application to be processed, this year and the previous four years.

Year	Average waiting time for processing a civil legal aid application
11/12 (to date)	3 weeks
10/11	5 weeks
09/10	5 weeks
08/09	3 weeks
07/08	7 weeks

Legal Services Commission

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how much has been spent by the Legal Services Commission in legal fees and outlays under civil legal aid in this financial year, to date; and how this amount compares to the previous four financial years.

(AQW 7362/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Legal Services Commission has supplied the figures in the following table detailing how much has been spent to date this year on civil legal aid and the previous four years.

Financial Year	Expenditure (£m)				
	Legal Advice & Assistance	Assistance By Way of Representation (ABWOR)		Civil	Total
		Other than Children Order	Children Order only		
2011/12 (YTD)	3.6	1.7	8.0	26.0	39.3
2010/11	5.2	1.9	8.0	27.4	42.5
2009/10	3.5	1.8	5.5	26.1	36.9
2008/09	3.6	1.6	5.2	22.1	32.5
2007/08	2.6	1.7	4.0	19.2	27.5

Civil Legal Aid

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how much money has been recouped by the Legal Services Commission through the payment of the statutory charge on civil legal aid in this financial year to date; and how this figure compares to the previous four financial years.

(AQW 7364/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Legal Services Commission has recouped £6,046.77 from April 2011 to end January 2012 from payments received in respect of the Statutory Charge. While precise figures cannot easily be extracted from the Commission's management information and finance systems, officials would estimate that this would compare favourably to the monies recouped in the previous four years.

Legal Services Commission

Miss M McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the category of case; (ii) the number of cases paid; and (iii) the total amount of money spent, for each category of bills paid by the Legal Services Commission, under the Assistance by Way of Representation scheme in this financial year, to date; and how this compares to the previous four financial years.

(AQW 7367/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Legal Services Commission makes payments to solicitors on submission of reports rather than cases. A solicitor may lodge more than one report throughout the life of the case.

The following table (overleaf) provides a detailed outline of the categories of proceedings covered under Assistance By Way of Representation, the volume of full reports paid for each and additional reports which have been paid up to the end of January 2012.

Table 1 – ABWOR Summary

Case Type	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	
	Volume	Net Total	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	2011-12
An Application for Life Sentence Review hearing before Parole Commission	65	£273,187	38	£208,216	43	£164,080	25	£115,042	14	£58,582
An application for Parole hearing before Parole Commission	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	3	£8,669	0	£0
Appeal under Art 2 of Child Support Appeal Jurisdiction Courts Order (NI) 1993	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	1	£334	0	£0
Application to discharge Order under Children (NI) Order 1995	8	£14,217	7	£11,198	11	£13,109	7	£18,888	9	£6,007

Case Type	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	
	Volume	Net Total	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	2011-12
Application to Remove Child from Jurisdiction under Children (NI) Order 1995	4	£2,206	0	£0	0	£0	3	£2,675	2	£1,437
Article 2 of Child Support Appeal Jurisdiction	4	£788	1	£148	1	£776	0	£0	0	£0
Article 44 or 45 of the PACE (NI) 1989	0	£0	0	£0	2	£846	0	£0	0	£0
Article 6 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 1998	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	1	£827	0	£0
Attachment of Earnings Order	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0
Breach of Order	41	£46,852	57	£70,907	54	£45,373	75	£94,833	66	£67,339
Care Order Article 50 under Children (NI) Order 1995	499	£1,091,552	646	£1,377,809	633	£1,200,803	799	£1,739,801	703	£1,506,935
Change of Child's Name Article 13 under Children (NI) Order 1995	1	£442	1	£298	6	£2,891	3	£1,321	3	£1,516
Child Assessment Order Article 62 under Children (NI) Order 1995	0	£0	10	£3,212	3	£1,761	0	£0	2	£5,141
Contact Order Article 8 under Children (NI) Order 1995	1,551	£1,298,998	1,797	£1,819,673	2,079	£2,090,794	2,748	£2,902,428	2,779	£3,158,657
Contact with Child in Care Article 53 under Children (NI) Order 1995	52	£66,210	72	£79,775	54	£37,853	92	£126,955	75	£72,035
Debt Proceedings	1	£159	5	£547	8	£780	5	£1,089	8	£882
Declaration of Parentage	39	£31,885	61	£46,140	104	£77,787	134	£100,566	128	£99,641
Declaration under Article 28 Child Support Order	0	£0	1	£287	1	£302	0	£0	0	£0
Discharge or Variation of Care or Supervision Orders Article 58 CO (NI) 1995	35	£25,226	29	£41,057	31	£22,716	81	£102,123	53	£53,416
Education Supervision Order Article 55 under Children (NI) Order 1995	9	£3,685	13	£15,927	20	£20,991	47	£26,377	23	£17,352
Ejectment	1	£159	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0
Emergency Protection Order Article 63 under Children (NI) Order 1995	26	£26,366	37	£85,666	34	£32,783	60	£84,737	44	£36,570
Ext or Discharge Emergency Protection Order Article 64, Children (NI) Order 1995	0	£0	2	£4,535	9	£4,474	7	£12,840	9	£13,028
Interim Care Order	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0

Case Type	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	
	Volume	Net Total	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	2011-12
Interim Care Order Article 57 under Children (NI) Order 1995	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	8	£4,590
Investigation into a Child's circumstances Art 56 under Children (NI) Order 1995	24	£17,124	21	£27,564	21	£19,210	23	£30,860	28	£9,125
Letter before Proceedings	0	£0	0	£0	31	£16,605	189	£106,147	147	£163,849
Non Attendance at School	6	£1,491	4	£752	2	£6,528	6	£4,107	4	£5,354
Non Molestation Order under The Family Homes & Domestic Violence (NI) Order 1998	2,819	£1,535,948	2,954	£1,633,640	3,001	£1,854,646	3,045	£1,950,420	2,766	£1,704,486
Occupation Order under The Family Homes & Domestic Violence (NI) Order 1998	26	£13,877	40	£18,681	65	£34,559	65	£40,427	66	£48,478
Orders for Financial Relief for Children Art 15 under Children (NI) Order 1995	1	£195	8	£4,228	6	£5,802	9	£2,148	7	£4,625
PACE case	23	£8,946	39	£17,814	37	£14,969	18	£7,897	21	£8,813
Parent Responsibility Order Article 7 under Children (NI) Order 1995	39	£24,748	45	£35,645	41	£36,815	41	£47,874	43	£46,199
Pre-Proceedings Meeting	0	£0	0	£0	13	£6,927	74	£39,929	96	£66,670
Proceedings before Prison Board of Visitors	0	£0	0	£0	1	£8,669	0	£0	0	£0
Proceedings for Arrears of Maintenance	14	£3,316	8	£1,713	5	£958	2	£494	1	£206
Proceedings for Arrears of Maintenance	0	£0	3	£1,895	0	£0	1	£562	1	£206
Proceedings for variation of maintenance	23	£4,868	33	£10,346	22	£5,662	20	£3,187	12	£2,294
Proceedings under Articles 44 or 45 of the PACE (Northern Ireland) 1989	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	2	£827	2	£624
Proceedings under Mental Health Tribunal	174	£33,936	123	£24,851	150	£87,159	122	£87,222	147	£110,432
Proceedings under paragraphs 29 or 36 of section 8 of the Terrorism Act 2000	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	9	£5,410	3	£1,075
Prohibited Steps Order Article 8 under Children (NI) Order 1995	51	£39,964	46	£39,024	46	£44,836	51	£45,756	57	£53,620

Case Type	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	
	Volume	Net Total	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	2011-12
Recovery of cost of assistance or benefit from a person liable for maintenance	0	£0	2	£1,089	0	£0	1	£0	0	£0
Recovery Order Article 69 under Children (NI) Order 1995	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	1	£207
Representation (Parties to be Joined)	20	£45,140	19	£40,287	10	£13,357	23	£31,017	0	£0
Representation in Art 44 (Parties to be Joined) under Children (NI) Order 1995	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	1	£1,770
Representation in Art 50 (Parties to be Joined) under Children (NI) Order 1995	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	19	£41,241
Representation in Article 52 of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995	0	£0	0	£0	1	£308	0	£0	1	£1,012
Residence Order Article 8 under Children (NI) Order 1995	1,029	£883,921	1,102	£1,126,304	1,190	£1,198,742	1,588	£1,748,363	1,664	£2,095,305
Revival Summons	0	£0	4	£217	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0
Revocation/Discharge of an Order	0	£0	2	£2,172	7	£6,008	13	£8,307	5	£6,312
Section 8 of the Terrorism Act 2000	0	£0	9	£3,722	27	£16,559	0	£0	0	£0
Secure Accommodation Article 44 under Children (NI) Order 1995	89	£74,306	95	£74,165	76	£52,542	91	£99,956	82	£100,171
Separation & Maintenance Proceedings	287	£87,843	273	£95,676	233	£86,281	191	£70,320	143	£56,754
Sex Offenders Order	1	£80	0	£0	39	£11,473	18	£4,910	16	£4,597
Specific Issue Order Article 8 under Children (NI) Order 1995	48	£19,159	66	£39,821	78	£53,624	108	£96,549	73	£51,268
Supervision Order Article 50 under Children (NI) Order 1995	25	£33,758	33	£35,592	31	£34,744	53	£81,373	30	£48,666
Tariff hearing under the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001	0	£0	0	£0	4	£12,967	4	£28,129	2	£10,843
Variation and Discharge of Non Molestation Order	35	£14,117	32	£9,575	60	£18,564	57	£20,989	49	£19,263
Variation and Discharge of Occupation Order	4	£1,726	7	£1,337	4	£1,012	0	£0	3	£631

Case Type	2007-08		2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	
	Volume	Net Total	2008-09		2009-10		2010-11		2011-12	2011-12
Variation of Sex Offenders Order	0	£0	0	£0	0	£0	2	£423	2	£432
Total:	7,074	£5,726,399	7,745	£7,011,504	8,294	£7,367,644	9,917	£9,903,109	9,418	£9,767,655

Legal Aid: Mileage and Travel Time Rates

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether lawyers set their own legal aid mileage and travel time rates, or whether there is a fixed rate.

(AQW 7368/11-15)

Mr Ford: Lawyers do not set their own rates. Legal aid mileage and travel time rates are either set in legislation or, where no statutory rate has been set, the rates are determined by the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission.

Gerard Donegan: Attempted Escape

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to outline the circumstances surrounding the attempted escape of Gerard Donegan from an appointment at Belfast City Hospital, including (i) the number of staff who accompanied him to the appointment; (ii) whether any of the staff sustained any injuries; (iii) the offence for which Mr Donegan was imprisoned; and (iv) whether he had a record of attempted escape or assault on Prison Service staff prior to this incident.

(AQW 7377/11-15)

Mr Ford: An attempted escape occurred on 22 January 2012 whilst Mr Donegan was under escort by two Night Custody Officers at Craigavon Area Hospital. The circumstances surrounding the attempted escape are currently subject to a full investigation by a senior Governor from Prison Service Headquarters. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on the circumstances until the investigation is completed.

Mr Donegan was imprisoned for a Breach of a Probation Order and is remanded in custody on a range of other alleged offences. He has a history of assault and attempted escape.

Legal Aid: Budget

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to list the expenses that lawyers are entitled to claim from the legal aid budget; and how much has been paid out in each category in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7378/11-15)

Mr Ford: The expenses which lawyers are entitled to claim are travel, mileage and car parking for journeys within Northern Ireland subject to them being deemed reasonable on assessment by the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission (NILSC) or by the Taxing Master.

Lawyers can also apply to the NILSC to incur travelling and subsistence for journeys outside Northern Ireland. In such cases the lawyer must satisfy the NILSC that such expenses are necessary and must provide an estimate of the expenses to be incurred. If the NILSC determines that the request to incur the expense is reasonable, the NILSC will assess the estimates provided to ensure value for money.

The table below shows expenses paid from the legal aid fund to solicitors and counsel for travel and mileage in the last three financial years. It is not possible to identify all instances of travel and mileage and other sundry expenses such as car parking without an exercise to examine individual files. Such information could not be obtained without incurring disproportionate costs.

Business Area	Expense	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
ABWOR	Travel Time	£34,045	£38,679	£42,544
	Mileage	£15,088	£18,675	£19,472
Children Order	Travel Time	£234,242	£226,066	£312,924
	Mileage	£114,827	£117,073	£164,488
LAA	Travel Time	£313,467	£268,110	£411,469
	Mileage	£118,103	£101,048	£154,731
Civil	Travel Time	£72,867	£95,564	£165,953
	Mileage	£54,431	£71,401	£115,513

Business Area	Expense	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11
Criminal	Travel Time	£1,238,706	£1,127,641	£1,192,635
	Mileage	£749,194	£671,281	£718,848
	Total	£2,944,970	£2,735,538	£3,298,577

Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre, Millisle

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice to outline his plans for the future of Lisnevin Juvenile Justice Centre in Millisle.
(AQW 7417/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service is giving consideration to contingency arrangements to deal with the rise in the prison population. No firm decision has yet been taken on the site but it will remain an option for future planning.

An oral briefing on the Estate Strategy is due to be delivered to the Justice Committee on the 29 March.

Whiplash Claims

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what is the average court settlement for a successful whiplash claim.
(AQW 7419/11-15)

Mr Ford: Information is not available to answer this question. A claim for a whiplash injury will usually be incorporated within a cause of action of road traffic accident or personal injury and the specific nature of any injury will not form part of the court record.

Anti-social Behaviour Orders

Mr Spratt asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the effectiveness of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders in tackling anti-social behaviour in the long-term.
(AQW 7426/11-15)

Mr Ford: In Northern Ireland anti-social behaviour orders are only one part of graduated response to anti-social behaviour which includes measures such as Neighbourhood Watch schemes, Community Safety Wardens, intergenerational projects, priority youth intervention programmes, warning letters, and acceptable behaviour contracts.

The recent consultation on a new Community Safety Strategy provided an opportunity for local consideration of the current approach to anti-social behaviour orders and obtaining views on their use as well as alternative approaches to addressing anti-social behaviour.

A range of views were received, which were reflected in the consultation response document, but I should stress that there was no consensus of opinion as to the effectiveness of anti-social behaviour orders.

The Criminal Justice Inspectorate Northern Ireland has commenced its inspection of the Criminal Justice System's approach to addressing anti-social behaviour, which includes a follow up to the 2008 report into the operation and effectiveness of anti-social behaviour orders. This process will be completed in the coming months.

I await the outcome of this inspection and will consider any recommendations arising from it when assessing the effectiveness of anti-social behaviour orders in tackling anti-social behaviour.

Legal Aid: Aidan Grew

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice to detail the (i) legal aid costs to date of the trial of Aidan Grew for taking part in an illegal procession; and (ii) estimated final costs, broken down by (a) solicitor; and (b) counsel costs.
(AQW 7454/11-15)

Mr Ford: No legal aid application has been made in respect of Mr Grew's trial for taking part in an illegal procession.

Marian Price: Security Status

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice could Marian Price be accommodated in Hydebank Wood Women's Prison were she to relinquish her republican separated prisoner status.
(AQW 7462/11-15)

Mr Ford: The decision to accommodate Marian McGlinchey (née Price) in Maghaberry Prison was as a result of her Category 'A' security status. She is for all intents and purposes a republican separated prisoner. If she were to request a transfer to integrated conditions in Hydebank Wood that would be subject to the outcome of a full risk assessment.

Enniskillen Court House: Double Yellow Lines

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6390/11-15, to detail the number of consultation responses received from local traders, broken down by those (i) in favour; and (ii) against the introduction of the yellow lines.

(AQW 7464/11-15)

Mr Ford: Following receipt of security advice from the Centre for Protection of the National Infrastructure NICTS took the decision to introduce double yellow lines outside and opposite Enniskillen Courthouse.

While no widespread public consultation process was undertaken, a NICTS official visited ten business premises in East Bridge Street, and issued letters to eight business premises explaining the need to introduce the parking restrictions. Contact was also made with a representative of Enniskillen Presbyterian Church.

No written responses were received to these letters, but in response to concerns raised by elected representatives I asked NICTS officials to meet with those representatives and local business owners.

All those who attended the meeting expressed opposition to the double yellow lines.

Following further consideration of alternative physical security measures a decision was taken to remove the double yellow lines.

Sex Offender Treatment Programme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6441/11-15, how many of the people convicted, reoffended by committing a (i) similar offence; and (ii) any other offence; and, of these, how many had participated in the Sex Offender Treatment Programme.

(AQW 7466/11-15)

Mr Ford: Of the 640 people convicted of sexual offences, seven were re-convicted for similar offences. Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) records indicate that none of the seven prisoners reconvicted of a similar offence completed a Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) during their original time in custody.

A comprehensive manual analysis of each case would be needed in order to assess how many have been re-convicted of any other offence. This could only be carried out at disproportionate cost to the public purse.

There are a number of potential reasons why an individual may not have participated in an SOTP.

First, in order to be eligible to participate in an SOTP, a prisoner must be sentenced and not in denial of their offence. Where possible, NIPS may be able to offer alternative programmes to those who are awaiting trial, which although not specifically designed for such offences, will assist in addressing reoffending, for example the Enhanced Thinking Skills Programme. However, there may also be other constraints for those who are awaiting trial or who have been on remand for a lengthy period of time, such as insufficient time to complete the programme. It should also be noted that some prisoners may be unable to complete the programmes due to learning difficulties.

Terrorist Convictions

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total number of convictions secured for involvement in terrorist activity for each year since 1969, broken down by (i) the nature of the terrorist convictions; (ii) the county of residency of the offender at the time of conviction, with the cities of Belfast and Londonderry accounted for separately; and (iii) the religion of the person convicted.

(AQW 7485/11-15)

Mr Ford: Terrorism statistics are a matter for the NIO.

Historical Enquiries Team: Forensic Investigations

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice (i) for his assessment of the importance of forensic investigations in delivering a successful outcome, in terms of convictions, in Historical Enquiries Team cases; (ii) to detail the total budget allocated to the Historical Enquiries Team for forensic investigations since its inception; and (iii) the total amount spent to date.

(AQW 7487/11-15)

Mr Ford: Forensic investigation is very important in delivering a successful outcome in terms of convictions in Historical Enquiry Team (HET) cases. Modern forensic techniques have offered the HET the opportunity to reinvestigate crimes that would not have been amenable to such investigation at the time of their occurrence. These advances include, amongst others, enhanced microscopic ballistics examination, improved instrumental analysis methods and, most prominently, DNA analysis. However, there are many factors other than forensic evidence alone that impact upon the rate of convictions. Although relatively few cases have been brought to judicial proceedings, those cases which have been brought, have, by and large, been as a result of forensic investigation.

The HET forensic budget forms part of the overall budget. However the HET has separate arrangements with Forensic Science Northern Ireland, and since its formation the HET has assigned £3,060,000 for forensic work. The total amount spent to date for forensic work is £1,588,898.

Historical Enquiries Team: Funding

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice whether the Historical Enquiries Team will be provided with additional funding, should the need arise, to enable it to conclude all cases registered under its remit.

(AQW 7489/11-15)

Mr Ford: I view the work of the Historical Enquiries Team as critically important. I believe that it has been resourced sufficiently to complete its task but will consider seriously any request for additional resources, should that prove necessary to enable the Team to conclude all cases within its remit.

Prisoners: On the Run

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice how many people convicted of a paramilitary offence since 1969 are currently considered to be 'on-the-run' from prison.

(AQW 7494/11-15)

Mr Ford: Records indicate that since 1969, 46 prisoners are 'Unlawfully at Large'. It is not possible to determine in all cases whether or not the offences were linked to organisations connected with the affairs of Northern Ireland.

Justice and Security Green Paper

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the implications for open justice and fairness in Northern Ireland arising from the Justice and Security Green Paper.

(AQW 7515/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Justice and Security Green Paper addresses a range of issues, many of which fall outside my area of responsibility. The main area of interest for Northern Ireland relates to the Coroners' Court and the conduct of certain inquests.

In my response to the consultation exercise, which has been shared with the Justice Committee, I have raised the question of whether the proposals are, in relation to inquests, Article 2 compliant.

Consultation in respect of the Paper ended on 6 January 2012 and the Government is considering responses before reaching decisions in relation to implementation of the proposals. Open justice and fairness principles would, of course, have to be carefully considered when deciding on any changes arising as a result of the Green Paper.

I would expect to be consulted on any implications for matters within my Ministerial remit before final decisions are taken.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7541/11-15)

Mr Ford: No mobile phone applications have been developed by the Department or its agencies and arm's length bodies for use by members of the public.

There are no mobile phone applications currently being developed.

Sex Offenders Treatment Programme: Prisoner Participation

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6441/11-15, in relation to the seven prisoners who accepted responsibility but refused to participate in the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme, (i) whether this was taken into consideration before their release; and (ii) what additional measures were imposed on them to ensure public safety.

(AQW 7568/11-15)

Mr Ford: Of the seven prisoners who accepted responsibility but refused to participate in the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme (SOTP) two remain in custody. One is serving a Determinate Custodial Sentence (DCS) and the release date is determined by the court conviction. The other prisoner is serving an Extended Custodial Sentence (ECS), which is a discretionary sentence and the decision to release will be taken by the Parole Commissioners following their assessment of the level of risk the individual presents and whether the risk can be safely managed in the community. For ECSs release will be automatic when the custody expiry date is reached.

Determinate Custodial Sentences, Indeterminate Custodial Sentences and Extended Custodial Sentences include a period on licence, and while it would not be appropriate to discuss individual cases, various additional measures can be imposed in addition to standard conditions to ensure public protection.

Examples of some of these additional measures include:

- Residency requirement in approved accommodation
- Curfew and/or Electronic Tagging
- Active participation in named programme
- Total ban on Alcohol and/or misuse any Drug

- Alcohol and/or Drug testing
- Bar on owning or using internet or any device with a camera
- Not to contact or engage with victim(s) or families

Adherence to licence conditions will be monitored by PBNI and/or PSNI, and any failure to comply may lead to the prisoner being recalled to custody.

Legal Aid: Payments Dispute

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether the dispute over lawyers' Legal Aid payments in 2011 contributed to the delay in cases being processed through the justice system; and what percentage of cases this affected.

(AQW 7569/11-15)

Mr Ford: Last year's dispute over legal aid payments had a potential impact on delay in the Crown Court. The extent to which any delay can be attributed to the legal aid dispute is not, however, quantifiable as a range of factors can contribute to delay.

Court statistics indicate that in the period January to March 2011 86% of defendants were arraigned in the Crown Court within six weeks of committal and 78% started their trial within a further twelve weeks. The equivalent performance statistics for the period April to August 2011, when the legal aid dispute was ongoing, were 77% and 63% respectively.

Prisoner Assessment Unit: Disciplinary Action

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 6083/11-15, (i) on what date the two members of staff were charged under the NIPS Code of Conduct; (ii) what was their rank; (iii) what was the charge; and (iv) how were they disciplined.

(AQW 7570/11-15)

Mr Ford: Two Governors were charged under the NIPS Code of Conduct and Discipline on 28 October 2011. They were charged with contributing to the reputational damage of the Northern Ireland Prison Service under Section 3 of the Code of Conduct and Discipline. Both Governors were found guilty and given a written warning.

Prison Service College: Artefacts

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made on the future of the Prison Service Museum.

(AQW 7581/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service continues to assess a number of options for the future of artefacts currently being held at the Prison Service College. These include use of the former Maze site and the new joint training facility at Desertcreat.

Contraband: HMP Maghaberry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions prisoners at Roe House, Maghaberry Prison have been found with contraband since the devolution of justice.

(AQW 7592/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since the devolution of justice on 12 April 2010, prisoners at Roe House Maghaberry Prison have been found with contraband on 41 occasions.

26 relate to Roe 1 and 2 and 15 relate to Roe 3 & 4.

Contraband: HMP Maghaberry

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Justice on how many occasions prison officers at Maghaberry Prison have been found with contraband since the devolution of justice.

(AQW 7593/11-15)

Mr Ford: Since the devolution of justice on 12 April 2010 no prison officers at Maghaberry Prison have been found with contraband.

Human Trafficking

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister of Justice (i) what discussions he has had in 2012 with (a) the UK Government; and (b) the Government of the Republic of Ireland in relation to human trafficking; and (ii) what assistance is available for people who are rescued from traffickers.

(AQW 7601/11-15)

Mr Ford:

(i)(a) I have had no meetings to date in 2012 but have accepted an invitation to the Home Office led Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Human Trafficking in April.

(i)(b) I hosted a trilateral meeting with Alan Shatter, Justice Minister of the Republic of Ireland and Kenny MacAskill, Cabinet Secretary for Justice in Scotland, on 1 February. Human trafficking was one of a range of topics discussed.

- (ii) The service for adult victims of human trafficking includes safe and appropriate accommodation in Northern Ireland, help with day-to-day living and travel costs, information in a language victims can understand, help to access health care and other services around support, immigration, advice, counselling etc. The support service is provided by Women's Aid and Migrant Helpline.

DHSSPS are in the lead for child victims and have detailed guidance for Trusts in place. All child victims of trafficking are entitled to the full range of services afforded to 'looked after children' under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.

Trevor Hamilton

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 7057/11-15, whether Trevor Hamilton was released from custody under the same circumstances prior to the introduction of the Criminal Justice Order (NI) 2008.

(AQW 7655/11-15)

Mr Ford: Hamilton was sentenced to a Custody Probation Order on 19 September 2001 for offences of rape, indecent assault of a female, assault with intent to commit buggery and threats to kill. He was released from prison on 18 August 2003, having served 3 ½ years of his determinate sentence, and on release was subject to supervision by the Probation Board. As this case predated changes to the laws on sentencing provided for by the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008, which made available indeterminate and extended custodial sentences where certain offenders present a significant risk of serious harm, his release date was not subject to consideration of risk by the Parole Commissioners.

Sexual Offender Treatment Programme

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many people, who are currently serving a custodial sentence for rape or sexual assault and are classed as being in 'complete denial', have refused to participate in a Sexual Offender Treatment Programme; and whether their refusal to co-operate with a programme will be considered by the Parole Commissioners.

(AQW 7657/11-15)

Mr Ford: There are 26 people currently serving a custodial sentence for rape or sexual offence who are classed as being in 'complete denial'. They have not completed a Sexual Offender Treatment Programme.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service is required to provide the Parole Commissioners with all current and relevant information on each case they consider. However, the manner in which this information is used to inform decisions about release dates and/or licence conditions is a matter entirely for the Parole Commissioners.

Prisoners: Christmas Leave

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice how many of the prisoners who were granted Christmas leave in 2011 were serving a custodial sentence of five years or more.

(AQW 7659/11-15)

Mr Ford: A total of 52 prisoners who were serving custodial sentences of five years or more were granted leave over the Christmas period.

Of these 52 prisoners, 35 were released under the Christmas Home Leave Scheme, while the remaining 17 were granted leave as part of their participation on a pre-release programme.

Prison Estate Strategy

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice when a decision will be made on the Review of the Provision of Prison Accommodation.

(AQW 7668/11-15)

Mr Ford: NIPS is in the process of finalising a refreshed Prison Estate Strategy, which will take into account the recommendations of the Prison Review Team's final report, published in October 2011, as well as other factors, such as the forecast growth in prisoner population, and the demands that this places on the current accommodation.

The Strategy is due to be delivered to the Minister by 15 March with an oral briefing to the Justice Committee to follow on the 29 March. It is envisaged that the Strategy will go through a process of public consultation before being finalised later this year.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships: Costs

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice what is the projected total cost of the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships in 2012/13.

(AQW 7671/11-15)

Mr Ford: The projected total cost of the new Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) in 2012/13 is approximately £5,828,000. This figure includes programme funding, staffing, administration and expenses.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships: Allowances

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how much is projected to be spent on allowances for members of the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships in 2012/13.

(AQW 7672/11-15)

Mr Ford: There will be no allowances along the lines of those provided to members of the District Policing Partnerships (DPPs) made available to PCSP members. However, I can confirm that a 'meeting expense payment' of £60 for up to 20 meetings per year will be made available to members in order to cover any costs associated with their attendance at, and membership of, a PCSP.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships: Costs to Local Councils

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice whether all of the costs associated with allowances for members of the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships will be met by the Policing Board; and if not, what proportion of the costs will be met by local Councils.

(AQW 7674/11-15)

Mr Ford: As stated above, there will be no allowances for PCSP members. The costs of the 'meeting expense payment' described above will be met by both the Department and the Policing Board, as they have joint oversight of the new partnerships.

Councils will have the discretion to make additional payments to members over and above the funding provided by the Department and the Policing Board for 20 meetings per year; however they are not obliged to do so.

Current/Capital Budget Allocation

Mr Copeland asked the Minister of Justice whether his departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to his capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7681/11-15)

Mr Ford: Although in practice spending areas in the Department of Justice with the largest revenue budgets will have large capital budgets, there is not necessarily a direct correlation between revenue expenditure and capital budget allocations. Revenue and capital budgets are each allocated in line with Ministerial priorities.

National Offender Management Service

Lord Morrow asked Minister of Justice whether his Department makes any indirect financial contribution to the National Offender Management Service, and, if so, to provide details.

(AQW 7683/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service does not make any indirect financial contribution to the National Offender Management Service. It does however, in line with normal practice, reimburse the costs of any staff seconded to NIPS.

Courthouses: Expenditure and Refurbishment

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, over the last five years, how much has been spent on refurbishing or upgrading each of the five courthouses that are now being considered for closure.

(AQW 7684/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below provides the expenditure on refurbishment or upgrade, including security and statutory compliance requirements, in each of the five Hearing Centres being considered for closure over the past five years. The figures for the current year (2011/12) are for the ten months from April 2011 to January 2012 and have not yet been audited.

	2007/08 £	2008/09 £	2009/10 £	2010/11 £	2011/12 (10 months) £	Total £
Bangor	Nil	11,824.59	84,434.23	28,125.89	10,323.64	134,708.35
Limavady	Nil	4,063.62	85,601.96	49,615.25	6,911.43	146,192.26
Magherafelt	Nil	17,301.94	86,247.96	10,018.27	31,598.18	145,166.35
Larne	Nil	36,008.23	88,675.31	27,357.47	10,305.06	162,346.07
Strabane	13,395	18,110.23	2,536.42	32,166.10	101,074.32	167,282.07
Total	13,395	87,308.61	347,495.88	147,282.98	160,212.63	755,695.10

This work was initiated prior to the Hearing Centre consultation and was necessary to protect the health and safety of all users of court accommodation, including members of the public, NICTS staff, judiciary, legal profession, PSNI and NIPS.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in his Department's Equality Unit.

(AQW 7716/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Department of Justice does not have an Equality Unit. Statutory and other equality responsibilities and duties are co-ordinated for the DOJ by the Central Management Unit. The DOJ's Personnel and Office Services Division leads on diversity for the Department. Equality issues will also feature in day to day HR operational matters. Equality and diversity issues are therefore delivered by a number of staff alongside other duties.

Animal Fighting Offences

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many convictions have been secured for unlawful animal fighting or participating in unlawful animal fighting in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7730/11-15)

Mr Ford: The table below gives the number of convictions for the calendar years 2004 to 2008 (the latest year for which figures are currently available).

During this period, animal fighting offences could be prosecuted under Sections 19(1)(a), 19(1)(c), 19(1)(f), 19(2) of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 and Article 19(2)(a) of the Dogs (Northern Ireland) Order 1983.

Number of convictions for animal fighting offences, 2004-2008

Year	Number of convictions
2004	0
2005	1
2006	0
2007	1
2008	0

Data are collated on the principal offence rule; only the most serious offence for which an offender is convicted is included.

Data for 2004-2006 should not be directly compared with data from 2007 to 2008 as the data sets are sourced from different systems.

Loughinisland Murders

Ms Ritchie asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with the PSNI regarding the progress of the inquiry into the killings of six men at O'Toole's Bar, Loughinisland on 18 June 1994.

(AQW 7736/11-15)

Mr Ford: The ongoing investigation into the killing of six men at O'Toole's Bar, Loughinisland on 18 June 1994 is an operational matter for the PSNI and as such it would be inappropriate for me to become involved.

I have however informed the Chief Constable of the member's ongoing interest in this case.

Police Stations: Irish Language

Mr McKay asked the Minister of Justice how the PSNI plans to make stations and services more welcoming for Irish language speakers.

(AQW 7762/11-15)

Mr Ford: The management of police stations is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Civil Service: Posts

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister of Justice how many Civil Service posts existed in his Department at the beginning of 2012 at (i) Administrative Assistant; (ii) Administrative Officer; (iii) Executive Officer 2; (iv) Executive Officer 1; (v) Staff Officer; (vi) Deputy Principal; (vii) Grade 7; and (viii) Grade 6 levels, broken down by local Council area.

(AQW 7766/11-15)

Mr Ford: A breakdown of Civil Service posts within the Department of Justice and its Agencies, by local Council area, at 1 January 2012 is as below:

Council	Grade	Number of posts (Full Time Equivalent)
Antrim	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Executive Officer/Grade C	5.5
	Administrative Officer	6.26
Ards	Grade 7/Principal	1
	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	2
	Executive Officer/Grade C	8.88
	Administrative Officer	17.06
	Administrative Assistant	2
Armagh	Staff Officer/Grade B2	0.95
	Executive Officer/Grade C	2.17
	Administrative Officer	3.7
Ballymena	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	1
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	2
	Executive Officer/Grade C	4.9
	Administrative Officer	2
	Administrative Assistant	9.63
Banbridge	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Administrative Officer	1
	Administrative Assistant	1
Belfast	Grade 6	7
	Grade 7/Principal	61.7
	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	125.44
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	187.68
	Executive Officer/Grade C	310.35
	Administrative Officer	422.08
	Administrative Assistant	67.49
Carrickfergus	Grade 6	1
	Grade 7/Principal	3
	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	5
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	4.9
	Executive Officer/Grade C	11.33
	Administrative Officer	23.63
	Administrative Assistant	0.8
Coleraine	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Executive Officer/Grade C	2.8
	Administrative Officer	5.34

Council	Grade	Number of posts (Full Time Equivalent)
Craigavon	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	1
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Executive Officer/Grade C	6.8
	Administrative Officer	11
Derry	Grade 7/Principal	1
	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	1
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	4
	Executive Officer/Grade C	9.65
	Administrative Officer	24
	Administrative Assistant	1.1
Down	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Executive Officer/Grade C	4.91
	Administrative Officer	5.41
Dungannon and South Tyrone	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Executive Officer/Grade C	5
	Administrative Officer	10.6
Fermanagh	Executive Officer/Grade C	1
	Administrative Officer	3.28
Limavady	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	1
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	2
	Executive Officer/Grade C	8
	Administrative Officer	22.7
	Administrative Assistant	5
Lisburn	Grade 7/Principal	1
	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	3.9
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	9
	Executive Officer/Grade C	21.52
	Administrative Officer	45.41
	Administrative Assistant	12.04
Newry and Mourne	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	1
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	2
	Executive Officer/Grade C	7.3
	Administrative Officer	10.54
Newtownabbey	Administrative Officer	0.78

Council	Grade	Number of posts (Full Time Equivalent)
North Down	Staff Officer/Grade B2	1
	Executive Officer/Grade C	0.88
	Administrative Officer	5.99
	Administrative Assistant	2
Omagh	Deputy Principal/Grade B1	1
	Staff Officer/Grade B2	2
	Executive Officer/Grade C	6.8
	Administrative Officer	10.58

The department is in the final stages of a grading review of all Grade C / EO posts to establish if they are equivalent to E01 or E02 grade. This exercise is due to be completed by the end of March 2012; until then we cannot provide a split between E02 and E01 grades.

Courthouses: Closures

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the proposed courthouse closures, what consideration has been given to the potential increase in arrest warrants that will have to be issued, and the associated costs including police resources, if defendants do not arrive in time for court hearings.

(AQW 7774/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is not anticipated that the proposed closure of any of the courthouses which currently operate as Hearing Centres will result in an increase in the issuing of arrest warrants. The issue of an arrest warrant is a judicial decision based on the individual circumstances of each case.

Prison Officers: Exit Scheme

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice whether the tax implications for the prison officers who are availing of the Prison Officer Exit Scheme will fall in the 2011-12 or the 2012-13 tax year.

(AQW 7783/11-15)

Mr Ford: Prison officers will be treated according to tax rules laid down by HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC). If individuals leave NIPS during the 2011/12 financial year they will be taxed within that year.

Wildlife Liaison Officers

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Justice how many Wildlife Liaison Officers are currently employed by the PSNI.

(AQW 7797/11-15)

Mr Ford: The deployment of officers is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Policing Board.

You may therefore wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Magilligan Prison: Redevelopment

Mr G Robinson asked the Minister of Justice what plans his Department has for the phased redevelopment of Magilligan Prison.

(AQW 7826/11-15)

Mr Ford: An Outline Business Case has been produced which considers the options for the potential development of Magilligan Prison. Consideration of the business case has been delayed pending the completion of a refreshed Prison Estate Strategy. It is planned that the Strategy will be presented to the Justice Committee at the end of March 2012.

Organised Crime Strategy

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice if there are any plans to develop a cross-departmental strategic framework to tackle serious organised crime.

(AQW 7867/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Organised Crime Strategy for 2012 to 2014 was published on 2 February 2012 (www.octf.gov.uk). This document sets the strategic direction for the Organised Crime Task Force which is a multi-agency partnership involving

relevant Northern Ireland Departments, law enforcement agencies, the Policing Board, the legal community, the business community and others.

Driving Without Insurance

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, given that the fine imposed for driving without insurance is minimal compared to the cost of insurance, whether he intends to increase the fine so that it is comparable to the cost of insurance, instead of the standard basic fine with penalty points.

(AQW 7874/11-15)

Mr Ford: Whilst motor car insurance levels can be high, driving without insurance can already attract a fine of up to £5000, 6 months' imprisonment or both. Whilst I have no immediate plans to increase the penalties further I will keep the matter under review.

Legal Aid: Mileage and Travel Time Rates

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 7070/11-15, AQW 6318/11-15 and AQW 6260/11-15, given that the travel time rate costs for lawyers grossed higher than the mileage costs (i) whether this will impact on the Legal Aid budget of lawyers who will have to travel greater distances if the proposed court closures proceed; and (ii) whether there is a set travel time rate for lawyers.

(AQW 7877/11-15)

Mr Ford: For the reasons stated in my recent answer to AQW7070/11-15 I do not anticipate any significant impact on the overall legal aid budget allocation for travel and mileage.

Legal aid mileage and travel time rates are primarily set in legislation. Where no statutory rate exists, the rates are set by the Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission.

Prison Service: Redundancies

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on the proposed redundancies in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQW 7907/11-15)

Mr Ford: Officials in the Northern Ireland Prison Service have been in discussions with HM Revenue and Customs for a number of months through a range of channels. These discussions have been in relation to which payments are taxable and subject to National Insurance Contributions, how staff will be taxed, the timing of applications to reclaim any overpaid tax, and the responsibility of each individual in declaring their taxable income.

Forensic Science Northern Ireland

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether working on dissident republican criminal activity evidence takes precedence over all other cases at Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI); and for his assessment of having a dedicated department at FSNI to deal specifically with this type of crime.

(AQW 7921/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI engages with Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) to prioritise cases for examination in line with ongoing investigations. As part of the investigation process by FSNI, it is often necessary to deploy a range of different forensic specialisms from across the Agency. It would therefore not be practical to have a separate section devoted to investigating cases related to one particular area of criminal activity.

Prison Officers: Redundancy

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether he is aware that prison officers who wish to avail of the redundancy options may not be aware of the tax implications of choosing option B; and (ii) what tax advice his Department is providing to officers in relation to this matter.

(AQW 7959/11-15)

Mr Ford: Civil Service Pensions in the Department of Finance and Personnel provided information about the taxation arrangements in respect of the different elements making up the Compensation Lump Sum Payment in Option B. This information was set out in personal illustrations which were issued to all individuals who expressed an interest in the Exit Package.

The Cabinet Office has confirmed that the information provided is in line with the information they provided in respect of the equivalent compensation scheme in the Home Civil Service in Great Britain.

The closing date to submit a formal application for the Exit Package is Friday 17 February. To date we have received 453 formal applications. No-one has chosen option B. To date officials have not received any queries regarding the implications of choosing Option B. However should individuals have questions in relation to this issue it would be appropriate for them to contact Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs for advice.

Questions for Written Answer: Stationery Costs

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister of Justice how much his Department has spent on stationery costs in replying to Assembly Written Questions, including the price of the envelopes and paper used, in (i) 2010; and (ii) 2011.

(AQW 8048/11-15)

Mr Ford: My department does not keep a record of the proportion of the stationery budget that is spent on replying to Assembly Written Questions.

Prison Officers: Redundancy

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether he is aware of the deadline of 17 February 2012 for prison officers who wish to avail of a redundancy package; and (ii) what tax advice his Department is providing to officers in advance of this date.

(AQW 8050/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am aware of the deadline of 17 February for prison officers to make an application for the Exit Package. Eligible staff were provided with an illustration of their early retirement financial package on 20 January 2012 and given four weeks to make their decision.

The Department does not provide tax advice. It is the responsibility of individuals to ensure that they pay the correct tax to HM Revenue and Customs.

Carjacking: Belfast

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice how many car-jacking incidents have occurred in the Belfast area since the beginning of 2012.

(AQO 1291/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Chief Constable has advised me that there have been 18 incidents of car-jacking in the Belfast area since 1 January 2012. I am sure that Members will join me to condemn these incidents and to encourage motorists to implement the personal security advice that has been given by the Police to help prevent this type of crime.

I would also encourage anyone who has information on the perpetrators of these crimes to inform the PSNI or the Crime Stoppers Charity, which have offered £1,000 reward.

I am also aware that the PSNI has recently issued an information note to all Councillors and MLAs in Greater Belfast informing them of progress made in tackling this issue.

This matter is an operational issue for the Chief Constable. I would suggest that any specific questions on operational matters should be directed to him.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme

Mr Byrne asked the Minister of Justice whether he has any plans to review the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme.

(AQO 1294/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have no current plans to review the Northern Ireland Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme. However, Members may be aware that the Ministry of Justice published proposals recently for changes to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Schemes that apply in England, Wales and Scotland.

The Northern Ireland Scheme broadly mirrors those schemes and my Department will examine the Ministry of Justice proposals to assess their relevance for Northern Ireland, particularly in terms of practical support for victims. Consideration will also be given to the recommendations from the Inquiry by the Justice Committee into the services available to victims and witnesses of crime.

Office of the Police Ombudsman: Interim Chief Executive

Mr F McCann asked the Minister of Justice to outline the legislative provisions under which the out-going Police Ombudsman appointed an Interim Chief Executive to the Office of the Police Ombudsman.

(AQO 1296/11-15)

Mr Ford: Responsibility for the appointment of a Chief Executive, whether in a permanent, interim or acting capacity, rests with the Police Ombudsman as set out in paragraph 3 of Schedule 3 to the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998.

Rural Crime

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Justice what action he is taking to address the growing problem of rural crime.

(AQO 1297/11-15)

Mr Ford: Building safer communities is a priority issue for my Department. Rural communities face unique issues around crime and anti-social behaviour, such as livestock and machinery theft, and isolation, alongside those issues faced by urban areas.

I recently met with the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development to discuss the issue of rural crime, and my Department is represented on DARD's Rural White Paper Project Board to ensure that issues around rural crime are reflected in the Rural White Paper.

The forthcoming Community Safety Strategy will support efforts to make rural communities safer through preventing and reducing rural crime. At a local level Community Safety Partnerships deliver initiatives in rural areas across Northern Ireland that contribute to the reduction of crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour.

These include local Neighbourhood Watch and Rural Watch schemes, and crime prevention advice to rural groups.

Many Community Safety Partnerships have held successful trailer marking schemes tailored to the particular needs of the rural community, with over twenty events held in the past six months and further events planned throughout the year.

There is often a cross-border element to rural crime, and the PSNI is working in partnership with An Garda Síochána under the Cross Border Strategy to combat rural crime along the border.

The new Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, will have a key role in engaging and empowering individuals and communities to find solutions to locally identified concerns. Organisations representing the rural community will have the opportunity to engage with their local Policing and Community Safety Partnership, ensuring that their voice is heard.

Prisons: Full-body Searches

Mr Dallat asked the Minister of Justice if he will publish the findings of the study into Recommendation 8 of the Review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service, relating to the practice of full-body searching of prisoners entering and leaving prison.

(AQO 1298/11-15)

Mr Ford: I do not propose to publish the report findings. The report contains security and commercially sensitive material and could not be published without extensive redaction which would make it meaningless.

Department for Regional Development

Buses: Contracts

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the names and addresses of the companies that were awarded contracts for new buses in each of the last five years; and for a breakdown of the value of each contract.

(AQW 7307/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Since 2007/08 the following contracts have been awarded by Translink:

Financial Year	Name and Address of Company awarded contract	Value of Contract
2007/08	NI Trucks, 3 Mallusk Road, Newtownabbey and NU Track Ltd, Steeple Industrial Estate, Antrim	£1.181m
2007/08	Volvo	£12.4m
2007/08	Volvo	£5.9m
2007/08	Volvo	£13.1m
2007/08	Volvo	£7.34m
2007/08	Scania	£6.21m
2007/08	Volvo	£6.23m
2007/08	Volvo	£3.54m
2009/10	Scania	£6.62m
2009/10	Volvo	£7.7m
2010/11	Scania	£4.0m
2011/12	Volvo	£2.534m
2011/12	Volvo	£4.455m
2011/12	Scania	£7.805m

Volvo and Scania Suppliers' address details are as follows:

- Volvo Bus Limited, Wedgnoek Lane, Warwick, CV34 5YA
- Delaware Drive, Tongwell, Milton Keynes, MK15 8HB

The vehicles were supplied and commissioned through local dealers in Northern Ireland. Under subcontracting arrangements, Wrightbus has produced bodies for the Translink vehicles, as part of their arrangements with both Scania and Volvo, for a substantial number of bus replacement projects.

Parking Tickets: Ballymena/Ballymoney/Ballycastle

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development how many parking tickets were issued in (i) Ballymena; (ii) Ballymoney; and (iii) Ballycastle in December 2011.

(AQW 7369/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that details of the number of Penalty Charge Notices issued in Ballymena, Ballymoney and Ballycastle during December 2011 are shown in the table below:-

Penalty Charge Notices issued during December 2011

Location	Number
Ballymena	744
Ballymoney	90
Ballycastle	9

Bus Shelters: Harbour Road and Marine Road, Carnlough

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Regional Development why a decision has not yet been made on the request for bus shelters at the Harbour Road and Marine Road in Carnlough village.

(AQW 7379/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that the current contract with Adshel for the provision and maintenance of bus shelters in Northern Ireland has delivered over 1,350 new bus shelters since 2001, at no cost to my Department.

Whilst the current contract does not expire until 2015, it does not make provision for any new shelters after 2010 and this will remain the case until the contract terminates in 2015. To ensure the future provision of bus shelters, my Department will establish new contractual arrangements which are expected to be in place for 2015.

However, I understand that a number of existing bus shelters in the Larne area have been identified, by Translink, as no longer being used by the public and that there may be scope to re-site these shelters into other locations in the borough where requests have been made. This option is at present being discussed with Adshel.

I should also explain that local Councils can provide bus shelters, should they wish to do so.

Rathlin Ferry: SMS Alert Service

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his Department has any plans to include the Rathlin Ferry in the new free SMS Alert Service, so that passengers can receive service updates.

(AQW 7392/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: An SMS Alert Service was introduced on the Rathlin Island Ferry Service in July 2008. This is a service provided by the operator, Rathlin Island Ferry Limited.

Car Parks: Regulation on Private Land

Mr D Bradley asked the Minister for Regional Development how private car parks are regulated in general, and particularly in relation to making parking charges for, and imposing penalties on, motorists who use them.

(AQW 7422/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has no authority or responsibility in relation to the regulation of car parks on private land.

I understand that the Department of Justice is looking at the future regulation of the private security industry in Northern Ireland, including issues arising from parking enforcement on private land.

Rural Community Transport

Ms Ruane asked the Minister for Regional Development how much funding his Department will provide to community based transport schemes during the current mandate; and how much of that funding is earmarked for (i) Newry and Mourne Community Transport; and (ii) Down Community Transport.

(AQW 7477/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Within the budget period up to 31 March 2015 the annual allocation to the Rural Transport Fund, from which funding is provided to rural community transport partnerships is £3.75 million. This figure is subject to review annually but currently this is in part allocated to Translink to provide rural stage carriage services which are deemed socially necessary. The bulk of the funding, however, is paid to the partnerships to provide services in their operating areas.

Newry and Mourne Community Transport is now part of a voluntary working agreement with two other partnerships Armagh Rural Transport and Down/Armagh Rural Transport. The combined amount of grant covering these three partnerships for 2011/12 is currently estimated at £0.4 million. Based on the grant allocation for 2010/11, Newry and Mourne Community Transport receives about 26% of this combined grant

Based upon the Business plan submitted by Down Community Transport for the financial year 2011/ 2012, my Department has to date awarded funding to this organisation of approximately £0.4 million.

Allocations for the next three years will not be determined until Business plans from the partnerships to cover that period are received and agreed.

Road Schemes: Monkstown and Jordanstown

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road schemes planned for (i) Monkstown; and (ii) Jordanstown over the next twelve months.

(AQW 7479/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Information on completed and proposed schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

With regard to proposed schemes for the next financial year, Roads Service is currently finalising details of its proposed works programmes for 2012/13. The Spring Council Reports, which are to be presented to local Councils during April and May of this year, will contain details of the agreed work programmes. These reports will also be accessible from the above website after they have been presented to local Councils.

Road Schemes: Larne

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road schemes planned for Larne over the next twelve months.

(AQW 7480/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Information on completed and proposed schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

With regard to proposed schemes for the next financial year, Roads Service is currently finalising details of its proposed works programmes for 2012/13. The Spring Council Reports, which are to be presented to local Councils during April and May of this year, will contain details of the agreed work programmes. These reports will also be accessible from the above website after they have been presented to local Councils.

Road Schemes: Carrickfergus

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road schemes planned for Carrickfergus over the next twelve months.

(AQW 7482/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Information on completed and proposed schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drndi.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

With regard to proposed schemes for the next financial year, Roads Service is currently finalising details of its proposed works programmes for 2012/13. The Spring Council Reports, which are to be presented to local Councils during April and May of this

year, will contain details of the agreed work programmes. These reports will also be accessible from the above website after they have been presented to local Councils.

In addition you will be aware of the recent announcement by the Finance Minister which will allow me to bring forward a balanced programme of improvements to our strategic road network. I am pleased to advise you that this programme includes the long-awaited A2 project to widen 2.4 km of the existing single carriageway between Jordanstown and Seapark. A procurement competition will be initiated as soon as possible which should see work commencing early in 2013.

Garrison Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on plans to upgrade the Waste Water Treatment Works at Garrison, Co Fermanagh to Tertiary Level Status.

(AQW 7508/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) that the Garrison Wastewater Treatment Works is compliant with consent standards set by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and there are no current plans to upgrade the Works.

Proposals to upgrade a wastewater treatment works are subject to a prioritisation process which is carried out in conjunction with the NIEA; and to the availability of funding. The ongoing prioritisation exercise for NIW's next programme of capital projects for the three year period up to 2015 has not identified this Works as a high enough priority for upgrade.

Resurfacing: Caddy Road, Randalstown

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Regional Development when the Caddy Road in Randalstown was last resurfaced; and for his assessment of the current road surface.

(AQW 7510/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it has no records to show when the Caddy Road was last resurfaced. However, the stretch between Ahoghill Road and Tamlough Road was surface dressed in 2002 and the stretch between Tamlough Road and Whitesides Road was surface dressed in 2011.

Roads Service officials carried out a recent inspection of the Caddy Road and found it to be in a reasonable condition. Some small localised areas of weakness in the road surface were identified and these will have appropriate remedial work undertaken, when their condition warrants intervention.

There are no plans at present, to resurface the Caddy Road.

Knock Airport, County Mayo: Bus Service

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development (i) for his assessment of the importance of Knock Airport, Co. Mayo, for improving connectivity for people in border areas with the rest of the world; (ii) whether he intends to have any discussion with his counterpart in the Irish Republic about maximising the potential of the airport for people in border areas; and (iii) what consideration he has given to creating a bus route from Enniskillen to Knock Airport.

(AQW 7573/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: People living in border areas have access to an open market for air services provided by airports both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Ireland West Knock Airport is privately owned and competes for business in this all island market.

I have no plans to discuss this commercial role with the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

There is also an open market for the operation of cross-border bus services to meet passenger demands. Bus Eireann already operates a limited bus service connecting Enniskillen with Ireland West Knock Airport via Sligo. It is open to other operators to apply for an international licence to offer alternative services, where a passenger demand can be identified.

Enniskillen Wastewater Treatment Works

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development what plans he has to upgrade the sewage works to allow for additional demand as a result of the extra properties being added to the site of the former Grosvenor barracks, Enniskillen.

(AQW 7577/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it has no current plans to upgrade the Enniskillen Wastewater Treatment Works. The Works was upgraded in 2009 and has adequate spare capacity to deal with any additional demand resulting from development on the site of the former Grosvenor Barracks, Enniskillen.

Bus Routes: Derry to Dublin

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of whether there are sufficient bus routes between Derry and Dublin, given the Executive's commitment to increase economic development and tourism in the North-West region.

(AQW 7591/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: International bus services between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are provided within an open market and I am aware that a number of operators, including Translink, offer bus connections to meet passenger demand for travel between Londonderry and Dublin.

Translink has assured me that the timetables of the services provided jointly by Ulsterbus and Bus Éireann on the route are kept under review to take account of seasonal variations in patronage and to ensure economic viability. The summer timetable for 2012 is currently under development.

SmartPasses: Cross-border Routes

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the rules around the use of smartpasses on cross-border routes; and to explain the rationale behind these rules.

(AQW 7626/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: On cross-border journeys with participating bus and rail carriers, my Department provides the following concessions:

- Holders of Senior SmartPasses (aged 65+), Registered Blind and War Disablement Passes travel for free for the entire journey;
- Holders of a 60+ SmartPass travel free as far as the final fare stage within Northern Ireland and pay full fare for that part of the journey through the Republic of Ireland;
- Holders of a Half-fare SmartPass receive a half-fare concession to the final fare stage within Northern Ireland and pay full fare for the remainder of the journey.

These provisions are consistent with the rules of the Northern Ireland Concessionary Fares Scheme.

Under the All Ireland Free Travel Scheme, holders of Senior SmartPasses (aged 65+) are also eligible for free travel wholly within the Republic of Ireland. With the exception of arrangements under the All Ireland Free Travel Scheme, policy regarding entitlement to concessions on cross-border journeys made by holders of Irish Free Travel Passes or on parts of journeys within the Republic of Ireland made by Northern Ireland pass holders is a matter for the Irish Government.

Bus Éireann: Reduced Ticket Prices

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has any plans to raise the anomaly with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in Dublin, that passengers using Bus Éireann services can book their tickets online at a reduced price on all routes, but appear to be excluded if they get on or off at a destination north of the border.

(AQW 7628/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: International bus services between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are provided within an open market and fare discounts on those services are commercial matters for the operators of those services. I have no plans to raise this issue with the Irish Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Mobile Phone Applications

Mr McKay asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) any mobile phone applications that have been designed by his Department, and its arm's length bodies, for use by members of the public; and (ii) any that are currently being developed.

(AQW 7631/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Department's Roads Service is presently piloting a cashless payment scheme for parking charges using mobile phone technology. The scheme is currently operating in Belfast, Londonderry, Newry, Lisburn and Omagh.

Translink has developed an application called mlink that enables passengers to purchase and download rail tickets to their internet-enabled mobile phones.

There are no other such systems currently being developed.

Road Schemes: Ballymoney/Ballycastle/Ballymena

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road schemes planned for (i) Ballymoney; (ii) Ballycastle; and (iii) Ballymena in the next twelve months.

(AQW 7642/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Information on completed and proposed roads schemes for the current financial year can be found in Roads Service's Spring and Autumn Reports to Councils. These reports can be accessed from my Department's internet site at the following web address:

http://www.drni.gov.uk/index/freedom_of_information/customer_information/cinformationtype-results.htm?signpost=Customer+information&informationType=Roads+Service+reports+to+councils

With regard to proposed schemes for the next financial year, Roads Service is currently finalising details of its proposed works programmes for 2012/13. The Spring Council Reports, which are to be presented to local Councils during April and May of this year, will contain details of the agreed work programmes. These reports will also be accessible from the above website after they have been presented to local Councils.

Road Schemes: North Antrim

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the road schemes planned for villages in North Antrim in the next twelve months

(AQW 7643/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I would refer the Member to my answer to his Assembly Question AQW 7642/11-15.

A7: Upgrade

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the plans to upgrade the A7 near Doran's Rock outside Saintfield.

(AQW 7644/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that while a preliminary design for a proposed on-line improvement scheme for the A7 has been developed, progress continues to depend on the availability of resources.

The limited funding available to my Department for capital improvement schemes has been fully committed to a programme of major improvement schemes on the strategic road network.

The timing of future road improvements will be dependent upon funding levels that materialise from the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-21, which is currently published for consultation.

I am currently unable to indicate when this scheme will be implemented.

Pedestrian Safety Railings: Windmill Street, Ballynahinch

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development for an assessment of the need to install pedestrian safety railings at Windmill Street, Ballynahinch.

(AQW 7645/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am aware of two accidents, one of which was fatal, that have occurred in Windmill Street, Ballynahinch during 2011 and I would like to express my deepest sympathy to the families affected.

Following further investigations, my Department's Roads Service discovered that both of these accidents took place only 35 metres from the nearby pedestrian crossing facility at the High Street junction.

Roads Service has advised that although guard rails do prevent pedestrians crossing the road at inappropriate locations, they often reduce the amount of available space on a footway and can also prevent delivery vehicles gaining access to shops.

Whilst I fully understand the concerns of local people when two similar accidents occur at the same location within a short period of time, Roads Service has fully investigated both accidents and not identified any comparable hazard. Therefore, it is not proposing to erect guard rails at this location on Windmill Street at this time but will continue to keep the situation under review.

Sewerage System: Dermott Green, Comber

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the timescale and the budget for NI Water's proposed upgrade of the system around Dermott Green, Comber.

(AQW 7646/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that it is planned to upgrade the sewerage system around Dermott Green as part of the Copeland Road, Comber project. The work, which is estimated to cost in the region of £200,000, is programmed to start onsite in May 2012 with an expected completion date of October 2012.

Road Traffic Signs: Procurement

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Regional Development to provide details and the consequences of the legal challenge to his Department's procurement of road traffic signs which has impacted on the supply of road traffic signs, such as 30mph signs.

(AQW 7660/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that it engaged in a public procurement competition for the award of 21 contracts for the Supply and Delivery of Permanent and Temporary Road Traffic Signs and Sign Posts in May 2010. This competition resulted in 'letters of intention to award' being issued on 21 July 2010 to three successful tenderers.

However, one of the successful tenderers commenced legal proceedings challenging the tender process and preventing the award of any of the contracts. This resulted in Roads Service being unable to procure any road traffic signs.

Following a lengthy court case dealing with the challenge, a judgement was issued on 4 February 2011, which ruled that three of the 21 contracts could not be awarded. After taking legal opinion, Roads Service proceeded to award 15 of the remaining 18 contracts on 21 March 2011. Roads Service is currently engaged with the Central Procurement Directorate of the Department of Finance and Personnel in taking forward a further procurement competition for the remaining six contracts.

At present, Roads Service is able to procure standard speed limit signs, including 30mph signs. However, in some instances, speed limit signs are included within a more complex sign arrangement, for example, gateway signs to towns and villages. Roads Service is currently examining the options available for procurement of this type of sign.

Cycle Targets

Mr McDevitt asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the 2020 cycle targets, for distance cycled in kilometres per person per year, compared to the other regions of the UK and Ireland.

(AQW 7664/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The draft Active Travel Strategy, which is currently out to public consultation, proposes that one of our key objectives should be to 'increase the average distance cycled to be in line with our UK counterparts by 2020'.

The most recent NI Travel Survey (2008 – 2010) has found that the average distance cycled per person per year in Northern Ireland is 31km. This is less than half the distance cycled in Great Britain which was found to be 68km per person per year in 2010 (National Travel Survey for GB 2010). Comparable figures for the Republic of Ireland are not available due to differing survey methodology.

The objective for 2020 in terms of distance cycled per person per year is to at least double the current distance cycled.

Railway Stations: Belfast to Bangor Line

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail any capital works planned for railway stations on the Belfast to Bangor line in the next three years.

(AQW 7675/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Translink advise that the following capital works are planned for railway stations on the Belfast to Bangor line in the next three years:

Projects	2012/13 £000s	2013/14 £000s	2014/15 £000s
Bangor Integrated Station			
Refurbishment of Public Toilets	40	0	0
Improvements to Rear Path and Fencing	30	0	0
Installation of Barriers	10	0	0

Translink revises capital plans each year taking account of updated budgets.

Current/Capital Budget Allocation

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development whether his departmental revenue expenditure varies proportionately to his capital budget allocation.

(AQW 7682/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My departmental revenue expenditure does not vary proportionally to the Department's capital budget allocation.

Unadopted Roads: Strabane/Omagh

Mr Doherty asked the Minister for Regional Development to list the unadopted roads in the (i) Strabane; and (ii) Omagh District Council areas; and which of these roads have an outstanding road bond.

(AQW 7745/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service advises that there are 57 unadopted roads in the Strabane District Council area, 48 of which have bonds in place and 60 unadopted roads in the Omagh District Council area, 51 of which have bonds in place.

The table below lists all the unadopted roads in each District Council area:

Council Area	Development Address	Bond in Place
Strabane	Breenvale	Yes
Strabane	Glenmore Drive	No
Strabane	Industrial Estate	No
Strabane	Park Road	No
Strabane	Melmount Mews	Yes

Council Area	Development Address	Bond in Place
Strabane	Curlyhill Road	No
Strabane	Foyle Vale	Yes
Strabane	Whinn View	Yes
Strabane	Mount Carmel Heights	Yes
Strabane	Elmwood Green	Yes
Strabane	Ingleside	Yes
Strabane	Ferndale	Yes
Strabane	Dergvale	Yes
Strabane	Grieve Park	Yes
Strabane	Melvin Court	Yes
Strabane	Victoria Road	Yes
Strabane	Glebe Park	Yes
Strabane	Barnhill Court	Yes
Strabane	Berryhill Road	Yes
Strabane	Oldcastle Road	Yes
Strabane	Donaboe Road	Yes
Strabane	Barley Hill View	Yes
Strabane	Oak Burn	Yes
Strabane	Corrickmore Avenue	No
Strabane	Grangewood Manor	Yes
Strabane	Lismore Park	Yes
Strabane	Castletown Court	Yes
Strabane	Drumquin Road	No
Strabane	Urney Court	Yes
Strabane	Meadowhill	Yes
Strabane	Dublin Street	Yes
Strabane	Ashleigh Court	Yes
Strabane	Evisk Grove	No
Strabane	Abercorn Cottages	Yes
Strabane	Burnside Path	Yes
Strabane	Glenview	Yes
Strabane	Bellspark Road	No
Strabane	Garag Hill	Yes
Strabane	Sandville Court	Yes
Strabane	Hawthorn Grove	Yes
Strabane	The Hollow	Yes
Strabane	Branch Road	No
Strabane	Bradley Way	Yes

Council Area	Development Address	Bond in Place
Strabane	Woodend Road	Yes
Strabane	Garvan Court	Yes
Strabane	Melmount Road	Yes
Strabane	Barnhill Road/Railway Street	Yes
Strabane	Brook Manor	Yes
Strabane	Main Street	Yes
Strabane	The Paddocks	Yes
Strabane	Glen Eden	Yes
Strabane	Linen Green	Yes
Strabane	Bridge End Park	Yes
Strabane	Whiterock Park	Yes
Strabane	Springwell Manor	Yes
Strabane	Castle Avenue	Yes
Strabane	Bessie Bell Court	Yes
Total	57	48
Omagh	Drumnaforbe Close	Yes
Omagh	Dergmoney View	Yes
Omagh	Gortin Road	Yes
Omagh	Circular Road	Yes
Omagh	Glenard Gardens	Yes
Omagh	Gleann Na Locha	Yes
Omagh	Churchdale Meadows	Yes
Omagh	Sheskinshule View	Yes
Omagh	Lisnagort Grove	Yes
Omagh	Killens Wood	Yes
Omagh	Killynure Court	Yes
Omagh	Farmhill Meadows	Yes
Omagh	Gortdale	Yes
Omagh	Drumnaforbe Heights	Yes
Omagh	The Orchard	Yes
Omagh	Drumman Glen	Yes
Omagh	Knockcarra	Yes
Omagh	Retreat Heights	Yes
Omagh	Castle Grove	Yes
Omagh	Mullaghmena Avenue	Yes
Omagh	Birchgrove	Yes
Omagh	Shanmullagh Drive	Yes
Omagh	Loughview Gardens	Yes

Council Area	Development Address	Bond in Place
Omagh	Mullaghmena Meadows	Yes
Omagh	Drumragh Int College	Yes
Omagh	Ballybrack Road	Yes
Omagh	Hawthorn Grove	Yes
Omagh	Lambrooke Grove	Yes
Omagh	Craigavon Road	No
Omagh	The Croft	Yes
Omagh	Altamuskin Road	Yes
Omagh	Coolnagard Hollow	Yes
Omagh	Killybrack Heights	Yes
Omagh	Carraig Bheag	Yes
Omagh	Killybracken Glen	Yes
Omagh	Carnalea Road	Yes
Omagh	Loughmuck Meadows	Yes
Omagh	Creevanmore Meadows	Yes
Omagh	Hunters Crescent	No
Omagh	Millbrook	Yes
Omagh	River Walkway	No
Omagh	Moylagh Meadows	Yes
Omagh	Burrells Glen	Yes
Omagh	Drumnakilly Road	Yes
Omagh	Townview Avenue	No
Omagh	Creevenmore Close	No
Omagh	Shergrim Grove	Yes
Omagh	Main Street	Yes
Omagh	Rathronan	Yes
Omagh	Tattykeel	No
Omagh	Highfield Close	Yes
Omagh	Dooish Road	No
Omagh	The Hawthorns	Yes
Omagh	Camcosy Road	No
Omagh	Glenside	Yes
Omagh	Camowen Mews	Yes
Omagh	Woodside Avenue	No
Omagh	Altamuskin Road	Yes
Omagh	Glenhill Cottages	Yes
Omagh	Hazelhill	Yes
Total	60	51

Footpaths: Removal of Snow and Ice

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Regional Development, pursuant to AQW 5867/11-15, to detail which councils have now signed up to an agreement with Roads Service on the removal of snow and ice from town centre footpaths during periods of severe winter weather.

(AQW 7862/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has confirmed that fourteen Councils have signed an agreement for the removal of ice and snow from town centre footways during severe winter weather. The Council's involved are listed below:

Councils That Have Signed An Agreement

Armagh	Cookstown	Lisburn
Ballymena	Fermanagh	Newtownabbey
Belfast City	Larne	North Down
Carrickfergus	Limavady	Derry
Craigavon	Moyle	

In addition, working arrangements are in place with a number of other Councils and work is ongoing with others to confirm their position.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail the current (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in his Department's Equality Unit.

(AQW 7893/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: There are currently 1.75 full time equivalent (FTE) staff employed in my Department's Equality Unit. Details of the grades of staff and salary ranges are contained in the table below.

GRADE	FTE	Salary Range
DP	0.75	£34,163 - £38,893
SO	1	£27,115 - £30,520

Street Lighting: Metal Thefts

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Regional Development whether there is any new technology available to make street lighting less susceptible to metal thefts; and whether his Department has carried out a cost-benefit analysis to assess whether this represents value for money

(AQW 7937/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that in order to make street lighting installations less susceptible to metal thefts, it has started to make use of special 'smart' grease to mark cables. In addition, Roads Service has also investigated the possibility of remotely monitored alarm systems and CCTV monitoring, and has changed the way it lays new street lighting cables, so that they are more difficult to remove.

However, while the use of 'smart' grease and revised cable laying arrangements were cost effective, the alarm and CCTV options were found to be prohibitively expensive for widespread use. Consideration is being given to selective use of appropriate theft counter-measures at vulnerable locations.

Disabled Car Parking Bays: Misuse

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Regional Development to detail (i) his position on the misuse of disabled car parking spaces; (ii) the penalties for such an offence committed in parking areas maintained by his Department, on or off-street; and (iii) any plans he has to raise awareness of the difficulties this misuse creates for people with a disability.

(AQW 7956/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Decriminalised parking enforcement is provided by my Department's Roads Service through its contract with NSL Services Group. Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) are issued by NSL's Traffic Attendants where vehicles are detected as parked in a disabled person's parking space without clearly displaying a valid disabled person's badge.

In the period from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011, 7,542 PCNs were issued to vehicles parked in disabled person's parking spaces without clearly displaying a valid badge.

The amount charged for a PCN is £60, however a 50% discount is offered if it is paid within 14 days.

It is considered that public awareness in this area will continue to develop as enforcement continues to be provided and PCNs are issued where contraventions are detected.

Roads: Salt Reserves

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Regional Development what is the annual cost of storing salt reserves in preparation for adverse winter weather.

(AQO 1306/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am pleased that weather conditions during the winter period to date have been considerably more favourable than those we experienced during the last two winters. However, there can be no grounds for complacency and my Department's Roads Service remains alert to the possibility of the onset of more adverse weather conditions and is ready to respond quickly to ensure our main routes remain open for all road users. I would also strongly encourage motorists to continue to exercise caution and drive with due care and attention and be mindful of the prevailing road conditions.

I can inform the Member that normal salt reserves are stored strategically, across Northern Ireland, in salt barns and external stores located within Roads Service depots. There are no direct costs associated with this storage other than annual maintenance of depot premises and associated security costs.

Following the severe weather conditions experienced over the last number of winters, a secondary resilience stock has been organised with storage sourced through the current salt provider. The cost of this storage has been determined through the contractual process and, as such, I am unable to disclose the details for reasons of commercial sensitivity, and in the interests of securing best value for money in future tenders.

Traffic Calming: Hillsborough

Mrs Hale asked the Minister for Regional Development how he will ensure that resident safety remains a priority when traffic-calming measures are introduced into the Culcavy and Halftown Roads in Hillsborough.

(AQO 1304/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have had several meetings with the Member regarding local traffic issues in Hillsborough and I would assure her that road safety is, and will continue to be, a top priority for my Department's Roads Service.

I would advise that Roads Service has already provided gateway signage on Culcavy Road at the M1 bridge and on Halftown Road at Coronation Gardens. It also has plans for the next financial year, to enhance the existing gateway signage at both locations in order to highlight a reduction in the speed limit by refreshing the red carriageway markings and laying additional white speed limit roundel road markings adjacent to the existing upright speed limit signs.

Halftown Road is more rural in nature than Culcavy Road and is subject to a 40mph speed limit in the vicinity of Coronation Gardens. This speed limit has been recently reviewed and is considered to be appropriate to the surroundings. Road humps are not considered to be appropriate for roads with a speed limit in excess of 30mph as they are designed to encourage traffic speed in the region of 20mph.

The use of measures such as road humps, are not considered appropriate for Culcavy Road. However, if elected representatives are able to demonstrate that there is widespread support from local residents for a traffic calming scheme on Culcavy Road within the existing 30mph speed limit, to include the provision of vertical deflection measures such as road humps, Roads Service would consider this when prioritising schemes for possible inclusion within further works programmes.

Spending Priorities

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Regional Development, given the withdrawal of money for the A5 project by the Irish Government, whether he will take the opportunity to review his spending priorities and increase the proportion spent on maintaining our existing roads and improving our public transport infrastructure.

(AQO 1305/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am currently awaiting confirmation of the funding that will be available to my Department, following the deliberations surrounding the A5 and A8 projects. When the funding is confirmed, I intend to review the spending priorities across the whole of my Department, including that available to the roads maintenance programme and public transport infrastructure.

The strategy for the development of the transport system in Northern Ireland is framed in the Regional Development Strategy and developed in the Regional Transportation Strategy. As you are aware both documents are currently under review.

I am a keen supporter of sustainable transport but I am also aware of the importance of our roads infrastructure. A programme of infrastructure renewal is required for our future competitiveness and as a catalyst for future economic growth. It is a significant and important source of employment for the Northern Ireland economy.

Over the past few years, my Department's Roads Service has made considerable efforts to resurface and strengthen the main traffic routes across Northern Ireland, particularly the strategic road network linking the more heavily populated urban areas.

It has been independently established that some £116 million per annum (2011 prices) is needed to maintain the structural integrity of the entire network at good practice resurfacing frequencies. The structural maintenance budget for 2011/12 is currently some £110m, leaving a shortfall of just £6m.

I will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds and Roads Service will continue to make the best use of resources available to it, to develop and maintain the road network.

Roadworks: Hillhall Road, Lisburn

Mr Craig asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the reasons for the major road works taking place on the Hillhall Road, Lisburn.

(AQO 1307/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that a minor improvement scheme currently ongoing on the Hillhall Road is now substantially complete. This scheme, which will enhance forward visibility for motorists through a series of bends, was identified through a Route Improvement Study.

The scheme will improve road safety by removing a number of roadside hazards, including trees and headwalls and also provide road widening in the vicinity of the bends to improve the consistency of road widths along the length of the Hillhall Road.

Belfast Rapid Transit

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Regional Development for an overview of the responses to the public consultation on the emerging preferred route options for the Belfast EWAY Rapid Transit Scheme.

(AQO 1308/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Public Consultation on the route options for Belfast Rapid Transit, which I launched on 12 October 2011, ended on 6 January 2012. We received some 200 responses to the consultation and officials are currently collating these responses and considering the issues raised. A Consultation Report will then be produced which will provide a factual account of the consultation process and provide my Department's responses to the main issues. This Consultation Report will be issued to all respondents.

Whilst it would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual responses whilst the analysis of all the issues raised is ongoing, I can say that, in relation to East Belfast, a large number of respondents expressed their support for the emerging preferred route option and for not using the Comber Greenway for Belfast Rapid Transit.

Railways: Belfast to Dublin Line

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the upgrade of the Belfast to Dublin railway line.

(AQO 1309/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Northern Ireland Railways and Irish Rail have developed a long term vision for the service for a significantly enhanced service and journey time but it is now recognised that this requires updating in light of budgetary and other constraints. In relation to a long term objective to upgrade the Belfast to Dublin railway line Translink has been asked to undertake a Feasibility Study to establish options and potential costs. Translink will seek the comments of Irish Rail. This is an issue I will have to discuss in more detail with Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the Republic of Ireland. Upon receipt of a Project Initiation Document, my officials will also consider what EU funding opportunities are available to fund the completion of a Feasibility Study for this project.

In the short term measures can be taken forward to improve service reliability and even journey times by ensuring that projects undertaken move us towards that long term objective.

For example my Department provided capital grant of just over £1.5 million for a project to fund the overhaul and reconfiguration of four generator vans from Irish Rail and to use these to power the heat and light on the Enterprise service. Subject to final approval from the Irish Railway Safety Commission, this project is scheduled for completion in March 2012 and will result in improved fuel efficiency and reliability of Enterprise locomotives.

The Department are also currently considering an appraisal from Translink proposing to relocate the signalling and telecoms lines along the track from Lisburn to Lurgan to ducts. One of the objectives of this project is to facilitate the planned track renewal works between Knockmore and Lurgan.

Translink is also looking at options to develop a new Transport Hub at Great Victoria Street. One potential benefit, if that project is taken forward, is a reduced journey time between Belfast and Dublin by rail.

The vast majority of line speed restrictions which were introduced on the line in 2011 have now been cleared. In addition, Translink continue to upgrade rail stations along the route including the recently announced major refurbishment for Portadown station.

Discussions about a move to an hourly service have taken place but the revenue support to facilitate this remains an obstacle.

Public Transport: Irish Open

Mr D McIlveen asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans to ensure that NI Railways and Translink can cope with increased demand during the Irish Open golf tournament at Royal Portrush this year.

(AQO 1310/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I refer to the answer given to AQW 6512/11-15 which outlines the preparations being made by the Translink bus and rail companies.

I should point out that, normally, the onus rests with the organisers of events to ensure that any special transport requirements of their participants and visitors can be met. It is open to the organisers to arrange private hire with bus and coach operators, including Translink, and to private operators to offer excursions or special services, subject to them holding the appropriate licences.

A5: Reallocation of Funding

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the projects on which he now plans to spend the £450 million which had been allocated to the A5 project.

(AQO 1311/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I welcome today's announcement by the Finance Minister which will allow me to bring forward a range of measures which will greatly benefit both the construction industry and the wider economy.

Following a series of meetings with Executive colleagues and work by Departmental officials, I have reviewed spending priorities across my Department and I am pleased that sufficient funding has been allocated to allow me to bring forward a balanced programme of improvements to our strategic road network over the next four years, that will make a significant difference to the people of Northern Ireland.

The revised Budget that has been agreed will enable me to bring forward two significant elements of the A5 dual carriageway project, between Londonderry and Strabane, and between Omagh and Ballygawley, along with the A8 Belfast to Larne project and a long-awaited scheme to dual the A2 Shore Road at Greenisland.

Roads Service: Slippage Monies

Mr McLaughlin asked the Minister for Regional Development what level of slippage monies is available to Roads Service annually, and how this is distributed near the end of the financial year.

(AQO 1312/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: It is assumed that the term 'slippage monies' used by the Member refers to additional funding that my Department's Roads Service has secured through in-year monitoring rounds. In-year monitoring provides Roads Service with the opportunity to bid for additional funds for pressures which are inescapable or high priority, however the success of such bids is not guaranteed.

The Member will be aware that the Executive determines the priorities when issuing any additional funding to meet Departmental pressures based on a number of factors. While the amount of funds surrendered by other Departments is a significant factor in the monitoring round, provision of additional funding is not guaranteed, or predictable. Therefore, it is not possible to indicate if or how much funding, which could be termed 'slippage monies', is available to Roads Service on an annual basis.

In 2011/12 Roads Service received £20 million of additional funding through the monitoring round process and £20.2 million during 2010/11.

These additional monies were primarily sought to address pressures on the maintenance budget and were allocated on the basis of need using a range of weighted indicators tailored to each maintenance activity, such as resurfacing, structural drainage, patching, gully emptying and grass cutting etc. Roads Service Divisions use these indicators when apportioning funding to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Roads: Maintenance

Mr McCarthy asked the Minister for Regional Development for his assessment of the adequacy of the road maintenance budget in meeting demand for road repairs.

(AQO 1313/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has advised that some £116.5 million per annum (2011 prices) is needed to maintain the structural integrity of the entire network at good practice resurfacing frequencies. Roads Service officials further advise that the structural maintenance budget for 2011/12 is currently estimated at £110m leaving a shortfall of £6 million.

If more funding was available, more maintenance work would be carried out, and I can assure the Member that Roads Service will continue to make strong bids for additional structural maintenance funds. In the meantime, Roads Service will continue to make the best use of resources available to it to develop and maintain the road network.

Department for Social Development

Homelessness

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development how many people are currently registered as homeless by the Housing Executive, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6251/11-15)

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 Parliamentary constituency. However, the table below gives details of the number of applicants currently accepted as homeless (Full Duty applicant) by District Council area.

Council Area	Accepted as homeless (Full Duty applicant)
Antrim Borough Council	388
Ards Borough Council	455
Armagh City and District Council	122
Ballymena Borough Council	498
Ballymoney Borough Council	102
Banbridge District Council	145
Belfast City Council	2766
Carrickfergus Borough Council	260
Castlereagh Borough Council	434
Coleraine Borough Council	347
Cookstown District Council	85
Craigavon Borough Council	307
Derry City Council	932
Down District Council	299
Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council	322
Fermanagh District Council	159
Larne Borough Council	128
Limavady Borough Council	130
Lisburn City Council	862
Magherafelt District Council	121
Moyle District Council	100
Newry & Mourne District Council	324
Newtownabbey Borough Council	556
North Down Borough Council	425
Omagh District Council	92
Strabane District Council	84
Total	10443

The Information provided is an Official Statistic. The Production and dissemination of all such Statistics is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by UK Statistics Authority.

Welfare Reform: Meetings with DWP

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions he, or his senior officials, have had with the Department for Work and Pensions between October and December 2011, in relation to the implementation of welfare reform.

(AQW 7274/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since becoming Minister for Social Development I have met with Department for Work and Pensions Ministers on a number of occasions to discuss welfare reform, including meeting Maria Miller, the Department for Work and Pensions Minister for Disabled People on 16 November 2011, where I was accompanied by the Acting Head of the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division. Discussions included reform of the child maintenance system in relation to the implementation of welfare reform.

During the period October to December 2011 senior officials from my Department have also been involved in extensive discussions with officials from the Department for Work and Pensions including Robert Deveraux, Department for Work and Pensions Permanent Secretary and Noel Shanahan, Child Maintenance and Enforcement Division Commissioner.

Senior officials have also participated in a number of meetings/forums including:

- Universal Credit Stakeholder Board
- Universal Credit Implementation and Delivery Steering Group
- Universal Credit Service Design Steering Group
- Universal Credit Implementation Assurance Group
- Universal Credit Pension Age Project Checkpoint
- Universal Credit Migration
- Incapacity Benefit Reassessment Project Board
- Incapacity Benefit Reassessment Delivery Board
- Personal Independence Payment Project Board
- Personal Independence Payment Central Authority/Delivery Implementation Steering Group
- Personal Independence Payment Senior Management Team
- Personal Independence Payment Implementation Programme
- Personal Independence Payment User Centred Design presentation Strand 1 Findings
- Employment and Support Allowance Legislative Changes Project Steering Committee
- Fraud and Error Programme Board
- Fraud and Error Programme – Overpayments/Decision/Calculations & Appeals/Sanctions
- Fraud and Error Programme – Sanctions & Civil Penalty Update
- Fraud and Error Programme – Debt Update
- Fraud and Error Programme – Single Fraud Investigation Service Update
- Fraud and Error Programme – Credit Reference Data Update/User Group
- Working Age to Pension Age Operational Readiness Review Out of Cycle Programme Board
- Social Fund Policy

Housing Associations: Standards

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what powers he has to ensure that housing associations maintain properties in a suitable condition and to a standard suitable for tenants.

(AQW 7317/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Association Guide sets out the Department's guidelines for Registered Housing Associations requiring robust policy and procedural standards across all Associations and equitable quality service provision for social housing tenants.

As stated in the Housing Association Guide, the Tenancy Agreement between the Association and its tenant determines the obligations of the landlord and the tenant. Both parties to the agreement are required to fulfil their responsibilities with regards to the maintenance of the dwelling.

The DSD Inspection Team carry out periodical inspections on registered Housing Association's to ensure compliance with procedures laid down in the Housing Association Guide. Failure to comply with the Guide will result in the suspension of payment of grant from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (Development Programme Group) provided by DSD.

Where the inspection reveals continuous failure, failure of a serious nature or if it considers there has been misconduct or mismanagement, the Department may invoke the powers under the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 to initiate an Inquiry.

Warm Homes Scheme

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many households in the North Down area have benefited from the Warm Homes scheme to date.

(AQW 7394/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Since the introduction of the new Warm Homes Scheme in July 2009 until 31 January 2012, 841 households in the North Down Council Area have received assistance from the Warm Homes Scheme.

Derelict Housing: Millisle

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to redevelop derelict housing in the Millisle area.

(AQW 7398/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is committed to bringing back into use all social housing that can be meaningfully restored and has a programme of work already underway. However, the Housing Executive has no long term voids in the Millisle area, but has three vacant properties. Two are currently undergoing repair and have been offered to applicants and the third is awaiting adaptation works for a person with a disability.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have applied for the Boiler Replacement Scheme to date, and the percentage who were eligible.

(AQW 7400/11-15)

Mr McCausland: At 31 January 2012 a total of 3,263 applications were received for the pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme. 1,369 (42%) applicants met the qualifying criteria and 1,275 applicants have received formal approval to commence replacement works. The pilot scheme will close on 31 March and I would urge any applicants waiting for work to be carried out in their home to make contact with their preferred installer urgently to ensure the work is completed as soon as possible.

State Pensions: Women

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development what measures he is taking to address the 25 percent of women who will not be entitled to a full state pension when they reach the age of retirement.

(AQW 7443/11-15)

Mr McCausland: In the past, an incomplete recognition of caring responsibilities, especially when tied to the different labour market experiences of men and women, made women's State Pension outcomes worse than men's.

The Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 introduced reforms of the State Pension aimed at narrowing the gender gap and assisting carers, frequently women, to build pension entitlement. Changes included a reduction in the number of qualifying years required for a full basic State Pension to thirty, the introduction of a single contribution condition and the carer's credit. The reforms are expected to increase the proportion of women entitled to a full basic State Pension to over 90 per cent by 2025.

The Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 introduced provision for the automatic enrolment of eligible employees into workplace pension schemes, beginning from 2012. This will enable low to moderate earners, who might not previously have had the opportunity, to build up a private pension income to supplement that received from the State. Employee contributions will be matched by employer contributions and a contribution from the State in the form of tax relief.

Assistance is available for those with low incomes through State Pension Credit, which remains a key part of the overall strategy for tackling pensioner poverty. An integral part of the Social Security Agency's benefit uptake programme is ensuring that as many people as possible claim their State Pension Credit entitlement.

These measures are to the benefit of the women in question.

Housing Executive: Land for Sale in North Down

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the sale of land in the North Down area by the Housing Executive.

(AQW 7446/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has confirmed that they have no land for sale on the open market at present within their Bangor District office area.

Town Centre Regeneration: Bangor

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development when his Department intends to organise a conference on Bangor town centre economic regeneration.

(AQW 7473/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is fully committed to working in partnership with all interested parties to take forward the economic regeneration of all our towns and cities including Bangor. I am currently considering Mary Portas's report on How to Revive the High Street to see what the implications are for Northern Ireland. I intend to invite Mary Portas to Northern Ireland to meet with representatives of business, local government and Ministerial colleagues to develop a NI Executive action plan to boost the performance of Northern Ireland's high streets.

Social Security Benefits

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development how much has been paid out, in total, in social security benefits in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7476/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Expenditure on social security benefits paid by the Department for Social Development for the last five years is detailed in the table below.

Year	Amount (£000s)
2006-07	3,938,282
2007-08	4,099,185

Year	Amount (£000s)
2008-09	4,366,618
2009-10	4,722,659
2010-11	4,888,404

State Pensions

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how much was paid out in state pensions in each of the last four years; and how much of this was subsidised each year by the UK Government.

(AQW 7530/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Expenditure on state pensions for each of the last four years is detailed in the table below. This includes the amounts for State Pension contributory benefit, State Pension non-contributory benefit, and State Pension Credit.

YEAR	State Pension (contributory) (£000s)	State Pension (non-contributory) (£000s)	State Pension Credit (£000s)	Total (£000s)
2007-08	1,374,732	1,854	314,710	1,691,296
2008-09	1,464,468	1,900	329,035	1,795,403
2009-10	1,591,547	2,068	351,396	1,945,011
2010-11	1,665,265	2,325	351,996	2,019,586

There is no breakdown of the direct subsidisations. However there are two sources of funding for pension benefits:

- State Pension non-contributory benefit, and State Pension Credit are funded from the NI Consolidated Fund. The NI Consolidated Fund consists of money from HM Treasury, local revenues and other non tax receipts.
- State Pension contributory expenditure is funded from the NI National Insurance Fund which is financed from NI National Insurance Contributions. The NI National Insurance Fund funds the range of contributory benefits payable by the Department, and similar arrangements also exist in Great Britain whereby GB contributory benefits are payable from the GB National Insurance Fund. Transfers between the two funds take place; however it is not possible to break down the transfers to one specific category of contributory benefit.

Employment and Support Allowance: Disallowed Claims

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many people have had their initial Employment and Support Allowance claim disallowed in each of the last three years; and (ii) how many appealed (a) successfully; and (b) unsuccessfully.

(AQW 7531/11-15)

Mr McCausland:

- (i) The table below shows a breakdown of the total number of claims where entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance has ceased in each of the last three years. In some instances customers may have lost their entitlement on more than one occasion and therefore the Department cannot provide the specific information requested.

Year	Employment and Support Allowance*
Apr 09 to Mar 10	12,827
Apr 10 to Mar 11	17,672
Apr 11 to Dec 11	14,807

* The figures provided have been derived from scans of the Department's Matching Intelligence Database Analysis and General Matching Service systems and include cases where a customer has been found fit for work, has failed to attend a medical assessment or has not provided the required information. The figures also include claims where entitlement has ceased following changes in a customer's circumstances including when a customer returns to work, claims an alternative benefit or the death of a customer.

- (ii) The information requested regarding appeals is not available in the format requested. However details of all appeal results, which includes claims where entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance has ceased, is set out in the table below:

Year	Appeals upheld in customer favour	Appeals upheld in Department's favour	Total Appeals results
2009-10	354	861	1215
2010-11	1410	3374	4784
2011-Jan 2012	1639	3000	4639
Total	3403	7235	10638

Disability Living Allowance: Disallowed Claims

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) how many people have had their initial Disability Living Allowance claim disallowed in each of the last three years; and (ii) how many appealed (a) successfully; and (b) unsuccessfully. (AQW 7532/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below details the total number of Disability Living Allowance initial claims that were unsuccessful in each of the last three years.

Year	Unsuccessful applications
2008/09	12,000
2009/10	12,016
2010/11	9,978

Appeals are received from applicants who have been unsuccessful in their application for Disability Living Allowance (nil award) and from those who have been awarded the benefit but are dissatisfied with the level of the award made. Disability Living Allowance appeals are recorded on an overall number basis and not distinguishable by the circumstances of the decision under appeal.

The table below details the total number of Disability Living Allowance appeals received in the Appeals Service and the outcome of those appeals in each of the last three years. Appeals may not be dealt with in the same year that they are received.

Year	Number of Appeals received in the Appeal Service	More Advantageous Decision	Less Advantageous Decision
2008/09	7,016	1,942	3,811
2009/10	5,636	1,836	3,311
2010/11	5,580	1,651	2,956

Employment and Support Allowance: Claimants

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development how many Employment Support Allowance claimants, to date, have had their entitlement changed to Jobseeker's Allowance following review. (AQW 7533/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A customer's entitlement is not automatically changed to Jobseeker's Allowance following loss of entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance. Customers may choose to claim Jobseeker's Allowance following loss of entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance, but are not required to do so. Therefore the Department cannot provide the specific information requested.

Social Housing: Waiting List

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development what consideration he has given to using vacant, privately owned homes to ease the social housing waiting list. (AQW 7543/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am determined to ensure that any scope to meet housing need through effective use of empty homes should be maximised.

The reasons houses are left empty can be complex and range from the individual who for some reason is unable or unwilling to do anything to bring the house back into use, to houses being situated in areas where people do not want to live. Therefore a variety of approaches have been developed such as advice and signposting, practical help such as grants and loans, and the threat and use of enforcement powers.

I have tasked the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to test the effectiveness and cost of these interventions in two pilot areas and the results will inform a revised empty homes action plan for Northern Ireland.

Vacant Properties: Privately Owned Homes

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development for an estimate of the number of privately owned homes which are vacant. **(AQW 7544/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: Data on the number of privately owned homes is held by the Department of Finance and Personnel, Land and Property Services. As at 22 January 2012 there were 40,889 vacant residential properties in Northern Ireland. This figure is reduced to 37,736 when Housing Executive and Housing Association voids are removed.

Solid Fuel and Economy 7 Heating: Replacement

Mr Eastwood asked the Minister for Social Development, in light of the Housing Executive's commitment to replace solid fuel and Economy 7 heating with gas central heating, whether he has any plans to upgrade heating systems in housing association properties.

(AQW 7584/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Housing Associations' plans to replace Economy 7 and solid fuel heating systems vary. A number have either replaced or are in the process of replacing Economy 7 and solid fuel heating systems, through the Cosy Homes programme, subject to available funding. Other Associations plan to replace their existing heating systems over the next five to seven years with mains gas, where it is available and subject to the agreement of the tenant. One Association is considering the replacement of its existing Economy 7 heating systems as these systems reach the end of their designated life. This decision takes into account the result of energy performance assessments carried out on the property and the potential benefit to the tenant - however, in the absence of mains gas, Economy 7 heating may sometimes remain the only realistic form of heating for some social housing tenants.

Pension Credit: Uptake

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the level of unclaimed pension credit in each of the last four years. **(AQW 7594/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available as there is no current reliable data source that can be used to accurately estimate how many people do not claim the pension credit to which they could be entitled.

Promoting benefit uptake is a key priority for the Department and the Social Security Agency has taken a proactive approach to increasing uptake since 2005.

The Social Security Agency, through its annual Benefit Uptake Programmes, has used a range of direct targeting, promotional and community outreach approaches to increase the uptake of all benefits. This work has generated an additional £37.6 million in annual benefit and arrears for over 11,000 people to date. Based on available research evidence the main focus of benefit uptake activity since 2009 has been older people, those living with disability and carers. The total annual benefit generated since 2005 for over 60s is £30.8m. Over 5,000 additional Pension Credit claims have been generated.

In 2011/12 significant additional investment has been made in benefit uptake, taking the annual spend to in excess of £1.3m across 4 complementary approaches:

- 25,000 people, selected from existing customer data, have received a personal invitation to have a full benefits assessment through a contracted partner in the independent advice sector. 21,700 of these are aged 60 and over and the exercise has involved 8,100 customers receiving State Pension but not State Pension Credit.
- A promotional outreach to older people approach at council and community level involving trusted partners such as community and older peoples' groups, general practitioners, pharmacies and church/faith based groups. Entitlement checks are delivered by telephone with home visits offered to those who require assistance with making a claim.
- The "Make the Call" advertising campaign - a television, radio, press and outdoor advertising campaign aimed at older people. Over 10,000 calls have been received to date and ongoing monitoring indicates that around 40% of callers have potential entitlement.
- A £375,000 Innovation Fund for Increasing Benefit Uptake has funded 7 projects led by the community and voluntary sector partners to test new and innovative ways of reaching people with potential unclaimed benefit entitlement.

A wide range of general services are also in place to make people aware of their potential entitlement to benefit. These include the production of specific publications, some in minority ethnic languages; NI Direct website; an online Benefits Adviser Service; general assistance with information available through our network of local and centralised offices.

At August 2011 the total number of claimants of Pension Credit was 97,040. Total number of beneficiaries was 120,550 (includes partners of claimants).

Benefits: Uptake

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Social Development to provide a breakdown of the level of unclaimed benefits in each of the last four years.

(AQW 7595/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information requested is not available as there is no current reliable data source that can be used to accurately estimate how many people do not claim the benefits to which they could be entitled.

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Clanmil Housing Association

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the improvement and repair scheme in Clanmil developments, including Sinton Court, Cookstown, when the tender process (i) began; (ii) was due to be completed; and (iii) is expected to be completed.

(AQW 7599/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Clanmil Housing Association has advised that, following a stock condition survey, re-improvement works were identified to be undertaken at Sinton Court, Cookstown and at a number of their other schemes. Contractors for this work were procured in accordance with the Public Contract Regulations. Tenders were invited on 12 December 2011 and were returned to Clanmil on 12 January 2012. Clanmil has evaluated all the tender submissions for the scheme at Sinton Court and has now identified a successful contractor. The successful contractor cannot be appointed until pre contract meetings have occurred and the contractors credentials have been confirmed in line with Clanmil Housing governance procedures and NI public procurement guidance. The tender evaluation process, and subsequent recommendation to appoint, will be concluded by the 29 February 2012 at the latest, at which point a contractor will be appointed

Housing Executive Properties: Repairs

Mr S Anderson asked the Minister for Social Development how his Department monitors the standard of repairs carried out on Housing Executive properties.

(AQW 7602/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I have been advised by the Housing Executive that with regard to heating installations in Housing Executive properties, the Housing Executive has a number of steps in place to ensure the quality of the work carried out by the contractor. The contractor and Housing Executive inspectors agree a list of items to be checked on completion of the work. The contractor is compelled to carry out this check on every property in each contract. Housing Executive inspectors then carry out audits of the work completed by the contractor. Inspectors then either sign off a property as satisfactory or as a failure. Failures are referred back to the Contracts Manager to initiate the necessary repairs and challenge the relevant installation team on the quality of the workmanship. Only properties that are satisfactorily completed and signed off can be processed for payment and submitted to the Housing Executive. The proportion of failures by the contractor is also constantly monitored and measured as one of a number of Key Performance Indicators. Housing Executive tenants are asked to sign a "Satisfaction Form" which rates the contractor (from very dissatisfied through to very satisfied) in various categories such as: -

- Consultation by Contractors tenant liaison officer prior to installation.
- Contractor's timekeeping performance.

- The standard of workmanship.
- How tidy were the workers.
- Attitude of the workers.
- Did they provide an explanation on the operation of the new heating system?
- Overall satisfaction.

In relation to Planned Revenue Replacement Schemes (for example kitchen or window replacement) and External Cyclical Maintenance Schemes, these are delivered in accordance with a documented scheme delivery process and specification. Project management and an inspectorate ensure work is delivered in accordance with the Housing Executive's procedures and the contract requirements. Key Performance Indicators are used to measure contractor performance. Compliance is assured by a series of technical, procedural and quality audits carried out and reported on a regular basis.

With regard to Response Maintenance Repairs, the Housing Executive carries out a programme of post inspections on completed Response Maintenance Repair work. These inspections check both the quality of completed work and the accuracy of the contractors' claim for payment. The number of completed jobs inspected is determined by job value and the work content. In addition to these on site inspections, the Housing Executive also has in place a telephone post inspection process for small value jobs. These are carried out by staff at our customer service units and if the tenants are dissatisfied with the completed work they are referred back to the contractor or Housing Executive technical staff on site.

The inspection programme is further supported by annual audits which carry out sample inspections on work completed by contractors throughout the year

The results of all inspections, both telephone and site inspections, are fed into a total of six key performance indicators (KPI's). These KPI's measure contractor monthly performance against: -

- Satisfactory Workmanship
- Accurate Payment Claims
- Timeliness of Completion
- Customer Satisfaction.

Failure to reach a satisfactory score in any of the KPI's will require the contractor to agree an improvement plan with the Housing Executive. If there is not an improvement in the performance of the contractor the Housing Executive will take steps to terminate the contract under the contract conditions.

Neighbourhood Renewal Projects: Portadown/Craigavon/Lurgan

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister for Social Development, pursuant to AQW 6885/11-15 to provide a breakdown of funding by (i) specific project; and (ii) project provider which his Department has allocated to Neighbourhood Renewal Projects in (a) Portadown; (b) Craigavon; and (c) Lurgan in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7603/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is as follows:

Lurgan

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
CLAN NA GAEL GFC	Sports Development Officer	£45,398.38		
	Clan Na Gael Multi Use Games Area and pitch refurbishment	£292,392.91	£195,573.08	
NIHE	Mourneview & Grey Estates community office	£71,500.00		
	Mourneview Community House furnishing		£8,454.50	
	Beaumont Square & Prospect Way	£6,000.00		
	Wakehurst Alleygating	£22,361.44	£3,569.50	
	Environmental Improvements - Kilwilkie / Lurgantarry	£5,500.00		
	Manor Park car parking		£6,000.00	
	Lurgantarry improvements		£29,500.00	
	Oakfield Car Parking			£6,479.37
	Lurgan Glenholme Fencing and Footpath			£12,781.57
DRD	Kilwilkie Roads and Pathways resurfacing			£253,860.69

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Albert Street & Lough Road Community Assoc.	Community office running costs	£7,012.00	£2,004.00	
Shankill (Lurgan) Community Projects Ltd	Equipment for Mount Zion - computers	£20,469.00		
Taghnevan Sports Ltd	Provision of sports facility	£423,700.00	£57,186.00	
Clann Eireann GFC	External site improvements	£50,389.70		
Springwell Centre	Site acquisition and new facilities	£55,007.20		
CIDO	Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation (CIDO) - Exploring Enterprise Programme	£6,757.50		
Southern Education and Library Board	Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)		£15,025.00	
	Naiscoil Chois Locha	£52,689.67		
Craigavon Borough Council	Craigavon Partnerships Building the Capacity	£1,583.33		
	Craigavon NR Officer	£28,882.53	£36,588.19	£3,468.26
	Craigavon Multi Sports Games Areas - Churchill Pk, Taghnevan and Clonmeen	£144,319.81		
	Craigavon Community Sport Programme		£25,128.72	
	Craigavon Retail Capacity Building			£74,520.00
	Craigavon - Graffiti Removal		£14,790.00	
	Craigavon - Pest Control		£1,375.50	£2384.00
	Craigavon - CBC - Technical Assistance 4			£24,332.08
	Graffiti Removal and Prevention Project			£12,750.00
	Craigavon Sport in the Community (2011-2014)			£31,955.93
	Citizen 21		£2,000.00	£32,800.00
	Mourneview MUGA *			£174,000.00
Southern Regional College	Education and Social Exclusion	£25,765.63	£15,080.26	£7,262.40
	Success to Employment (Health Trust)		£7,224.00	
	Craigavon - TOPS			£44,252.70
	Southern Region - Practice Firms			£11,002.94
	Craigavon - Steering to Success		£29,357.53	£33,882.46
	Southern Region - Cancerwise			£406.00
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	Craigavon Health and Well-being programme	£22,085.40	£100,826.52	
	Craigavon Health Improvement Project			£51,000.00

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/2012
Southern Education and Library Board	Social Renewal Educational programme 2	£130,219.83	£115,877.10	£7,614.04
	SELB - Inclusion in Education			£46,794.19
	SELB - Youth Engagement			£38,336.12
	SELB – St Mary's Family Learning Room			£57,063.88
DRD Roads Service	DRD – Levin Road Repairs		£122,000.00	
	DRD – Donard Gdns/Gracey Drive Repairs		£41,500.00	
Total		£1,412,034.33	£829,059.90	£926,946.63

* Project originally scheduled for 2011/12 financial year but will now be moved to 2012/13 because of delay in securing planning approval.

BROWNLOW PROJECTS

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/12
NIHE	Drumbeg physical improvements - fencing of gables	£2,096.00		
	Brownlow additional car parking	£48,370.00		
	Rosmoyle and Russell Drive fencing		£14,000.00	
	Brownlow Estates - entrance features	£19,420.00		
	Parkmore beacon		£9,500.00	
	Clanrolla and Clonmeen - additional carparking			£53,279.07
	Enniskeen Community House - refurbishment			£30,000.00
	Drumellan Family Learning Centre - refurbishment			£118,850.00
Brownlow Ltd	Bluestone Business Park	£715,057.00	£12,470.00	
Craigavon Borough Council	Brownlow Outdoor Pursuits Instructor Training Programme			£13,600.00
	Drumbeg Community Arts Project	£85,000.00		
Dept For Regional Development	Brownlow - Drumgask 2 footways improvements 2	£50,000.00	£155,551.00	
	Brownlow - West Brownlow Environmental Improvements			£70,474.44
Business In The Community	Brownlow - Adopt a School	£15,118.50	£5,039.50	£0.00
Craigavon Amateur Boxing Club	Boxing club			£31,525.25
Moyraverty Arts And Drama Society	St Anthony's Hall - refurbishment		£5,000.0	£405,509.44
Craigavon Borough Council	Craigavon Partnerships Building the Capacity	£1,583.33		
	Craigavon NR Officer	£28,882.53	£39,424.65	£3,468.26
	Craigavon Multi Sports Games Areas - Churchill Pk, Taghnevan and Clonmeen	£126,644.66		
	Craigavon Community Sport Programme		£17,245.20	
	Craigavon Retail Capacity Building			£32,360.00
	Craigavon - Graffiti Removal		£10,150.00	

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/12
Craigavon Borough Council	Craigavon - Pest Control		£1,375.50	£1,636.00
	Craigavon - CBC - Technical Assistance 4			£35,831.96
	Graffiti Removal and Prevention Project			£8,750.00
	Craigavon Sport in the Community (2011-2014)			£28,044.91
Southern Regional College	Education and Social Exclusion	£17,682.30	£10,349.20	£4,984.00
	Success to Employment (Health Trust)		£4,958.00	
	Craigavon - TOPS			£35,369.50
	Southern Region - Practice Firms			£16,002.94
	Craigavon - Steering to Success		£20,147.33	£23,252.67
	Southern Region - Cancerwise			£406.00
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	Craigavon Health and Well-being programme	£15,156.65	£69,194.67	
	Craigavon Health Improvement Project			£35,000.00
Southern Education and Library Board	Social Renewal Educational programme 2	£89,366.55	£79,523.50	£5,225.33
	SELB - Inclusion in Education			£32,113.66
	SELB - Youth Engagement			£26,309.11
Total		£1,214,377.52	£453,928.55	£1,011,992.54

NW Portadown Projects

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/12
Drumcree Community Trust	Learning through Play	£11,844.86		
	Physical enhancement of Drumcree Community Centre	£16,867.05		
NIHE	Woodside access road	£49,500.00		
	Woodside Darby & Joan Club	£11,000.00		
	NW Portadown Environmental Improvements			£56,115.95
Southern Education And Library Board	Naiscoil na Banna	£63,000.00		
	Ballyoran PS Community Learning Room & Early Years facility			£144,706.53
St Mary's Youth Centre	Refurbishment Phase 1 - Consultancy			£44,500.00
	St Mary's Boxing Club		£6,290.70	
Edgarstown Residents Association	Edgarstown community IT equipment	£3,498.28		
	Edgarstown Community Base refurbishment			£74,200.00
Drd Roads Service	Park Road/ Edgarstown Footbridge	£155,000.00		
	Edgarstown Carriageway & Footpath Improvements			£61,105.00
Craigavon Borough Council	Arts development – Shared history of Garvaghy		£15,000.00	
Bannside Community Assoc	Bannside Refurbishment		£15,446.80	£5,600.00

Applicant	Project	2009/2010	2010/2011	2011/12
St Johns Scouts	St John's Scouts – Regeneration			£22,000.00
Craigavon Borough Council	Craigavon Partnerships Building the Capacity	£1,583.33		
	Craigavon NR Officer	£13,883.52	£16,354.76	£3,468.26
	Craigavon Multi Sports Games Areas - Churchill Pk, Taghnevan and Clonmeen	£57,977.36		
	Craigavon Community Sport Programme		£6,898.08	
	Craigavon Retail Capacity Building			£10,120.00
	Craigavon - Graffiti Removal		£4,060.00	
	Craigavon - Pest Control		£1,375.50	£654.50
	Craigavon - CBC - Technical Assistance 4			£24,332.08
	Graffiti Removal and Prevention Project			£3,500.00
	Craigavon Sport in the Community (2011-2014)			£2,639.93
Southern Regional College	Education and Social Exclusion	£7,072.92	£4,139.68	£1,993.60
	Success to Employment (Health Trust)		£1,983.00	
	Craigavon - TOPS			£12,147.80
	Southern Region - Practice Firms			£11,002.94
	Craigavon - Steering to Success		£8,058.93	£9,301.07
	Southern Region - Cancerwise			£406.00
Southern Health and Social Care Trust	Craigavon Health and Well-being programme	£6,062.66	£27,677.87	
	Craigavon Health Improvement Project			£14,000.00
Southern Education and Library Board	Social Renewal Educational programme 2	£35,746.62	£31,809.40	£2,090.13
	SELB - Inclusion in Education			£12,845.46
	SELB - Youth Engagement			£10,523.64
Total		£422,036.60	£139,084.72	£527,252.89

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr Spratt asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of people currently in receipt of Jobseeker's Allowance, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 7605/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The table below shows the number of people claiming Jobseeker's Allowance by Assembly Area at August 2011.

Assembly Area	Number of claimants
Belfast East	2,640
Belfast North	4,840
Belfast South	3,260
Belfast West	4,830
East Antrim	2,310
East Londonderry	3,340
Fermanagh And South Tyrone	2,740

Assembly Area	Number of claimants
Foyle	5,430
Lagan Valley	2,180
Mid Ulster	2,690
Newry And Armagh	4,520
North Antrim	3,010
North Down	2,010
South Antrim	2,240
South Down	3,410
Strangford	2,250
Upper Bann	3,730
West Tyrone	3,320
Unknown	550
Total	59,310

Data source Northern Ireland Benefits Statistics Summary August 2011

Green Investment Bank

Mr Agnew asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the potential to obtain funding through the Green Investment Bank; and whether it could help fund the Green New Deal.

(AQW 7610/11-15)

Mr McCausland: A Cross Departmental Group which is chaired by my Department and includes representatives from DETI, DARD and DFP have developed a full economic appraisal to determine the most cost effective way of delivering a Green New deal solution with the £12m that has been set aside by the NI Executive, ensuring that the maximum benefit is realised from the expenditure.

When the economic appraisal has been approved a detailed forward work programme will be developed for the preferred option within the appraisal. The forward work programme will include the potential to exploit other funding streams to increase additional funding for a Green New Deal solution over and above the £12m that is currently available. Obtaining funding from The Green Investment Bank (GIB) will be one of the funding streams that will be explored once greater detail is known about the establishment of the bank and the funding that it has at its disposal.

Carbon Monoxide Monitors

Mr Hamilton asked the Minister for Social Development how many carbon monoxide monitors the Housing Executive intends to install in properties in (i) Newtownards; and (ii) Down district council areas in this financial year.

(AQW 7641/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive advises that they intend to install carbon monoxide detectors in their properties within the Newtownards and Down District Council areas as follows:-

- Newtownards 1,920 dwellings
- Downpatrick 267 dwellings

The contractor has already started installations and intends to complete by the end of May 2012.

Employment and Support Allowance: Work Capability Assessments

Mr Molloy asked the Minister for Social Development, in relation to the ATOS healthcare professionals who conduct Work Capability Assessments for people on Employment and Support Allowance (i) to provide a definition of healthcare professionals; and (ii) the qualifications required for the post.

(AQW 7703/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The definition of a healthcare professional and the qualifications required have been agreed by the Department and Atos Healthcare and are included within the terms of the Medical Support Services Agreement. Specific details are set out below.

- (i) The Medical Support Services Agreement defines a healthcare professional as:
- (a) a registered medical practitioner;
 - (b) a registered nurse;
 - (c) an occupational therapist or physiotherapist registered with a regulatory body established by an Order in Council under section 60 of Health Care Act 1999; or
 - (d) a member of such other profession regulated by a body mentioned in section 25(3) of the National Health Service Reform and Health Care Professions Act 2002 as the Secretary of State may prescribe.

Currently only registered medical practitioners or registered nurses are employed in the provision of the service to the Department for Social Development.

- (ii) The qualifications required of healthcare professionals are:
- (a) in the case of a Medical Practitioner:
 - to hold a current registration to practice in the United Kingdom;
 - to have 3 years post-registration full-time equivalent experience across a range of relevant clinical disciplines (within the last 6 years prior to an advertisement for positions being placed); and
 - to hold a full and unconditional registration with the United Kingdom General Medical Council.
 - (b) in the case of a nurse:
 - to be fully registered, without restrictions or conditions, with the Nursing and Midwifery Council; and
 - to have a minimum of 3 years post registration experience.
 - (c) for all other healthcare professionals:
 - to be fully registered, without restrictions or conditions, with the relevant licensing body;
 - to have a minimum of 3 years post registration experience;
 - to possess good communication skills;
 - to have an understanding of customer care issues; and
 - to have an understanding of disability issues.

Housing Executive: Vacant Properties

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive properties are currently vacant. **(AQW 7803/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: There are currently 2,032 Housing Executive properties vacant.

Equality Unit

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the (i) number; and (ii) annual cost of staff employed in his Department's Equality Unit. **(AQW 7807/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: Equality issues are dealt with by my Department's Corporate Services Unit. Staff costs in relation to equality issues cannot be desegregated from other activities for which this unit has responsibility.

Fuel Hedging

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department, and its arm's-length bodies, are engaged in fuel hedging to manage fluctuations in fuel prices. **(AQW 7898/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: Neither the Department for Social Development nor its arm's length bodies are engaged in fuel hedging.

Volunteering Strategy Action Plan

Mr Dallat asked the Minister for Social Development when his Department's strategy on volunteering will be published. **(AQW 7902/11-15)**

Mr McCausland: Northern Ireland's first ever Volunteering Strategy Action Plan is expected to be launched in early March.

FirstBuy NI Pilot Scheme

Mr Elliott asked the Minister for Social Development to detail (i) the level of funding allocated to the FirstBuy NI pilot scheme; (ii) the timescale for the delivery of the scheme; and (iii) how much money had been allocated under the scheme to home buyers at 1 February 2012.

(AQW 7963/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department allocated £3.25m to the FirstBuy NI pilot scheme. This funding was made available to Co-Ownership Housing for the 2011/12 financial year and the pilot will, therefore, close on 31 March 2012.

It is disappointing that no applications for assistance have been received. Given this, the funding has been re-allocated to support purchases under the main Co-Ownership Scheme. Any applications for assistance under FirstBuy NI that are received before 31 March 2012 and qualify for help will be accommodated from this funding within the main scheme.

Portrush: Public Realm Scheme

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the Portrush regeneration scheme.
(AQO 1316/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Station Square public realm scheme in Portrush, which is being funded by my Department, Coleraine Borough Council and Northern Ireland Tourist Board, will be completed in time for the busy and exciting schedule that lies ahead for the town this year.

- The section in front of Barry's is to be completed by 16 March.
- The section in front of the old Train Station building and the portion of the scheme around the amphitheatre is to be completed by 9 April.
- The remainder of the scheme will be completed by 2 May. There may be a slight delay in the completion of the mosaic for the base of the new amphitheatre, as it has to be laid in dry conditions, but that will not delay the scheme being opened to the public.

Housing: Improvement Grants

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for Social Development what grants are currently available to home owners who wish to make improvements.

(AQO 1321/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I am determined to increase not just the quantity but also the quality of housing stock in Northern Ireland.

My Department continues to fund the Warm Home Scheme which offers a range of insulation and heating measures to vulnerable householders. A pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme is also being delivered which offers a grant of up to £1,500 towards the cost of installing a new boiler. Approximately 1,330 boilers will be replaced before the end of this financial year.

Applications for Disabled Facilities Grants have not been affected by the reduction in the funding available for Private Sector Grants and they are being processed as normal by the Housing Executive. Home Repair Assistance Grants for people who are infirm or have a disability and who need small scale improvements, repairs, adaptations or basic security measures carried out to their property can be approved if the Housing Executive's Exceptional Circumstances Committee agree that there is a serious and imminent risk to the occupier if the work is not carried out.

There is also a need to identify new and more sustainable ways to finance repair and improvements and encourage home owners to more effectively help themselves while also making the best use of limited public money.

Home owners would benefit from practical advice and sign posting to a range of services including access to other forms of private finance including equity release. My officials have been exploring how such an approach could and should be introduced and I intend to use the forthcoming Housing Strategy to more fully discuss this issue.

As well as looking for opportunities from within our existing budget allocations, I will consider the use of monitoring rounds to seek additional funding for grants.

Community Care Grants

Mr Hussey asked the Minister for Social Development how many Community Care Grant applications were received and granted in the last twelve months.

(AQO 1320/11-15)

Mr McCausland: 47,652 Community Care Grant applications were received between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2011, of which 24,403 resulted in a successful award.

Welfare Reform: Benefit Cap

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister for Social Development how many families will be affected in Northern Ireland if a £26,000 benefit cap is introduced.

(AQO 1322/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The coalition Government is proposing to introduce a cap on the amount of benefit a household, the vast majority of which will be families, can receive of £26,000 per year after tax and National Insurance or £35,000 per year before Tax and National Insurance.

This equates to £500 net a week and is based on average earned income. The principle behind the introduction of a cap is that people on benefits should not receive more in social security benefits than is earned by those who are working and paying their taxes.

Those entitled to Working Tax Credit, as well as households with someone receiving Disability Living Allowance, are excluded from the benefit cap. Initially the intent is that the cap will be delivered through Housing Benefit payments however it will ultimately be administered as part of the new Universal Credit system.

Early analysis based on survey data indicates that when the cap is first introduced, approximately 99% of all households claiming Housing Benefit will not be affected by the cap.

Supplementary analysis of Housing Benefit administrative data indicates that at January 2012 there are 160,000 households claiming Housing Benefit.

Crisis Loans

Mr McGimpsey asked the Minister for Social Development how many Crisis Loan applications were received and granted in the last twelve months.

(AQO 1323/11-15)

Mr McCausland: 156,765 Crisis Loan applications were received between 1 January 2011 and 31 December 2011, of which 119,941 resulted in a successful award.

Fuel Poverty

Mr Ross asked the Minister for Social Development what action he is taking to reduce fuel poverty.

(AQO 1324/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Tackling fuel poverty is one of my main priorities and my Department has a range of initiatives in place to help householders who are in fuel poverty. In April 2011, my Department launched its fuel poverty strategy entitled "Warmer Healthier Homes". This strategy sets our vision for the future as "a society in which people live in a warm, comfortable home, and need not worry about the effect of the cold on their health". The strategy places significant emphasis on the partnership approach required to tackle fuel poverty and the cross-departmental nature of the whole area of fuel poverty.

In addition to continuing to deliver annual initiatives such as the Warm Homes Scheme, the Housing Executive's Heating Replacement Scheme, a Benefits Uptake campaign and making Winter Fuel Payments and Cold Weather Payments, my Department is also working on a number of new and exciting pilots.

I set aside £2 million to deliver a pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme which entitles eligible householders to a grant of up to £1,500 towards the cost of installing a new boiler. The pilot has been very successful and the Housing Executive is no longer taking applications for the pilot.

My officials are working with colleagues in Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services to deliver as Pay as You Go for Oil. This innovative approach is aimed at discouraging people from purchasing emergency oil drums. 20 homes will have the technology installed; 10 Housing Executive homes and 10 private homes in the Dungannon area.

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is actively evaluating the feasibility of an energy brokering scheme in relation to discounted electricity for its tenants. However, there remain a number of legal, regulatory and practical issues that need to be examined before embarking on such a project. The Housing Executive is looking at a similar scheme already in place in Dundee to establish if it is practical to do a similar project here, or to implement a modified version that is more appropriate for its tenants.

Boiler Replacement Scheme

Mr Buchanan asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the uptake of the Boiler Replacement Scheme.

(AQO 1325/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I set aside £2 million to deliver a pilot Boiler Replacement Scheme which will assist in the region of 1,330 householders who previously have not been eligible for assistance from other energy efficiency schemes. I am delighted with the success of the pilot to date. The scheme will close on 31 March and therefore I would urge anyone still waiting for work to be carried out in their home to make contact with their preferred installer urgently to ensure the work is completed as soon as possible.

Housing Executive: Vacant Properties in West Belfast

Ms J McCann asked the Minister for Social Development how many Housing Executive homes in the West Belfast constituency are currently unoccupied.

(AQO 1326/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary constituency.

However, across the Housing Executive's District Offices in West Belfast, Shankill and Lisburn Dairy Farm, there were 303 vacant properties at 31 December 2011. Of these, 33 were categorised as awaiting relet, 218 pending sale/demolition, 49 undergoing repairs and 3 others which include SPED and squatters.

Housing Executive: Kitchen Replacements in Upper Bann

Mr Moutray asked the Minister for Social Development what plans the Housing Executive has in place for kitchen replacements in Upper Bann.

(AQO 1327/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The information is not available in the format requested as the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by Parliamentary constituency. However, the Housing Executive's Craigavon and Banbridge District Offices have the following kitchen replacement schemes programmed:-

2011/12: -

- 95 dwellings in Ballyoran Estate, Portadown
- 85 dwellings in Primrose Estate, Banbridge

2012/13 (subject to available funding)

- 85 dwellings in Hospital Estate, Lurgan
- 85 dwellings in Drumbeg Estate, Brownlow
- 74 dwellings in Redmanville Estate, Portadown
- 83 dwellings in Reilly Street, Banbridge

Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy: Sport

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of how sport could contribute towards Neighbourhood Renewal Schemes.

(AQO 1328/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy aims to address the range of social problems which characterise the most deprived areas. The benefits of a physically active society bring economic benefits in terms of: reduced health care costs; increased productivity; healthier physical and social environments; better performing schools and workplaces, reductions in levels of anti-social behaviour; and the promotion of active citizenship.

In recognition of the positive contribution sport can make, my Department has provided in

the region of £10.5 million between 07/08 and 11/12 to support projects and programmes that promote participation in sport and physical activity. However, more can be done and in planning for the future there is a need for Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships to recognise the positive contribution participating in sport can make across their communities and to make provision for this within the Neighbourhood Renewal Action Plans.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Parliament Buildings: Good Relations

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission what actions are being taken to make Parliament Buildings more welcoming to people from a nationalist or republican background; and how it will ensure that these political traditions will be reflected.

(AQW 7303/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission is designated as a Public Authority under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Under section 75 (2) of this legislation, the Commission has a statutory duty to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different political opinions as well as of different races and religious beliefs. The current Equality Scheme was approved by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in February 2008 and a Revised Equality Scheme was submitted for approval in December 2011. Documentation relating to the Commission's equality work is published on the Assembly website including an Audit of Inequalities.

The Commission has recently undertaken an Internal Good Relations Audit and is currently considering its findings.

Furthermore, the Information and Outreach Directorate provide an outreach service to schools across Northern Ireland. In 2011, the Secretariat education staff welcomed 499 schools and / or educational establishments and visited 35 schools and / or educational establishments across Northern Ireland.

Elizabeth II Coronation Vase

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission where the vase, made to commemorate the coronation of HM the Queen in 1953, and which formerly stood beside the staircase in the Great Hall, is now located.

(AQW 7313/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Elizabeth II Coronation Vase commemorating the coronation of HM the Queen is currently on display in the First Minister's office.

I hope that the above information provides the detail that you sought, however should you require any supplementary information I would be very happy to assist with your enquiry.

Assembly: Silverware

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission what items of silverware are currently held by the Assembly; and where these items are currently located.

(AQW 7385/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): I can confirm that the following silverware items are held by the Assembly:-

Description	Location
Silver Collection on loan.	
The Royal Irish Rifles' McArdle Cup, London 1904	On display in the First Ministers office
The Turf Club Cup 1928	On display in the First Minister office
The Linfield Hurdle Cup 1928 - all owned by Lord Glentoran	On display in the First Minister office
A small oval dish from the Industrial College of Armed Forces, Washington DC - owned by the Andrews family	In secure storage at Mallusk
The Parliament Golf Handicap Challenge Cup 1927. Silver two-handed trophy dated 1926	On display in the First Ministers office
Silver cigar lighter presented by the Royal College of Nursing, Founders Day 1960	On display in the First Ministers office
Silver egg timer with crest of NI. Presented by Rt Hon Thomas Moles (first Chairman of Ways and Means) to the House of Commons.	In secure storage at Mallusk
Silver maces from the Commons and Senate. Made in London 1924	On display in the Speakers office
A Japanese officer's sword presented by Lord Mountbatten, Supreme Allied Commander, South East Asia	On display in the First Ministers office
Black Rod's Wand of Office, an ebony staff with silver-gilt mounts dated London 1923. 37 in long	On display in the First Ministers office

Assembly: Plans to Mark Diamond Jubilee

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to to AQW 7197/11-15, what plans the Commission has to equip Parliament Buildings suitably to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

(AQW 7496/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The role of the Assembly Commission is to provide the property, staff and services for the Assembly's purposes. As such, the Assembly Commission does not have a role in equipping Parliament Buildings in this regard. Official events and functions, on behalf of the Assembly, are normally hosted by the Speaker.

Assembly Website: Smart Phone Compatibility

Mr Flanagan asked the Assembly Commission whether any plans are in place to make the Assembly website more compatible with smart phones.

(AQW 7509/11-15)

Mr McElduff (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly website is currently compatible with all major mobile phone operating systems. During 2011, less than 3% of visitors to the Assembly's website used a mobile device.

As stated in AQW 7302/11-15 the Assembly's Information Systems Office is currently developing a mobile web application which will improve access to AIMS-based procedural data from a range of web-enabled mobile devices. We hope to trial this web application before the summer recess.

There are currently no plans to introduce mobile apps.

Assembly: Art Procurement

Mr McKay asked the Assembly Commission whether consideration has been given to the procurement of paintings, statues and other art and antiques that reflect nationalist and republican history, given the make-up of the existing materials on display.
(AQW 7763/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Apart from the procurement of portraits of former First and deputy First Ministers and Speakers of the House the Assembly Commission has not, to date, given consideration to the procurement of paintings, statues and other art and antiques.

However, the Assembly Commission is designated as a public authority under

Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Section 75(2) of the Act, the Commission has a statutory duty to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious belief, political opinion or racial group.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members. The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Revised Written Answers

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Fire and Rescue Service: Recruitment Drive

In Bound Volume 70, page WA424, replace the answer to the question (AQW 6128/11-15) asked by **Mr Campbell** with:

Mr Poots (Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service has advised that the recent recruitment competition comprised four stages: a multi stage fitness test; an assessment of the candidate's application form: a Practical Aptitude Test (PAT); and an interview. Only the Practical Aptitude Test had an appeal process and the outcome of that process is set out below.

Number of candidates attending the PAT	664
Number of candidates who failed the PAT	372
Number of candidates who appealed	67
Number of candidates retested	44
Number of successful candidates after retest	37

Justice

Robert Black

In Bound Volume 68, page WA317, replace the answer to the question (AQW 3975/11-15) asked by **Lord Morrow** with:

Mr Ford (Minister of Justice): The answer provided in AQW 3975/11-15, mistakenly, did not include Robert Black's first journey to Northern Ireland from England, two pre trial court appearances, or the return journey back to England.

I enclose a table with a full breakdown of all the costs involved in transporting Robert Black to his court appearances in Northern Ireland. Additionally as his post sentence tariff hearing has now taken place the costs associated with this have also been included in the response

The table of figures below sets out, in chronological order, all of the costs associated with Robert Black's trial. The costs detailed in rows 2-6 and rows 34 were mistakenly not included in the original response to AQW 3975/11-15. The daily costs shown for transporting Mr Black to/from court are halved on those occasions when Mr Black shared a vehicle with other prisoners.

	Date	Venue	Purpose	Cost	Remarks
1	21/01/10	Belfast International Airport	Chartered Flight from England	Unknown	Paid for by NOMS
2	21/01/10	Belfast International Airport	NIPS Staff to collect from airport	£280.44	
3	22/01/10	Lisburn Magistrates Court	Preliminary Enquiry	£264.02	
4	26/02/10	Belfast Crown Court	Arraignment	£147.75	
5	14/04/10	Belfast International Airport	NIPS Staff Escort to England	£400.14	
6	14/04/10	Belfast International Airport	Chartered Flight to England	£2088.00	
7	08/09/11	Belfast International Airport	Chartered Flight from England	£5675.00	Paid for by NOMS
8	08/09/11	Belfast International Airport	NIPS Staff to collect from airport	£280.44	
9	19/09/11	Craigavon Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
10	20/09/11	Craigavon Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£159.37	
11	21/09/11	Craigavon Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	

	Date	Venue	Purpose	Cost	Remarks
12	22/09/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
13	26/09/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
14	27/09/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£159.37	
15	28/09/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
16	29/09/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
17	03/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
18	04/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£159.37	
19	06/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
20	07/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
21	10/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
22	11/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£159.37	
23	12/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
24	13/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
25	17/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
26	18/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£159.37	
27	19/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
28	20/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
29	21/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
30	24/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
31	25/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£159.37	
32	26/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
33	27/10/11	Armagh Crown Court	Crown Court Trial	£318.74	
34	08/12/11	Belfast Crown Court	Crown Court Tariff Hearing	£147.75	
			Total Cost	£16295.82	

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Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 30 January 2012

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 Public Petition - Future of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School

Mr Stephen Agnew was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to the future of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion - Tenancy Deposit Scheme

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the safeguards which Tenancy Deposit Schemes offer to landlords and tenants within the private rented sector; expresses concern that many landlords often make unjustified deductions or are slow to return deposits at the end of a tenancy, particularly for tenants living in student accommodation; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to urgently bring forward his plans to introduce a mandatory Tenancy Deposit Scheme which would safeguard tenants' deposits and provide a fair and effective mechanism to resolve disputes.

Mr M Copeland

Mr J McCallister

3.2 Amendment

Proposed:

After 'Social Development' insert:

' to consider the workings of the Private Residential Tenancies Board, which is based in Dublin, as a potential way forward for dealing with unscrupulous landlords who cheat their tenants out of deposits; and '

Mr F McCann

Mr M Brady

Mr A Maskey

Debate ensued.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Amendment **fell** without division.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

The Speaker took the Chair.

3.3 Motion - Marian Price

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the continuing detention of Marian Price in Maghaberry Prison, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision to revoke her licence; further notes her on-going medical and social needs; believes that reliable evidence and the necessary process should govern judicial and quasi-judicial actions; and calls on the Minister of Justice to engage with the Secretary of State on the reasons for the revocation of her licence, and for her detention, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision, to be reviewed urgently.

*Mr P Ramsey
Mr C McDevitt
Mr A Maginness*

Debate ensued.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

4. Question Time

4.1 Agriculture and Rural Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Mrs Michelle O'Neill.

4.2 Culture, Arts and Leisure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Ms Caral Ní Chuilín.

5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Motion - Marian Price (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the Motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was **negatived** (Division 1).

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

6. Adjournment

Ms Margaret Ritchie spoke to her topic on Tourism development in the South Down area, in particular St Patrick's Country and the Early Christian Heritage Signature Project.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.57pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

30 January 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

30 January 2012

Divisions

Division No. 1

Marian Price - Motion

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the continuing detention of Marian Price in Maghaberry Prison, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision to revoke her licence; further notes her on-going medical and social needs; believes that reliable evidence and the necessary process should govern judicial and quasi-judicial actions; and calls on the Minister of Justice to engage with the Secretary of State on the reasons for the revocation of her licence, and for her detention, by reason of the Secretary of State's decision, to be reviewed urgently.

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 37

Noes: 54

AYES

Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Molloy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Durkan and Mr McDevitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr T Clarke and Mr Nesbitt.

The Motion was **negatived**.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 25 - 30 January 2012

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
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Office of the Northern Ireland Certification Officer (DCAL)
 - Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Office of the Northern Ireland Ombudsman and Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints (DCAL)
 5. Assembly Reports
 6. Statutory Rules
 - (The Department identified after each rule is for reference purposes only)
 - S.R. 2012/10 The Local Government (Constituting Joint Committees as Bodies Corporate) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
 - S.R. 2012/12 Plant Protection Products (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DARD)
- For Information Only:**
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 8. Consultation Documents
 - Consultation on Proposed Amendments to the Tribunal Procedure (Upper Tribunal) Rules 2008 (Tribunal Procedure Committee)
 9. Departmental Publications
 - DFP Memorandum on the First Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2015 (DFP)
 10. Agency Publications
 11. Westminster Publications
 12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 31 January 2012

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

The Speaker informed Members that he had been notified by the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Tom Elliott, that Mr David McNarry had been replaced as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education. The Speaker also informed Members that Mr Tom Elliott nominated Mr Mike Nesbitt to be Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Education with effect from 31 January 2012. The Speaker confirmed the appointment.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement - Further update on Pseudomonas in the Neo-Natal Unit at the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital, Belfast

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Mr Edwin Poots, made a statement regarding a further update on Pseudomonas in the Neo-Natal Unit at the Royal Jubilee Maternity Hospital, Belfast following which he replied to questions.

3.2 Second Stage - Pensions Bill (NIA Bill 3/11-15)

The Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland, moved the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill (NIA Bill 3/11-15).

Debate ensued.

Bill (NIA 3/11-15) passed Second Stage (Division 1).

The sitting was suspended at 12.44pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd.

4.2 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Consideration Stage - Rates (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 2/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved the Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 2/11-15).

Five amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 1 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendments 2 and 3 (as amendments to Amendment 1) were **negatived** without division.

As neither Amendment 2 nor 3 was made, Amendment 4 (as an amendment to Amendment 1) was not called.

After debate, Amendment 1, inserting a new clause after Clause 1, was **made** without division.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 2 to 5 stand part of the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 5 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.

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clause 7 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

Bill NIA 2/11-15 passed Consideration Stage and stood referred to the Speaker.

5.2 Motion - Draft Pharmacy (1976 Order) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the draft Pharmacy (1976 Order) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5.3 Motion - Draft Sunbeds (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Proposed:

That the draft Sunbeds (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.50pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

31 January 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

31 January 2012
Divisions

Division No. 1

Second Stage - Pensions Bill (NIA Bill 3/11-15)

Minister for Social Development

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 50

Noes: 33

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Rt Hon P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Easton and Ms Lewis.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Dallat, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Flanagan, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Mollo, Mr Murphy, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Eastwood and Mr Lynch.

The Second Stage was agreed.

Rates (Amendment) Bill

Marshalled List of Amendments

Consideration Stage

Tuesday 31 January 2012

Amendments tabled up to 9.30am Thursday, 26 January 2012 and selected for debate

The Bill will be considered in the following order-

Clauses and Long Title

Amendment 1

New Clause

After clause 1 insert -

'Temporary rebate for certain previously unoccupied hereditaments etc.

1A. After Article 31C of the principal Order (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments) there shall be inserted the following Article—

"Temporary rebate for certain previously unoccupied hereditaments etc.

31D.—(1) Subject to the provisions of this Article, the Department shall grant to a relevant person a rebate from the rates chargeable in respect of the net annual value of a hereditament to which this Article applies.

(2) No rebate shall be granted except on an application made before 1st April 2013 to the Department by a relevant person; and any such application shall contain such information as the Department may reasonably require.

(3) This Article applies to a hereditament which—

(a) falls within paragraph (4); and

(b) became occupied during the year ending on 31st March 2013 immediately after having been unoccupied for a continuous period of twelve months or more.

(4) A hereditament falls within this paragraph if it is included in the NAV list and—

(a) when last occupied before it became occupied as mentioned in paragraph (3)(b), it was used for retail purposes; or

(b) if never occupied before it became occupied as mentioned in paragraph (3)(b), it could reasonably have been considered by the Department as likely when next in use to be used for retail purposes.

(5) In this Article—

“F” means the first person to occupy the hereditament after the period mentioned in paragraph (3)(b);

“O” means the owner of the hereditament;

“rebate” means rebate under this Article;

“reduced” includes reduced to nothing;

“retail purposes”, in relation to a hereditament, means the retail provision of goods or services on or from the hereditament.

(6) In this Article “relevant person” means—

(a) F; or

(b) O if O pays the rates mentioned in paragraph (1) instead of F,

but the Department shall not grant the rebate to O unless it appears to the Department that the rebate will be applied for F's benefit.

- (7) Subject to paragraph (8)—
- (a) the period for which the rebate is granted shall be the period of twelve months beginning with the day on which the hereditament became occupied as mentioned in paragraph (3)(b); and
 - (b) the amount of the rebate shall be one half of the rates chargeable in respect of that period in respect of the net annual value of the hereditament.
- (8) If—
- (a) F ceases to occupy the hereditament during the period for which the rebate is granted; or
 - (b) the rebate would to any extent contravene an EU obligation,
- the rebate shall be proportionately reduced and if too large an amount has been paid or allowed by way of rebate the excess shall be recoverable summarily by the Department as a debt.
- (9) Where a rebate is granted in respect of a hereditament, in respect of the period for which the rebate is granted—
- (a) Articles 31, 31AA, 31B and 33B shall not apply to the hereditament;
 - (b) the hereditament shall not be a specified hereditament for the purposes of Article 31C (temporary reduction of rates for specified hereditaments);
 - (c) if the hereditament is distinguished in the NAV list as—
 - (i) exempt from rates under Article 41, 41A or 42 or under Article 12(2) to (4) of the Rates (Capital Values etc.) (Northern Ireland) Order 2006; or
 - (ii) occupied and used wholly or partly for industrial purposes or for transport purposes,the hereditament shall be treated as if it were not so distinguished.
- (10) If the rebate is reduced by virtue of paragraph (8), the reference in paragraph (9) to the period for which the rebate is granted shall be construed accordingly.
- (11) The Department shall serve on every relevant person notice of its decision on an application for a rebate.
- (12) Any relevant person may, within twenty-eight days of the service on that person of a notice under paragraph (11), apply to the Department for a review by the Department of its decision.
- (13) The Department shall serve on every relevant person a notice of the result of the review and any relevant person, if dissatisfied with the result of the review, may appeal to the Lands Tribunal.
- (14) On an appeal under paragraph (13) the Lands Tribunal may make any decision which the Department could have made.
- (15) The Department may by an order made subject to affirmative resolution modify paragraphs (2) to (8).
- (16) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (15), an order under that paragraph may—
- (a) for the references to 1st April 2013 and the year ending on 31st March 2013 in paragraphs (2) and (3)(b) substitute references to such date and to such period as may be specified in the order; and
 - (b) provide that no rebate shall be granted for so much of any period as falls after such date as may be specified in the order and modify paragraph (7)(a) accordingly.”’

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Amendment 2

As an amendment to the amendment tabled by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 25/01/2012, inserting a new clause after clause 1.

In Article 31D(4)(a), after ‘purposes’ insert ‘or office purposes’

Mr J Allister

Amendment 3

As an amendment to the amendment tabled by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 25/01/2012, inserting a new clause after clause 1.

In Article 31D(4)(b), after 'purposes' insert 'or office purposes'

Mr J Allister

Amendment 4

As an amendment to the amendment tabled by the Minister of Finance and Personnel on 25/01/2012, inserting a new clause after clause 1.

In Article 31D(5), after 'owner of the hereditament' insert ' "office purposes" has the meaning assigned to it by Article 2 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977,'

Mr J Allister

Amendment 5

Clause 6, Page 4, Line 26

After 'Sections 1' insert ', 1A'

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 31 January 2012

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
 - Draft S.R. 2012 Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DARD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
 - Summary Report of Responses to the Consultation on Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion and the associated Equality Impact Assessment (DE)
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 on 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 31 January 2012

2011-2015 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
/Budget (No. 2) Bill NIA Bill 1/11-15	13.06.11	20.06.11	N/A	N/A	21.06.11	27.06.11	27.06.11	25.07.11
/Rates (Amendment) Bill NIA Bill 2/11-15	16.01.12	24.06.11	N/A	N/A	31.01.12			
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12					

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

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 6 February 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matters of the Day

2.1 60th Anniversary of the Accession of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the Throne

The Rt Hon Mr Peter Robinson made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the 60th Anniversary of the Accession of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II to the Throne. Party representatives were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion - Suspend Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4)

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 6 February 2012.

*Mr P Weir
Ms J McCann
Mr J McCallister
Mr P Ramsey
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support. *Nemine contradicente.*

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mrs Sandra Overend replace Mr Mike Nesbitt as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; that Mr Fra McCann replace Mrs Sandra Overend as a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning; and that Mr David McNarry replace Mr Michael Copeland as a member of the Committee for Regional Development.

*Mr J McCallister
Mr R Swann
Ms J McCann
Mr P Maskey*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** without division.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement - Speeding Up Justice

The Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford, made a statement regarding Speeding up Justice, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair.

5.2 Further Consideration Stage - Rates (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 2/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 2/11-15).

Two amendments were tabled to the Bill.

After debate, Amendment 1 to Clause 2 was **made** without division.

After debate, Amendment 2 to Clause 3 was **made** without division.

Bill NIA 2/11-15 passed Further Consideration Stage and stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act.

6. Committee Business (Cont'd)

6.1 Motion - Widening Access to Education Maintenance Allowance

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues, to expedite the finalisation and implementation of an effective and cross-departmental strategy for young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs) and the on-going Review of Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), in order to address the issues of record levels of youth unemployment and increasing disengagement with mainstream education; and to make the necessary improvements to ensure that EMA is targeted at those in greatest need.

Chairperson, Committee for Employment and Learning

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

7. Assembly Business (Cont'd)

7.1 Committee Chairperson Appointment

The Speaker informed Members that he had received notification from Ms Michelle Gildernew that she would be indisposed for a number of weeks, following an accident and had resigned as Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The nominating officer from Sinn Féin, Mr Pat Doherty, had nominated Ms Sue Ramsey to fill the vacancy and she had accepted the appointment. The Speaker also advised Members that as a Member may not be the Chairperson of a Statutory Committee and a Standing Committee at the same time, Ms Ramsey had been replaced as the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures by Mr Gerry Kelly, who had also accepted the appointment.

8. Question Time

8.1 Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Peter Robinson. Junior Minister, Mr Jonathan Bell, also answered a number of questions.

8.2 Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster.

9. Committee Business (Cont'd)

8.1 Motion - Widening Access to Education Maintenance Allowance (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on the motion.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried without division.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

10. Private Members' Business

10.1 Motion - Car Insurance

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern the soaring cost of insurance in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Justice to intervene to ensure that the payment of compensation claims is capped, and that cases are heard in lower courts.

*Mr A McQuillan
Mr G Campbell*

10.2 Amendment 1

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Justice' and insert:

' to review the level of general damages paid in whip-lash type injuries and further review the jurisdiction in which cases are heard to ensure that court and legal costs are kept to a minimum.'

*Mr A McQuillan
Mr G Campbell*

10.3 Amendment 2

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'capped' and insert:

'; furthermore calls on the Minister to introduce an efficient protocol for low value personal injury claims such as that contained in the Civil Procedures Rules 1998 for England and Wales, and to enable cases to be heard in lower courts, where appropriate.'

*Mr R Beggs
Mr B McCrea*

Debate ensued.

Amendment No 2 was, by leave, withdrawn.

The Question being put, amendment No 1, was agreed without division.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

10.4 Motion - Regulation of the Local Home Heating Oil Industry

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes that home heating oil has the most variable price of any heating fuel; further notes that a growing number of households have no choice but to purchase 20 litre drums of oil that are significantly more expensive per litre than buying in bulk; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to introduce legislation, as soon as possible, to regulate the local home heating oil industry.

*Mr P Flanagan
Mr D McKay
Ms S Ramsey*

10.5 Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'notes' and insert:

' with concern, Northern Ireland's over-reliance on our unregulated home heating oil market; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage further with the Office of Fair Trading, the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator, whilst also encouraging pre-payment schemes operated by local Councils, with a view to addressing consumer concerns.'

Mr T Lunn

Mr S Dickson

Mr K McCarthy

Mrs J Cochrane

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, amendment No 1, was agreed, division 1.

The Question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

11. Adjournment**Proposed:**

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.03pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

6 February 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

6 February 2012

Divisions

Division No. 1

Regulation of the Local Home Heating Oil Industry

Proposed: Leave out all after 'notes' and insert:

' with concern, Northern Ireland's over-reliance on our unregulated home heating oil market; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to engage further with the Office of Fair Trading, the Consumer Council and the Utility Regulator, whilst also encouraging pre-payment schemes operated by local Councils, with a view to addressing consumer concerns.'

Mr T Lunn

Mr S Dickson

Mr K McCarthy

Mrs J Cochrane

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 50

Noes: 28

AYES

Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr W Clarke, Mr Flanagan, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Flanagan and Mr McKay.

The amendment was made.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 1-6 February 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Rates (Amendment) Bill (As Amended at Consideration Stage)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
Electoral Office for Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule (DCAL)
Labour Relations Agency Draft Code of Practice - Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities (DEL)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
S.R. 2012/17 The Road Traffic (Financial Penalty Deposit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
S.R. 2012/18 The Road Traffic (Financial Penalty Deposit) (Appropriate Amount) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
S.R. 2012/19 The Road Traffic (Immobilisation, Removal and Disposal of Vehicles) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
For Information Only:
S.R. 2012/16 (C.3) The Road Traffic (2007 Order) (Commencement No.9) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
S.R. 2012/20 (C.4) The High Hedges (2011 Act) (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
Consultation on Proposals for the Mutual Recognition of Probation Measures, Licence Supervision, and Alternative Sanctions across Member States of the European Union (DOJ)
9. Departmental Publications
Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates 2011-2012 and Vote on Account 2012-13 (DFP)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 7 February 2012

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 Final Stage - Rates (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 2/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved the Final Stage of the Rates (Amendment) Bill.

Debate ensued.

The question being put, NIA Bill 2/11-15 passed Final Stage with cross-community support. Nemine contradicente.

3. Private Members' Business

3.2 Motion - Surety Bonds for New Housing Developments

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern, the number of housing developments where roads and footpaths remain unfinished and sewerage systems have not been completed to a satisfactory standard, despite developers having entered into Surety Bonds under the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980, the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 and any preceding legislation; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development to carry out a review of the bond system in relation to roads, footpaths and sewerage systems in new developments and to review when a bond can be invoked by the relevant authority to address this on-going problem.

Miss M McIlveen

Mr J Wells

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.19 pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm with the Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Environment

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of the Environment, Mr Alex Attwood.

4.2 Employment and Learning

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson.

5. Private Members' Business (Cont'd)

Motion - Surety Bonds for New Housing Developments (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Speaker took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was carried without division.

5.1 Motion - Human Trafficking

Proposed:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the increase in human trafficking where people are brought in illegally and forced into a life of sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude; or are transported onward to other jurisdictions for similar purposes; and calls on the Executive to use all its powers to raise public awareness of this crime to ensure that the perpetrators are brought to justice, and that victims are given the support and help they need.

*Ms J McCann
Ms C Ruane
Ms S Ramsey*

5.2 Amendment

Proposed:

At end insert:

'regardless of whether they are co-operating with the law enforcement authorities; and further calls on the Executive to meet the obligations set out by the Council of Europe Convention (2005) and the new EU Directive (2011) on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings by addressing the demand for sexual and labour exploitation, increasing penalty levels, adopting a victim-centred approach and implementing effective preventative measures.'

*Ms A Lo
Mr C Lyttle
Mr S Dickson
Mrs J Cochrane*

Debate ensued.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

The question being put Amendment 1 was **made** without Division.

The question being put, the Motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

6. Adjournment

Mr Stephen Moutray spoke to his topic on Millenium Way, Lurgan.

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.21pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

7 February 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 7 February 2012

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. 2012/22 The Licensing (Form of Licence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

S.R. 2012/23 The Licensing (Register of Licences) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

S.R. 2012/24 The Licensing (Notice relating to Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

S.R. 2012/25 The Spring Traps Approval Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)

S.R. 2012/26 The Registration of Clubs (Certificate of Registration) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

S.R. 2012/27 The Registration of Clubs (Notice relating to Age) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

For Information Only:

S.R. 2012/21 (C.5) The Wildlife and Natural Environment (2011 Act) (Commencement No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)

S.R. 2012/28 (C.6) Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) (2011 Act) (Commencement No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
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 on 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 7 February 2012

2011-2015 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
/Budget (No. 2) Bill NIA Bill 1/11-15	13.06.11	20.06.11	N/A	N/A	21.06.11	27.06.11	27.06.11	25.07.11
/Rates (Amendment) Bill NIA Bill 2/11-15	16.01.12	24.06.11	N/A	N/A	31.01.12	06.02.12	07.02.12	
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12					

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

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 13 February 2012

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Personal Prayer or Meditation

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Matters of the Day

2.1 The Death of Mr Andrew Allen

Ms Martina Anderson made a statement, under Standing Order 24, in relation to the death of Mr Andrew Allen. Party representatives were also called to speak on the matter.

3. Assembly Business

3.1 Motion - Suspend Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4)

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 13 February 2012.

*Mr P Weir
Ms J McCann
Mr J McCallister
Mr P Ramsey
Mr S Dickson*

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support. *Nemine contradicente.*

3.2 Motion - Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Ms Sue Ramsey be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures; and that Ms Michelle Gildernew be appointed as a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

*Ms J McCann
Mr P Maskey*

The Question being put, the Motion was carried without division.

4. Speaker's Business

4.1 Public Petition - The exploitation of indigenous fish species, including salmon, where stocks are no longer sustainable.

Mr Robin Swann was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to the exploitation of indigenous fish species, including salmon, where stocks are no longer sustainable.

4.2 Public Petition - Car Parking Scheme in College Park Avenue, Belfast

Mr Conall McDevitt was granted leave, in accordance with Standing Order 22, to present a Public Petition relating to a Car Parking Scheme in College Park Avenue, Belfast.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Motion - Supply Resolution for the 2011-2012 Spring Supplementary Estimates

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a total sum, not exceeding £15,244,040,000, 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 2012 and that total resources, not exceeding £16,220,944,000, 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 2012 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 2011-12 that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

Minister of Finance and Personnel

Debate ensued on this motion and the motion on the Supply Resolution for the 2012-13 Vote on Account.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) took the Chair

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

6. Question Time

6.1 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.

6.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mr David Ford.

7. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

7.1 Motion - Supply Resolution for the 2011-2012 Spring Supplementary Estimates (Cont'd)

Debate resumed on both motions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support. *Nemine contradicente.*

7.2 Motion - Supply Resolution for the 2012-2013 Vote on Account

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £6,987,469,000, 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 2013 and that resources, not exceeding £7,451,346,000, 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 2013 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 4 and 6 of Table 1 in the Vote on Account 2012-13 document that was laid before the Assembly on 6 February 2012.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried** with cross-community support. *Nemine contradicente.*

7.3 First Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA Bill 4/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, introduced a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of certain sums for the service of the years ending 31st March 2012 and 2013; 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 2012 and 2013; and to revise the limits on the use of certain accruing resources in the year ending 31st March 2012.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

8. Committee Business

8.1 Motion - Report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Response to the Executive's Review of the Financial Process in Northern Ireland

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the Response to the Executive's Review of the Financial Process in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in conjunction with relevant Executive colleagues, to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Chairperson, Committee for Finance and Personnel

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 6.10pm.

Mr William Hay
The Speaker

13 February 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 8 - 13 February 2012

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

Budget Bill (NIA Bill 4/11-15)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

South Eastern Education and Library Board Annual Report and Accounts 2010-2011 (DE)

Learning and Skills Provision by the Northern Ireland Prison Service (DOJ)

The Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Records 2010-11 (PRONI/DCAL)

Department of Finance and Personnel - Retention and Disposal Schedule (PRONI/DCAL)

Southern Education and Library Board Annual Report and Accounts 2010-11 (DE)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

- S.R. 2012/30 The Ballydoogherty Road (U5003), Loughgilly (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/31 The North Circular Road and Tarry Lane, Lurgan (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/33 The High Hedges (Fee) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/34 The Control on Dogs (Non-application to Designated Land) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/35 The Environmental Offences (Fixed Penalties) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/36 The Statutory Nuisances (Insects) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/37 The Statutory Nuisances (Artificial Lighting) (Designation of Relevant Sports) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/38 Street Litter Control Notices (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- S.R. 2012/39 The Dog Control Orders (Procedures) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)
- Draft S.R. The High Hedges (Fee Transfer) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DOE)

For Information Only:

- S.R. 2012/29 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Omagh) (No.2) Order (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/32 The Control of Traffic (Belfast) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DRD)
- S.R. 2012/40 The Social Security Pensions (Flat Rate Introduction Year) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
- Draft S.I.2012 Public Bodies (Abolition of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) Order 2012 (DETI)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on Proposals to Amend the Scheme for Construction Contracts in Northern Ireland Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1999 (DFP)

Consultation on the Governance and Accountability of the Public Prosecution Service (DOJ)

9. Departmental Publications

Needs Assessment and Feasibility Study for the Development of High Level Diagnostic Tools in Irish for Children with Special Educational Needs in the Irish Medium Sector (DE)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 14 February 2012

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 - Financial Allocations

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, made a statement regarding Financial Allocations, following which he replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker (Mr Molloy) took the Chair

2.2 Statement - North-South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral Format

The Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, made a statement regarding the North-South Ministerial Council meeting in Education Sectoral Format, following which he replied to questions.

2.3 Statement - North-South Ministerial Council meeting in Tourism Sectoral Format

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding the North-South Ministerial Council meeting in Tourism sectoral format, following which she replied to questions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.22 pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm with the Deputy Speaker (Mr Dallat) in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Regional Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Regional Development, Mr Danny Kennedy.

3.2 Social Development

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Social Development, Mr Nelson McCausland.

4. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

4.1 Impact of the HCL BPO job losses on the community in Armagh

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Mrs Arlene Foster, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer, tabled by Mr Conor Murphy.

The Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs) took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (Cont'd)

5.1 Second Stage - Budget Bill (NIA Bill 4/11-15)

The Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, moved the Second Stage of the Budget Bill (NIA 4/11-15).

Debate ensued.

The Speaker took the Chair.

Bill (NIA 4/11-15) passed Second Stage with cross-community support. Nemine contradicente.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.37pm.

Mr William Hay

The Speaker

14 February 2012

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 14 February 2012

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. 2012/44 The Jobseeker's Allowance (Sanctions for Failure to Attend) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (DSD)
7. Written Ministerial Statements

Programme for Government (2008-11) - Delivery Report to 31 March 2011 (OFMDFM)
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications

Department of Finance and Personnel Memorandum on the Second Report from the Public Accounts Committee Mandate 2011-2015 (DFP)
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 on 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 14 February 2012

2011-2015 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
/Budget (No. 2) Bill NIA Bill 1/11-15	13.06.11	20.06.11	N/A	N/A	21.06.11	27.06.11	27.06.11	25.07.11
/Rates (Amendment) Bill NIA Bill 2/11-15	16.01.12	24.01.12	N/A	N/A	31.01.12	06.02.12	07.02.12	
Pensions Bill NIA Bill 3/11-15	23.01.12	31.01.12	13.03.12					
/Budget Bill NIA Bill 4/11-15	13.02.12	14.02.12	N/A	N/A				

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

/ Bill progressing by accelerated passage